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All the Pretty Girls

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J.T. ELLISON

ALL THE PRETTY GIRLS



Three

"I sure am glad we don't live in California."

Detectives Pete Fitzgerald, Lincoln Ross and Marcus Wade were killing time. Nashville's criminal element seemed to be taking a vacation. They hadn't had a murder to investigate in nearly two weeks. The city had been strangely quiet. Even the Fourth of July holiday had procured no deaths for their investigative skills. No one was scheduled for court, and their open cases were either resolved or held up by the crime lab. They had hit dead time.

The three men were crammed in their boss's office, watching TV. A perfectly acceptable pastime, especially since the department had inked a deal with the cable company. Ostensibly, the televisions were to be tuned to twenty-four-hour news networks, but the channels invariably got changed. Usually to accommodate the guilty habit of daytime soaps to which many of the detectives were addicted.

Today though, a car chase through the mean streets of Los Angeles had captured the three detectives' attention. Exciting, splashy. A kidnapping, a semiautomatic weapon at the ready, even a stolen red Jaguar. The car rolled through the various highways, rarely going under seventy miles an hour, captivating the news announcers that speculated breathlessly about whether the kidnap victim was in the vehicle or not. The homicide team cheered on their brothers in blue.

Fitz swept a beefy arm up and looked at his watch. The chase had been going on for nearly two hours now. "They put that spike strip down about five minutes ago. Wheels should start coming off here soon."

"There you go." Marcus pointed to the screen, where a large piece of tire had flown from the back wheel of the Jag, narrowly missing the pursuit car. His brown eyes were shining, excited. Fitz gave him a grin, the kid was just so young.

"You ever done a chase, Marcus?" he asked, leaning back, arms over his prodigious belly.

"No, but I have done all the training for it. I can drive, man, I can drive."

"Remind me not to give you the keys. It's over now." Lincoln Ross stood and stretched, brushing invisible wrinkles from his charcoal-gray Armani suit. "He starts running on rims, they can do a Pitt Maneuver and knock him out. See, there it is."

The pursuit car slipped up on the Jag like a black-and-white snake, then gently bumped the back right fender. In a textbook reaction, the driver of the Jag spun out, slamming into a guardrail, losing a fender, and came to rest facing traffic. In an instant, vehicles sur-

rounded him, cops with long guns and sidearms pointed at him. No escape.

The TV anchors congratulated themselves on a story well covered, predicting it would be anywhere from five minutes to five hours before the standoff would be over. Promising not to break away from the coverage until there was a resolution, they brought in the experts, a former police officer and a hostage negotiator, for the requisite public speculation of the criminal's past. A producer somewhere in New York turned off the five-second delay a moment too soon, and the detectives stared as the door to the Jaguar opened. The suspect jumped out, dragging a woman out of the driver's-side door by the hair.

There was frantic movement on the ground, a quick tightening of the cordon around the kidnapper. The suspect looked up in the air, making sure the overhead helicopter had a moment to focus its long lens on his grinning face. He pulled the woman upright, lifted his arm and shot her in the head. He was gunned down before she hit the ground, the pandemonium obvious. The network went black for a heartbeat, then focused on the face of the shocked anchor. He looked green.

"Like I said, damn glad we don't live in California," Fitz grumbled.

The phone rang and he answered, listening carefully while jotting a few notes. "We're on it."

"What's up?" Marcus had leaned so far back in his chair that he threatened to tip over on his back.

"Body out in Bellevue. I'll go. I'll call Taylor from the car."

Lincoln and Marcus were up immediately. "We're

coming, too," Marcus said. "I know I don't want to sit around here anymore. Do you, Lincoln?"

"Hell, no."

They marched dutifully from the office, gathering suit jackets and keys on the way out. Lincoln grinned, happy at last for an excursion. "At least there won't be a car chase."

The day was stifling, humidity in the high nineties, a threat of rain on the horizon. Though it was full light, the sun was not shining. A thick miasma of haze blanketed the sky, turning the blue to gray. Nashville in the summer.

The crime scene was populated with sweating men and women. Their movements were sluggish, practiced, not at all urgent. Several wore masks to shelter their fragile sinuses from the smell. A decomposing body in ninety-degree heat could fell even the strongest professional.

They were assembled in a grassy field at the Highway 70 and Highway 70 South split, near the westernmost edge of Davidson County. The area was known as Bellevue, only fifteen minutes from downtown. Another couple of miles and Cheatham County would have the job. It was Metro Homicide who had gotten the call instead. Taylor had felt the same sense of boredom her detectives were experiencing, and was happy for the diversion.

