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Guilt by Association

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Published by Mulholland Books

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PROLOGUE

He snapped his cell phone shut *and slid it into the pocket of his skin-tight jeans. The last piece was in place; it wouldn't be long now. But the waiting was agonizing. Unbidden, the memory of his only ride on a roller coaster flooded over him, like a thousand tiny needles piercing his face and body: eight years old, trapped in that rickety little car with no escape, the feeling of breathtaking terror that mounted as it click-click-clicked its slow, inexorable climb to the top of the sky.*

He shook his head to cleanse his mind of the memory, then abruptly grabbed his long brown hair and pulled it tightly into a ponytail behind his head. He held it there and exhaled again more slowly, trying to quiet his pulse. He couldn't afford to lose it now. With the lift of his arms, his worn T-shirt rode up, and he absently admired in the little mirror above the dresser the reflection of the coiled snake tattooed on his slim, muscled belly.

He started pacing, the motel carpet crunching under his feet, and found that the action helped. Despite his anxiety, he moved with a loose-hipped grace. Back and forth he walked, considering his plan yet again, looking for flaws. No, he'd set it up just right. It would work. It had *to work. He stopped to look around at the dimly lit motel room. "Room" was using the term loosely—it was little more than a box with a bed. His eyes fell on a switch on the wall. Just to have something to do,*

he went over and flipped it on. Nothing happened. He looked up and saw only a filthy ceiling fan. The sour smell of old cigarettes told him that it hadn't worked in years. There were stains of undetermined origin on the walls that he thought were probably older than he was. The observation amused him. Neither the stains, nor the foul smell of decay, nor the hopeless dead-end feeling of the place fazed him at all. It wasn't that much worse than a lot of the places he'd lived during his seventeen years on the planet.

In fact, far from depressing him, the ugly room made him feel triumphant. It represented the world he'd been born into, and the one he was finally leaving behind… forever. For the first time in a life that had nearly ended at the hands of a high-wired crackhead while his so-called mother was crashing in the next room, he was going to be in control. He paused to consider the memory of his early near demise—not a firsthand memory since he'd been only two months old when it happened, but rather a paragraph in the social worker's report he'd managed to read upside down during a follow-up visit at one of the many foster homes where he'd been "raised" for the past sixteen or so years. As it always did, the memory of that report made him wonder whether his mother was still alive. The thought felt different this time, though. Instead of the usual helpless, distant ache—and rage—he felt power, the power to choose. Now he could find her… if he wanted to. Find her and show her that the baby she'd been too stoned to give a shit about had made it. Had scored the big score.

In just a few more minutes, he'd say good-bye to that loser kid who lived on the fringes. He stopped, dropped his hands to his hips, and stared out the grimy window as he savored the thought of having "fuck you" money. He planned to extend a vigorous middle finger to the many foster parents for whom he was just a dollar sign, to all the assholes he'd had to put up with for a meal and a bed. And if he did decide to find his mother, he'd show up with something awesome for her, a present, like a dress or jewelry. Something to make her sorry for all the years she'd let

him be lost to her. He pictured himself giving her whatever it was in a fancy, store-wrapped box. He tried to picture the expression on her face, but the image wouldn't resolve. The only photo he had of her—taken when he was less than a year old—was so faded, only the outline of her long brown hair was still visible. Still, the thought of being able to play the Mac Daddy puffed him up, and for a moment he let himself go there, enjoying the fantasy of his mother really loving him.

The knock on the door jolted him back to reality. He swallowed and struggled for a deep breath, then walked toward the door. He noticed his hands were shaking, and he quickly rubbed them on his thighs to make them stop. He slowly released his breath and willed his face to relax as he opened the door.

"Hey," he said, then held the door open and moved aside to let in his visitor. "What took you so long?"

"Lost track of the time, sorry." The visitor stepped inside quickly.

"You have it all?" the boy asked, wary.

The visitor nodded. The boy smiled and let the door close behind him.

1

"Guilty? Already? What'd they do, just walk around the table and hit the buzzer?" Jake said, shaking his head incredulously.

I laughed, nodding. "I know, it's crazy. Forty-five-minute verdict after a three-month trial," I said as I shook my head. "I thought the clerk was kidding when she called and told me to come back to court." I paused. "Now that I think about it, this might be my fastest win ever on a first-degree."

"Hell, sistah, that's the fastest win I done heard on *anythang,*" Toni said as she plopped down into the chair facing my desk. She talked ghetto only as a joke.

"Y'all gotta admit," I said, "homegirl brought game this time."

