

**T H E
JANES**

ALSO BY LOUISA LUNA

Two Girls Down (An Alice Vega Novel)

Serious as a Heart Attack

Crooked

Brave New Girl

**T H E
J A N E S**

AN ALICE VEGA NOVEL

**L O U I S A
L U N A**

DOUBLEDAY
NEW YORK



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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First Edition

At some point I was asked what's the one thing you need to know about Alice Vega, and I said, "She's not afraid of pain or death," and in that moment, I realized I was also talking about my mother.

This is for my mom, Sandra Luna, once again.

**T H E
JANES**

1

MEET OUR GIRL: SEVENTEEN, ARRIVED HERE A YEAR AGO FROM A rough and dusty town in Chiapas, considered pretty by most standards because she is young, her face unmarked by scars or wrinkles, her body boasting the tender snap of fresh muscle. Our girl's brain, on the other hand, is at war with itself and others: with memories of her mother's worry and her father's pain, subtle with her own simmering meditations on sex and violence, with fear of all the men that come through the door with their eyes so stark and full of want it's like they've eaten her up before they've even selected her from underneath the butcher's glass.

Our girl walks in bare feet, unsure if she is dreaming. Her dreams these days are collisions, collages, bursts of fire and color that all start normally enough—she is playing paper dolls with her sister on the porch under the umbrella with one panel missing, or fluffing up yellow rice in a pot right after it's done steaming. But then they turn; the dolls become scuttling cockroaches in her hands; the rice bowl fills with blood; her own teeth grow into blades and shred her tongue to streamers.

The house is divided, two floors: the ground floor, where she and the other girls sleep on towels side by side in the bedroom they share, and watch TV and wait in the living room; and there's downstairs full of boxes that pass for rooms—no windows, no air. The working rooms.

Then there is the garage, which is separate from the house, but there are no cars inside. There is just a table and some machines and tools. Our girl hasn't been there yet but this is what she's heard. Only girls who cry and act stupid are taken there and our girl keeps her head down and does what she's supposed to do. She doesn't ask questions and doesn't make trouble, but she watches everything.

She avoids the bosses. Coyote Ben is easy to avoid because he comes and goes, although when he's around and there's no work he grabs the

hair at the back of her neck and whispers in her ear. He speaks English so she doesn't really understand everything he says, but she knows he doesn't expect her to respond. He lets her make the drinks.

Fat Mitch is always there, and he's got the gun on a belt that looks like it's strangling all the fat on his stomach. He has named the gun, Selena, after a singer, and he is always reminding the girls the gun is there. He'll say things in Spanish like "Selena got a lot of sleep last night and wants to have some playtime today." And then there's Rafa.

Rafa is the one who takes the girls to the garage. Fat Mitch tells them Rafa only does what he does because he has to, but our girl doesn't buy it. She knows Rafa does it because he likes it. It's not like on a farm when they make the runtiest worker shoot and drown the sick animals to toughen him up. The house may be a farm but Rafa's no runt—he's bigger and stronger than Fat Mitch, and our girl has heard he smiles when he does what he does to the girls in the garage. That is what they get when they act stupid.

Our girl's not stupid, and she stays away from the stupid girls: Isabel, Chicago, Good Hair. They cry and try to steal food. Stupid. The girl called Maricel is new, one of the girls from the city, and while it's usually not a good idea to get to know the new girls, our girl actually likes her and Good Hair both. In another time and place they may have all played card games and shared secrets about boys in their class. Instead they wait to be picked. Which is better than the alternative. If a girl doesn't get picked from the TV room for a month, she's out, not taken to the garage—*out* out, out of the house and dropped somewhere in the desert because she's not worth the Wonder bread.

Our girl has learned a little English here and there from TV. She pays attention to the American news. Police, homicide, catch, release. She watches a news show about a boy who looks her age, and Mexican too, but American. She tries to wrap her mouth around a word the newswoman keeps repeating, which sounds like something about a duck flying up. Duck-ted. Up-duck-ted. The boy talks to the newswoman, points to a picture of a fish tank. Then there is another woman, not the newswoman; 2014 it says in the corner. Her name is at the bottom of the screen. Our girl notices: American first name, Mexican last name. She looks like she is police. Or a lesbian. Or a gangster. She wears black clothes and sunglasses.