She stood over the body, drinking in the scene. Her blond hair was pulled into a messy ponytail, her long body casting grotesque muted shadows in the high grass. She wore no mask, her nostrils pinched and white, her mouth open so she could breathe without inhaling death. A Jane Doe, young, brown hair massed

beneath her swollen body. Brown eyes glinted dully from cracked eyelids. The bugs had done their duty, ingesting, laying eggs, repopulating their masses. A struggling white larva spilled from the girl's mouth.

Taylor nearly came undone, imagining that worm in her own mouth, and mistakenly took in a deep breath through her nose. She winced and turned away for a moment, watching the activity around her. Usually the death greeters would swarm like their own type of insect, but no one was in much of a hurry today. Fitz was ambling back toward the crime scene control area, he'd taken a cursory look at the body, covered his mouth and politely excused himself. She could see Marcus and Lincoln conferring in the distance, waves of heat shimmering around their bodies. Crime scene techs carried brown paper bags to their vehicles, patrol officers kept their backs to the body. The scene stirred, listless, the entire group indolent in the heat.

Except the man striding effortlessly toward her. He was a big man, dark haired, graceful. He wasn't one of hers.

He stopped in front of one of the patrol officers, flipped open a small leather identification case, speaking loud enough for Taylor to hear. "Special Agent John Baldwin. FBI."

The officer stepped aside to let Baldwin continue his trek toward Taylor. He slipped the case into his breast pocket, then came to her with his right hand outstretched. He winked as he took her hand. She felt the warm pad of flesh press her own for a brief instant. A concussive touch, she felt it all the way to her toes. She stood straighter. At nearly six feet, she generally

towered over men. This one was taller by nearly five inches, and she had to look up to meet his eyes. They were the oddest shade of green, deeper than jade, lighter than emeralds. Cat eyes, she thought.

Her heart beat a little faster. Taylor's right hand went to her neck, an unconscious gesture. The four-inch scar was barely healed; she still looked as if she'd been garroted. A knife slash, compliments of a crazed suspect. A permanent souvenir from her last case. Gathering herself, she flipped her ponytail off her shoulder and gave Baldwin a brief but warm smile.

"What are you doing here? I didn't ask for FBI backup. It's just a murder." She paused for a moment, concerned by the expression on his angular face. She knew the look. "Please tell me it's just a murder?"

"I wish I could."

"Why the posturing?" Taylor looked over Baldwin's shoulder. There were few people on the scene who weren't familiar with John Baldwin. Her team—Fitz, Marcus and Lincoln—had worked with him before.

"I needed this to be an official consultation. I think I know who she is." He gestured almost carelessly at the body prostrate at their feet.

"Ah. Out of state, I'd guess. We haven't had any missing persons reported in the right time frame for this."

"Out of state. Right. Mississippi." The statement was absent, an afterthought. Baldwin was circling the body, taking in all the details. The bruises around the girl's neck were visible despite the decomposition. He made another circle, smiling to himself with a bizarre look of triumph. The body had no hands.

"I think this may be the work of our boy."

"Your boy?" Taylor's eyebrow went up an inch. "You know who did this?"

He ignored the question for a moment. "Is it okay to touch her?"

"Yes. The crime scene techs have finished with her for now, and we're waiting for the medical examiner to haul her out of here. I was just giving her one last look."

Baldwin reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of thin white latex gloves. He squatted next to the body and reached for the girl's right stump, knocking a few maggots off in the process.

Taylor prompted him again. "Your boy, you say?"

"Mmm, hmm. I don't know his name, of course, but I recognize his work."

Taylor went down on one knee beside him. "He's done this before?" She spoke quietly. No personnel were within earshot, but just in case, she didn't want the leaks to start before she had a grip on what was happening. Habit.

"Twice, that I know of. Though he hasn't hit for a month. We've dubbed him the Southern Strangler, for lack of a better name. You know us feds, not an original thought between us." He tried for a smile, but it came out as a leer.

"Why haven't I heard of this…strangler?"

"You have. Remember the Alabama case a few months ago, in April? Pretty little college nursing student, disappeared from the U of A campus. We found her in—"

"Louisiana. I remember."

"Right. The second was last month, from Baton Rouge. Found her in Mississippi."