Toni gave me a disdainful look. "Uh-uh, snowflake. You can't pull it off, so don't try." She reached for the mug I kept cleaned and at the ready for her on the windowsill.

I raised an eyebrow. "You've got a choice: take that back and have a drink, or enjoy your little put-down and stay dry."

Toni eyed the bottle of Glenlivet on my desk, her lips firmly pressed together, as she weighed her options. It didn't take long. "It's amazing. For a minute there, I thought Sister Souljah was in the room," she said with no conviction whatsoever. She slammed her mug down on my desk. "Happy?"

I shrugged. "Not your best effort, but they can't all be gold." I broke the small ice tray out of my mini-fridge, dumped the cubes into her cup, and poured the equivalent of two generous shots of Glenlivet.

Toni shot me a "don't push your luck" look and signaled a toast.

I turned to Jake and gestured to the bottle. "Maybe a token?" I asked. He was a nondrinker by nature, but he'd occasionally join in to be sociable.

He nodded and gave me that little-boy smile that could light up a room—the same one that had warmed the hearts of juries across the county. His wire-rim glasses, wavy brown hair, and country-boy, self-effacing style—the dimples didn't hurt, though they were redundant—made a winning combination. Juries instinctively trusted him. He had a look that was almost angelic, making it hard for anyone to believe he'd even graduated from college, much less done all the backbreaking work required to finish law school and survive into his seventh year in the DA's office. I poured him a short dog of Glenlivet with a liberal dousing of water, careful not to give him more than he could handle. I was careful not to give myself more than I could handle either: a heavy-handed, undiluted triple shot.

Toni raised her mug. "To Rachel Knight: she put the 'speed' in 'speedy trial.' "

Jake lifted his cup. "To that," he said with a sly grin. "Until I beat her record."

I rolled my eyes. Jake had just thrown down the gauntlet. "Oh no, here we go," I said.

"Oh yeah," Toni replied. She narrowed her eyes at Jake. "It's on now, little man."

Jake gave her a flinty smile and nodded. They looked each other in the eye as they clinked cups. We all drank, Toni and I in long pulls, Jake in a more modest sip.

Toni turned back to the matter at hand. "Was this the dope-dealer shoot-out at MacArthur Park?" she asked.

I shook my head. Toni, Jake, and I were in Special Trials, the small, elite unit that handled the most complex and high-profile cases. Though Toni was as tough and competitive as anyone in the unit, she didn't live the job the way Jake and I did. It was one of the many ways Toni and I balanced each other.

Before I could answer, Jake said, "No, this was the one where the defendant poisoned his wife, then dumped the body off the cliff in Palos Verdes."

Toni thought for a moment. "Oh yeah. Body washed out to sea, right? And they never found a murder weapon."

I nodded.

Toni shook her head, smiling. "Evidence is for pussies," she said with a laugh. "You really are my hero." She raised her mug for another toast.

"I got lucky," I said with a shrug, raising mine to join her.

Toni made a face. "Oh please. Can you stop with the 'I'm so humble' stuff already? I've seen you pull these beasts together before. Nobody else drags their ass all over this county the way you do." She turned to Jake and added, " 'Cept maybe you." She took another sip, then sat back. "Both of you are ridiculous, and you know it."

Jake and I exchanged a look. We couldn't argue. From the moment Jake had transferred into Special Trials two years ago, we'd found in each other a kindred workaholic spirit. Being a prosecutor was more than a career for us—it was a mission. Every victim's plight became our own. It was our duty to balance their suffering with some measure of justice. But by an unspoken yet entirely mutual agreement, our passion for the work never led us into personal territory—either physically or verbally. We rarely had lunch outside the building together, and during the long nights after court when we'd bat our cases around, we never even considered going out

to dinner; instead we'd raid my desk supply of tiny pretzels, made more palatable by the little packets of mustard Jake snatched from the courthouse snack bar. Not once in all those long nights had we ever discussed our lives outside the office—either before or after becoming prosecutors. I knew that this odd boundary in our relationship went deeper than our shared devotion to the job. It takes one to know one, and I knew that I never asked personal questions because I didn't want to answer them. Jake played it close to the vest in the same way I did: don't ask, don't tell, and if someone does ask—deflect. The silent awareness of that shared sensibility let us relax with each other in a way we seldom could with anyone else.

"Well, she's not entirely wrong, Tone," Jake said with a smirk. "She did get lucky—she had Judge Tynan."

Toni chuckled. "Oh sweet Jesus, you did get lucky. How many times did you slip?"

"Not too bad this time," I admitted. "I only said 'asshole' once."

"Not bad for you," Toni remarked, amused. "When?"