Back to the boy. Over and over he says the same thing: "She safes me, she safes me." Our girl watches the boy's top row of teeth, the way

they scrape his bottom lip as he cries. The word is not “safes.” It’s “saved.” “She saved me,” the boy says, again and again.

Our girl watches Maricel get up close to the TV. Maricel doesn’t take her eyes off it. The boy on the screen says, “She saved me. Alice Vega, she saved me.” Maricel begins to cry, along with the boy. Our girl watches her and realizes her own hands are shaking.

Our girl has a thought out of nowhere: you treat us like dogs; we’re going to act like dogs. A map unfolds in her mind, square by square. She saved me, the boy says. She saved me.

2

ALICE VEGA WATCHED THE DOGS, AND THE DOGS WATCHED THE meat.

There were six different kinds, some shaky fluff balls, some big with long jaws, all tied by their leashes to the same bike post outside a Reno's Coffee, all watching the couple at the table nearest them eating breakfast sandwiches. Mouths open, tongues flapping like flags. Vega didn't know much about dogs, about what variations in their gene pools led to different breeds, but they all wanted that bacon, even if they weren't hungry.

Vega sat at a table without an umbrella, and it was hot and just after nine in the morning. It was pretty and bland here. The streets were clean; the people were attractive in a nonflashy way; the dogs were groomed. It was not unlike where Vega lived, except in her town there were a few more homeless people, a few fewer luxury car models. A little rougher by only a couple of ticks. California was its own planet, and Vega had lived there her whole life, so most of it felt like familiar terrain to her. San Diego was not an exception.

When the time on her phone read 9:50, she threw away her cup, took one last look at the dogs, and left. Drove the half mile to the County Medical Examiner's office and pulled into the lot. It was a building made of sandy yellow brick, looked like half hospital, half elementary school. Vega scrolled through the email on her phone, the name, the address.

She stepped out of the car, cracked her neck, twisted her back one way and then the other like a licorice stick. Felt better. Thirty-five isn't that old, she thought, not defensively to anyone in particular.

Through the automatic doors, where it was cool inside, clean, a diamond pattern on the linoleum underfoot. A guard sat on a folding chair at a desk watching the feed from the security cameras. He was not surprised to see Vega; he had seen her walk from the parking lot.

“Can I help you, ma’am?” he said. He was young and black, the faint line of a mustache on his upper lip.

“I’m here to see Emilia Paiva,” said Vega.

“Your last name Vega?”

Vega nodded, produced her driver’s license. The guard took it and wrote down her information on a log in front of him. He pressed two buttons on the phone and handed her license back to her. Vega glanced at the screens: clipped office park lawn, cars parked, a line of white vans, two staff wearing scrubs unloading the contents—gurney and bag.

Then a woman’s voice: “You’re Alice Vega.”

Vega looked up, and there she was, Latina, with a youthful face, a line of straight dark bangs over her forehead. She was a little shorter than Vega and weighed about two fifty. She wore her blue lab coat unbuttoned, a Deadpool T-shirt underneath.

“Ms. Paiva?” said Vega.

“Mia,” she said cheerily. “Everyone calls me Mia.”

They shook hands.

“That’s Sam,” she said, nodding to the guard. “He smiles once a week.” Sam smiled.

“There it is,” said Mia, pointing. Back to Vega: “This way.”

Vega followed her through gray swinging doors, into a hallway with a long window on one side, facing a line of parked cars. They walked toward another set of swinging doors at the other end. Mia moved surprisingly fast for carrying so much weight on her hips.

“How long’ve you worked with Rowlie?” she said to Vega.

“Roland Otero?” said Vega. “I haven’t met him yet. He wanted me to see you first.”

“Ohhh,” sang Mia, pushing through the second set of doors. “I get it now.”

Vega didn’t ask what it was that she got. Now the hallway split—on one side were transparent sliding doors; inside were technicians at counters and desks with microscopes, boxy analysis equipment, laptops. TOXICOLOGY, read the small sign. On the other side was a narrower hallway than the one they just came from, a set of stairs leading down. Vega followed Mia, who kept talking.

“Hot out there, huh?” she said, and then without pausing for a response, added, “It’s supposed to get up to ninety today. At least we’re inside, right?”