Taylor searched her memory for the details of the

case. It had been all over the national news networks, with correspondents broadcasting live from Baton Rouge, lamenting and glorifying the kidnapping. But no one had put the two together, as far as she knew. She told Baldwin that.

"The time frame was lengthy enough that the media didn't jump on the connection. And we kept a few things back. The hands, for one."

"Why, for God's sake? Aren't you guys supposed to get the word out so we small-town law enforcement types know we've got someone on the loose?" Her sarcasm missed its mark. Baldwin only nodded.

"The lubricant, too. We think there is consensual sex, he uses a lubricated condom. Whichever M.E. catches it should look for that."

Taylor shook her head, putting aside the strange reality that had marred her beautiful southern town. A serial killer, passing through her turf. Great. It wasn't something she was prepared to keep quiet.

"I already called Sam, she'll take good care of her." Dr. Samantha Owens Loughley was the chief medical examiner for the mid-state of Tennessee, and a friend. "You said you know who she is." She indicated the body with a jerk of her chin, eyes accusing.

"Her name is Jessica. Jessica Ann Porter. Jackson, Mississippi. She's only been gone three days."

Taylor looked down again. Three days? The decomp was more advanced than that. Baldwin read her thoughts.

"You know how this works. Heat's speeding up the process. Two weeks in this mess would be all it took to get her down to the bones. We're lucky we found her

so quickly. Another week and it would have been hell to ID her in the field."

"Tell me more."

"There isn't a lot more to go on. He likes brunettes. Young brunettes. All three girls have brown eyes, are late teens to early twenties, and we don't have really good victimologies on them. None of them had risk behaviors, none of them had been seen with strangers, nothing. They just went poof. One day they were living their lives, the next, they were just gone. I've been working the periphery of the cases. I was kept informed but I didn't do the investigation myself. Now that we may have three victims, I'm probably getting involved full-time."

Taylor heard tires crunching on the gravel on the side of the road. The body, Jessica's body, she corrected herself, was only about ten yards from the roadside. The news van would be able to get a clear shot. Too clear. She waved to Marcus standing by his car, motioned to the van. She didn't need to say a word. He started signaling to them immediately, forcing them away from the scene. Taylor watched as he maneuvered them to a very discreet vantage point, one from which they wouldn't be able to view the body. She smiled to herself. Screw the newsies.

Baldwin had taken a notebook out of his back pocket and was writing furiously, scribbling notes as quickly as his mind could feed them through his fingers to his pen.

"Have you found…?" Baldwin's voice trailed off. A uniformed officer was waving frantically at Taylor. She eyed Baldwin for a moment, realizing he knew exactly

what the fuss was about. He just shrugged and put out a hand in a "you first" gesture. She stared him down for a moment, then made her way to the gesticulating officer. The look of horror on his face was evident from twenty paces.

"You have something there, Officer?" Taylor didn't recognize him, he must have been fresh out of the academy.

"Yes, Lieutenant," he answered, Adam's apple bobbing. Taylor reached him and followed his pointing finger. In the grass, lying quietly, was a hand.

Taylor reared back, but Baldwin leaned over the hand with interest. She tried for glib.

"Well, Special Agent, since she's missing both hands, I'd say we should find another right around this area, shouldn't we?" The sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach belied the bravado in her statement. She had the distinct feeling there was more to the case than he had told her. He confirmed it in the next moment, the way he gazed at the wayward hand was a dead giveaway that there was more to this than met the eye. She dismissed the patrol officer with a flick of her hand. He scrambled away, visibly relieved.

"No, we won't." He gazed up at her, his green eyes troubled. "You can search for it if you want, but it won't be here."

"What the hell? He's taking the girl's hands off, leaving one in the field and taking one with him? Some sort of trophy?"

Baldwin nodded. "Definitely a trophy. There's just one problem."

For the briefest moment, the reality of what a psycho could do with a severed hand crowded her mind. She shoved the thought away. "What's the problem?"

"This isn't Jessica's hand."

Praise for J.T. Ellison's
ALL THE PRETTY GIRLS

"J.T. Ellison's debut novel rocks.
Darkly compelling and thoroughly chilling, with rich characterisation and a well-layered plot, *All the Pretty Girls* is everything a great crime thriller should be."
—Allison Brennann,
New York Times best selling author of *Fear No Evil*

"Taylor Jackson is a fresh portrayal of a cop with a serial killer to catch. Creepy thrills from start to finish."
—James O. Born, author of *Burn Zone*

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