"During rebuttal argument. And I was talking about one of my own witnesses."

My inability to rein in my colorful language once I got going had earned me fines on more than one occasion. You'd think this financial incentive would've made me clean up my act. It hadn't. All it had done was inspire me to keep a slush fund at the ready.

"There is an undeniable symmetry to your contempt citations," Toni observed. "What did Tynan do?"

"Just said, 'I'm warning you, Counsel.'" I sighed, took another sip of my drink, and stretched my legs out under the desk. "I wish I had all my cases in front of him."

"Hah!" Jake snorted. "You'd wear out your welcome by your second trial, and you'd be broke by your third."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

Jake shrugged. "Hey, I'm just sayin'…"

I laughed and threw a paper clip at him. He caught it easily in an overhand swipe, then looked out at the clock on the Times Building. "Shit, I've got to run. Later, guys." He put down his cup and left. The sound of his footsteps echoed down the hallway.

I turned to Toni. "Refresher?" I said as I held up the bottle of Glenlivet.

Toni shook her head. "Nah. I've had enough of county ambience for one day. Why don't we get out of here and hit Church and State? We should celebrate the hell out of this one."

Church and State was a fun new restaurant in the old Meatpacking District, part of the ongoing effort to gentrify downtown L.A. Though how a restaurant that catered to a hip, moneyed crowd was going to make it with Skid Row just two blocks away was a looming question. I looked over at the stack of cases piled on the table where I kept my mini-fridge. I wanted to party, and with that gnarly no-body murder behind me, I could probably afford to. But the trial had taken me away from my other cases, and I always got a little—okay, a lot—panicky when I hadn't looked in on a case for more than a few days. If I went out with Toni tonight, I'd just be stressing and wishing I were working. I owed it to her to spare her that drag.

"Sorry, Tone, I—"

"Don't even bother—I know." Toni shook her head as she plunked her mug down on my desk and stood to go. "You can't even take time off for one little victory lap? It's sick, is what it is."

But it wasn't news, as evidenced by the lack of surprise in Toni's voice.

"How about tomorrow night? We'll do Church and State, whatever you want," I promised with more hope than conviction. I wasn't sure whether I'd be able to wade through the pile of cases and finish all the catch-up work by then. But I hated to disappoint Toni, so I privately vowed to push myself hard and make it happen.

Toni looked at me and sighed. "Sure, we'll talk tomorrow." She

slung her laptop bag over one shoulder and her purse over the other. "I'm heading out. Try not to stay too late. If even your OCD partner-in-crime took a powder," she said, tilting her head toward Jake's office, "you can spare a night off too."

"I know." I looked toward his office. "What's up with that?" I laughed.

"Maybe his alien leaders told him to get a friggin' life," Toni said as she moved to the doorway. "And I've already got one, so I am now officially exiting the OCD Zone." She smiled and headed down the hall.

"Have fun!"

"You too," she called back. In a loud stage whisper, she muttered, "Ya freak."

"I heard that!" I yelled out.

"Don't care!"

I leaned back to rest my head against the cold leather of the majestic judge's chair. It was a tight fit at my little county-issue prosecutor's desk, but I didn't mind. The chair had mysteriously appeared late one night, abandoned in the hallway a few doors from my office. I'd looked up and down the hall to make sure the coast was clear, then whisked it into my office and pushed my own sorry little chair out to a hallway distant enough that it wouldn't be traced back. As I'd returned to my office, scanning the hallway for witnesses, I wondered whether someone had "liberated" the chair straight out of a judge's chambers. The possibility made my score even more triumphant.

I turned to the stack of case files and pulled the first one off the top, but within fifteen minutes I felt my eyelids drooping. I'd thought I'd had enough energy to plow through at least a few cases, but as usual I'd underestimated how tired I was. And the Glenlivet hadn't helped.

I listened to the last stragglers chatter their way out of the office.

As the door snicked closed behind them, silence filled the air. I was tired, but I wasn't ready to go home. This was my favorite part of the day, when I had the whole DA's office to myself. No phones, no friends, no cops to distract me. I exhaled and looked out the window at the view that never got old. The streetlights had blinked on, and the jagged outline of the downtown L.A. office buildings glowed against the encroaching darkness. From my perch on the eighteenth floor of the Criminal Courts Building, I could see all the way from the main cop shop, the Police Administration Building, to the theaters at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion and all the streets and sidewalks in between. The irony of being in the middle of those two extremes still made me smile. Just having an office with a window was a coup—let alone one with a spectacular view. But the fact that it had come with my transfer into Special Trials—the unit I'd worked my ass off to get into for seven years—made it a delicious victory.