Vega put on a smile when Mia turned around. Better to keep her

offering information, but Vega had a feeling it wouldn't be difficult; Mia seemed to be a chatter. She pushed through another door at the bottom of the stairs, and here the doors in front of them were steel, a large red biohazard sticker on the left. Mia held her ID up to a key card reader, and the pinpoint light turned green. The doors slid open in front of them.

It was a big room, metal racks with six shelves apiece lined the walls, white polyethylene bags with a black zipper down the middle on every one, each containing a dead person. Vega recognized the smell. The vinegar tang of formalin, the heady odor of a meat counter.

"Here you go," said Mia, handing her a pair of safety goggles. "The chemicals might get to you after a while."

Vega put them on, watched Mia put on her own. Then Mia pulled a pair of purple latex gloves on her hands.

"It gets to me, too. I'm one of those people who tear up at everything, not because I'm emotional or anything like that, I just have sensitive eyes," said Mia, as she walked to the back of the room.

She stopped at two gurneys side by side, a bag on each. Vega stood at the short edges of the gurneys, what she suspected were the feet.

"Cutting onions, forget it," Mia added. And then, "Okay. This one was the first."

Mia unzipped the bag. There was the body of a girl, Latina, long curly hair that probably hit midback when she was standing, slender with small breasts and narrow hips. The Y-cut of the autopsy incision, with the two tines on either side of the neck and the line down the middle of the torso. Mia pulled the bag off the body's shoulders so Vega could get a better look at what she was there to see: a cluster of clumsy cuts above the left hip.

"Female, age twelve to fourteen, came in last Thursday. Cause of death was myocardial infarction due to bleed-out due to multiple stab wounds," said Mia, lifting the hip with two fingers to show Vega where the cuts continued. "I estimate she was dead about a day before getting to us. No sign of recent sexual assault, per se, but some labial and anal fissures, as well as absence of hymen tissue. And, notably, a functional IUD in her uterus."

Vega walked around the body so she stood next to Mia, to see what she saw.

"Organs all relatively normal, except one puncture in the kidney."

"Is that what did it?" said Vega.

Mia shrugged.

“Kidneys bleed a lot, so it probably accelerated the process, but it’s not like she would’ve definitely lived if the stabber missed the kidney. No food in the stomach. Here’s something for you,” said Mia, somewhat bubbly. She pointed to the stab wounds. “You see this scraping, here?”

Vega leaned closer. Between the cuts on the hip and the cuts on the back were scabs close together, some shorter, some longer, like a bar code.

“My guess is that Jane’s moving around, Stabber drags the blade, but you see how some are shorter than others?”

Vega nodded.

“Serrated blade, right?” said Mia.

“Right,” agreed Vega. “Anything else about the knife?”

“Not really,” said Mia. “Probably sixteenth of an inch, but most knives are.”

Mia stood up straight, surveyed the whole body.

“Some bruising, contusions here and there. This one down here,” she said, pulling back a bit of flesh on the upper right thigh to reveal several small sunburst-shaped scars. “Looks like cigarette burns to me.”

Vega looked at the hands and arms, saw small red gashes near the wrists and on the fingers.

“Defensive wounds,” she said.

“Totally,” said Mia, wrinkling up her nose. “Stabber comes from behind, girl reaches around and back.”

Mia mimed it, wiggled and waved her fingers to the sides, a weird little hula.

“And these,” Mia said, moving up to where the girl’s head lay. “You see?”

Vega joined her on the other side of the body and saw an egg-shaped, dark red mark on her left temple.

“Some sort of blunt trauma,” said Mia. “But I can’t think of an object that would make a shape like that. Wooden spoon, maybe?”

Vega tilted her head to get a better look. The skin was raised slightly, looked a little puffy. It reminded Vega of an allergic reaction, a rash from poison oak or ivy but strangely concentrated.

“You want to see the new one?” Mia said.

“Sure.”

Mia walked around to the second gurney and unzipped the bag, Vega right behind. This girl had a different smell. Vega took it in at first,

didn't fight it. It was strong, musty, had dampness to it. Almost like this one was fresher.

She, the girl, was either older than the first girl or just more developed: fuller breasts, rounder hips, darker and more hair in between her legs. Her eyes were closed, but she had an expression: brow pushed down, off-center lips, an unmistakable scowl. The body was also beat up much worse than the first girl. She had dark brown bruises the size of plums covering her arms and legs, and again, above the left hip, stab wounds, not as sloppy as those on the first girl and more toward the back, only four that Vega could see. No scraping.

"Stabber got better," said Mia, seeing where Vega was looking.

Vega nodded.

Mia waved her hand over the girl's crotch. "Jane Two. Also twelve to fourteen. Also plenty of fissures, lacerations on the labia." She lifted the hip with two fingers again. "He got three in the kidney this time."

Vega leaned down to look at the wounds, but let her eyes wander to the hand. Dirt was encrusted under the short nails and in the pockets of the cuticles. The fingers were long and slender and appeared to be resting so lightly on the table Vega almost had the impression they were hovering just above the surface. She glanced at the other hand, wondering if it looked the same, and oddly, it did not. The fingers on the right hand were slightly tucked under the palm, as if the girl were just starting to make a fist.

The smell filled Vega's nose again; this time it was all meat, and Vega tried not to think of food, of the dogs and the breakfast sandwich, turkey on Thanksgiving, fish sticks. She bent over, hands on her knees, breathed through her mouth.

"You sick?" said Mia, not unkindly. "Happens to me sometimes, too. Happened last week. I was really hungover, but still."

Vega barely heard her, fuzz filling her ears.

"Try this," Mia said, holding something in front of her face.

Vega squinted at it: a bright white pill.

"Altoid," said Mia.

Vega took it, placed it on her tongue. The mint spiked through the roof of her mouth, and she could breathe again. She exhaled and stood up straight.

"Thanks," she said, lifting her goggles to wipe the wet corners of her eyes.

"NP," said Mia. She looked back down at the body. "Where were we?"

“Were they found in the same place?” said Vega, pushing the mint to her back teeth with her tongue.

“No,” said Mia. “Rowlie will give you those details, crime scene stuff. We didn’t have any of our people there. But no. Different days, different places. Jane Two we had to clean a lot more. Lot of dust.”

Vega walked between the two bodies, looked from one to the other.

“Cause of death, type of victim, but that could still be random, right?” said Vega. “So what makes us think they’re definitively linked?”

Mia smiled, round cheeks pressing up against the bottom of the goggles. Brainy squirrel, thought Vega.

“The new girl had an IUD, too,” she said, pleased.

Mia paused then, and Vega sensed more was coming.

“I bagged them,” she continued, and she pulled two plastic evidence bags from the shelf below the gurney, held one up in each hand. “Copper. From the same company.”

“How do you know?” said Vega.

“Name’s printed on the coil. Health-Guard.”

Mia paused another moment and looked almost giddy, like she had a secret.

“Can I show you something?” she said.

Vega nodded.

Mia grinned, lifted her goggles to her forehead.

“Come.”

She went to a counter in the corner of the room, where there was a desktop monitor and a microscope. Vega followed and watched as Mia removed one of the IUDs from its bag and placed it on a small plate under the lens of the microscope. She flipped on the monitor, and the screen was white with a blurry image of the IUD.

“I’ll make it as sharp as I can,” said Mia, peering through the eyepiece and adjusting the lens.

The image grew clearer and Vega stepped closer to the screen. The lettering on the IUD was visible now, the words HEALTH-GUARD engraved on the tines at the top.

“Take a look here,” Mia said, not lifting her head away from the eyepiece.

She turned the plate that held the IUD sideways, so the longer tine was lengthwise across the screen. There was something written there as well.

“Numbers,” said Vega.

“Yeah,” said Mia. “Eight numbers, but you only have to remember the last three.”

Vega studied the numbers.

Then Mia removed the plate, and the screen was blank white. She slid the second IUD under the lens, focused again.

“You remember the last three?” she said to Vega.

“79433530.”

Mia raised her eyebrows, impressed.

“Very good,” she said, tightening the focus as close as she could.

Vega put her face very near to the screen. Identical make of IUD, HEALTH-GUARD printed on the top coil. She stared at the number on the long tine.

“79433525,” she read aloud.

Mia lifted her head from the eyepiece and looked triumphant.

“Almost sequential,” said Vega.

“Yep,” said Mia. “Rowlie always tells me if I notice something, not to wait for him.”

Vega listened to her as she walked slowly back to the new girl. Jane 2. IUD 79433525.

“That’s smart,” said Vega, studying the body.