Not that I'd minded working the routine felonies during my stints in the smaller Van Nuys and Compton branch courts. Seeing the same defendants come back to the fold with a new case every couple of years gave the job a kind of homey, family feeling. Sure, it was a weird, dysfunctional, and largely criminal family, but still. So it wasn't as though I was miserable when I worked the outlying courts. It just wasn't for me. From the moment I'd heard of the Special Trials Unit, based in the hub of the DA's office downtown, I'd known it was where I wanted to be. I'd been warned by the senior prosecutors in the branch courts about the long hours, the marathon-length trials, the public scrutiny, and the endless pressure I'd face in the unit. I didn't tell them that, for me, that was the allure. And being in the unit was even better than I'd imagined. On almost every case, I got to work with great cops and the best lawyers—for both the prosecution and the defense—I'd ever seen. Far from a detraction, the intensity of the job was exhilarating. Too often in life a

long-desired goal, once achieved, turns out to be much less than expected—as they say, "Be careful what you wish for." Not this time. Getting into Special Trials was all I'd hoped for and then some, and I savored that fact at least once a day.

I tried to drag my mind back down to the supplemental reports—updates on the investigation—that had been added to the case file during the last month, but the words were blurring on the page. I leaned back in my chair, hoping to catch a second wind, and watched the cars crawl down Main Street. The sky had darkened, and clouds were moving in.

I could tell my second wind wasn't going to arrive anytime soon. I decided to admit defeat and pack it in for the night. I got up, stretched, walked over to the table next to the window where I'd dropped my briefcase, and brought it over to my desk. I threw in five of the files—wishful thinking, I knew—picked up my purse, and grabbed my coat off the hook on the back of the door. I swung into my jacket and slung the strap of my briefcase over my shoulder, then reached into my coat pocket and flipped off the safety on my palm-size .22 Beretta. Then I kicked out the doorstop and headed down the hall toward the bank of elevators as my office door clicked shut behind me.

At this time of day I didn't have long to wait. Within seconds, the bell rang and I stepped into a blissfully empty car. The elevator hurtled down all eighteen floors and came to a shuddering stop on the first floor. It was a head-spinning ride that happened only at quiet times like this. I enjoyed the rush as long as I ignored what it meant about the quality of the machinery and my possible life expectancy.

As I walked through the darkened lobby toward the back doors, I stretched my eyes for better peripheral vision. I'd been walking to work ever since I'd moved into the nearby Biltmore Hotel a year ago. It seemed stupid to drive the six blocks to the courthouse, and I enjoyed the walk—it gave me a chance to think. Plus it saved me a

bundle in gas and car maintenance. The only time I had second thoughts about it was after dark. Downtown L.A. empties out after 5:00 p.m., leaving a population that lives mainly outdoors. It wasn't the homeless who worried me as much as the bottom-feeders who preyed on them.

Being a prosecutor gave me an inside line on the danger in any area, but the truth was, I'd grown up with the knowledge that mortal peril lurked around every corner. So although I didn't have a permit to carry, I never left either home or office without a gun. The lack of a permit occasionally worried me, but as my father used to say, "I'd rather be judged by twelve than carried by six." I'd never applied for a permit because I didn't want to get turned down. There'd been a crackdown on gun permits ever since a certain sheriff's brother-in-law had fired "warning shots" at some neighborhood kids for blasting rap music from their car. And, to be honest, permit or no, I was going to carry anyway. Besides, I was no novice when it came to guns. Being my father's daughter, I'd started learning how to shoot the moment I could manage a shaky two-handed grip. If I had to shoot, I wouldn't miss. I stood at the wall of glass that faced out toward the Times Building and scanned the parking lot and sidewalk, as always, looking for signs of trouble. Seeing nothing, I pushed open the heavy glass door and stepped out into the night.

As I walked toward the stairs that led down to street level, I heard the sound of sirens, distant at first but rapidly getting louder. Suddenly the air was pierced with the whooping screams and bass horn blasts of fire engines. They were close, very close. Police cars, their sirens shrieking, seemed to be approaching from all directions, and the night air jangled with wild energy. I watched intently, waiting to see where they were headed. The flashing lights seemed to stop and coalesce about four blocks south and east of the Biltmore, in the middle of a block I knew was filled with junk stores, iron-grilled pawnshops, and low-rent motels. I'd never seen this much action at

a downtown crime scene. My usual "neighbors"—druggies, pimps, hookers, and the homeless—generally didn't get this kind of "Protect and Serve" response. My curiosity piqued, I decided to find out what was going on. At least with all those cops around, I wouldn't have to worry about muggers.