The scowl, the breasts, one hand with fingers curled, the other reaching out. Vega crouched a little to get a closer look, her face near the girl’s shoulder, and thought, Somewhere there’s four more just like you, or not like you at all.

Max Caplan wedged a finger in the knot of his tie as he waited for the client, attempting to loosen it. He’d worn a tie most days as a cop but they were always loose back then, always halfway-to-happy-hour style. Then when he stopped being a cop and started as a private investigator he threw most of them away, only pulled them out for weddings and funerals. But now, working for a lawyer, it was jacket and tie on the days he came to her office to hand in reports.

Vera Quinn was a one-man shop, just like Cap. No-nonsense, polished, attractive in a senatorial sort of way. She was possibly the most well-known attorney in Denville, PA, had produced a series of print ads boasting the only sentiment a potential client needed to know: I don’t get paid until you do. The classiest ambulance chaser this side of the Allegheny.

Work had been steady for Cap for almost a year and a half now, since he'd enjoyed a brief stint of notoriety after finding two local abducted girls, the Brandt sisters. But no one paid more or as frequently as Vera Quinn, and the work, though not exactly exciting, when Cap was being very honest with himself, watching the numbers of his direct deposits run up, was so damn easy. No skips, no cheaters, just desert-dry interviews with insurance companies.

And he was helping people! On top of everything, Vera Quinn was out to help the little guy. Medical malpractice, car manufacturing negligence, dead bugs in the French fries. The only price was he had to wear a tie once a week, and hell, Cap could do that for no black eyes or pulled muscles, for eight hours of sleep a night. Win-win all over.

"You can go on in, Cap," said the receptionist, in her sixties, a smoker with a voice like a buzz saw.

"Thanks, Martha."

Cap walked into the office, where Vera leaned against her desk and spoke into a headset with a microphone the size of a pencil eraser. She smiled and waved emphatically to Cap while she wrapped it up.

"You can expect the memo tomorrow . . . I appreciate your time. Cheers."

She clicked a button on the headset and removed it.

"Whoo," she said energetically.

"Good news?" said Cap, sitting in the chair opposite her desk.

Vera held her hands up above her head like she was presenting a banner.

"Turino settled," she said.

"Already?" said Cap.

"Already," said Vera, laughing. "If I weren't on the Paleo diet, I'd say let's get a margarita."

Cap laughed, in part because Vera was funny, self-deprecating and humble, but also because the job he'd just started was over and won. Easy.

"I guess we won't need Double G's statements," he said, dropping a manila envelope on Vera's desk.

"Hey, let's hold on to those. Paperwork's not signed up yet. Anything of interest?"

"I got two day laborers saying the foreman told them to work fast and cut corners."

Vera sat in her chair behind the desk and rolled forward.

“Just what you expected them to say,” she said, pointing at Cap.

He shrugged.

“Makes sense. Those guys don’t have a dog in the fight. Should we call Mr. Wyse, tell him he can pay for his medical bills and maybe a little trip to Atlantic City?” said Cap.

“Try the Bahamas,” said Vera, grinning.

“No shit,” said Cap. “That’s fantastic. Let’s call him.”

“In a few,” said Vera. “I wanted to run something by you first.”

She had a look in her eye like she had a nice juicy secret. It was silly for Cap to be nervous but he couldn’t help it. The only other person in the room knowing something you didn’t never felt good.

But he smiled congenially and said, “Shoot.”

Vera put her hands together and rubbed them a tiny bit.

“This is good, don’t you think? Us working together?” she said.

“Yeah, of course, Vera,” said Cap right away.

She nodded.

“Your work is impeccable, Cap. Thorough, fast, you have more experience and ethics than anyone in the field I’ve worked with, certainly.”

Cap was embarrassed; he didn’t like compliments because he never believed them unless they were coming from his daughter, and then he allowed them to wash over him in a gentle mist.

“I appreciate that,” he said. “You know the feeling’s mutual.”

Vera didn’t respond to that sentiment directly, just presented a tight smile and kept talking.

“I’ve been thinking about our arrangement, and I think we could consider making it a little more permanent.”

She let that sink in for a moment. She was a lawyer, after all. Let the other guy do the thinking and the talking; maybe he’ll say what you want to hear. But if she was a lawyer at her core, Cap was a cop, and he could play the quiet game too, maybe even better than she could.

He just kept smiling, allowed a marginally confused expression to cross his face.

“I’d like to make you an offer,” Vera said finally. She continued: “To become a full-time employee. You could make your own hours, just like you do now. All you have to do is keep doing the work you do. Health benefits, vacation, sick days. All I would ask in return is your word that you’d stay on for two years, and then we’ll reevaluate.”

Vera then handed Cap a gray envelope. He took it and stared at the blank face.

“Vera, I . . .” he began.

“Please. You don’t have to answer now. Take a couple of days. Talk it over with Nell.”

Cap smiled because everyone knew his daughter, Nell, was his most trusted adviser. Even though there had been a seismic shift in her personality since she’d been held at gunpoint for two hours during the Brandt case. Whereas before there had been boundless energy and eager curiosity, now there was burgeoning anxiety and uncharacteristic sullenness.

His ex, Jules, still held an impressive grudge about Cap having put Nell in danger. When Cap had confided in Jules that he had the distinct feeling Nell was hiding things from him, Jules responded, via email, “What the hell do you expect? She’s been through a trauma and now God forbid she acts like a normal teenager!! Stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

“I’m not sure what to say,” said Cap, feeling like an idiot.

“Think about it,” said Vera. “We make a good team.”

“Thanks, Vera. This is really something,” he said, good-natured and vague.

“I hope that’s good.”

“It is,” said Cap. “It absolutely is. It’s just I’ve gotten so used to worrying about where the next job is. I’m not sure what I’ll do with all that excess energy.”

Vera smiled and said, “Well, there’s always CrossFit.”

Cap laughed, and Vera laughed, and then they talked politely and professionally for a few more minutes about the Turino suit, another project in the pipeline, other possible business prospects. Then Vera walked him to the door and opened it. Cap tucked the gray envelope into the inside pocket of his blazer, and they said goodbye.

Vera said, “Speak soon, then?”

“Yes, thank you, Vera. Thanks,” said Cap, shaking her hand with both of his to convey his gratitude.

“I got your two-o’clock holding,” said Martha.

“Be there in a sec,” said Vera.

Vera gave a last wave to Cap and retreated into her office. Cap stood still for a moment, a little dazed.

“See you when I see you, Cap,” said Martha, idly scrolling on Facebook.

“You take care, Martha.”

Cap started slow and then hurried to the front door, where he fumbled with the knob and then was out, onto the sidewalk, choking on the humid August air. Come on, Caplan, he thought. No matter what's inside that gray envelope, this is a solid offer with a good shop and a first-rate boss and a health insurance plan that will make you salivate over its reasonable deductible like it was a medium-rare cheeseburger.

Then what was the problem? He grabbed hold of the knot in his tie and yanked it side to side until it loosened up. What was that movie, he thought as he bent over to catch his breath. Who was it—Brad Pitt? George Clooney? When he rips the tie off and throws it to the ground to reject corporate job security? Cap didn't want to do that.

He had only two ties.

3

VEGA WAS THE ONLY PERSON WAITING. IT FELT MORE LIKE A DOCTOR'S office than a police department, a young black woman with her hair in a neat bun and starched uniform behind the desk, the landline beeping inoffensively. Magazines fanned out on small tables in the corners. Clean floors, no dust.

Vega read news about the tunnel while she waited for Roland Otero. She scrolled on her phone, looking at the photos—the lights, ventilation systems, appliances, and the tracks for the carts. Entrance was a hole in the ground on a construction site near the airport, just big enough for a large dog or an average man. Or, Vega thought, two girls side by side.

A Latino man emerged from a door behind the reception desk. A few inches taller than Vega and with a slight build, dressed in a black button-down shirt and gray suit pants, a patch of white in otherwise black hair.

“Ms. Vega,” he said, walking quickly to shake her hand. “Roland Otero.”

They shook, said nice to meet you. Vega noticed pockmarks on his cheeks and forehead, smelled musky cologne on his skin as they returned to the door he'd come from.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice,” he said.

Vega nodded and put on a small, gracious smile. She glanced at the officer answering the phone, the Glock 19 tucked into her belt holster. Then she followed Otero through the door to a room the size of a high school gym. There appeared to be no offices, or even cubes, just pairs and clusters of desks, conference tables, vending and coffee machines—no walls or doors anywhere, just a long clear window wrapping around the whole space showcasing the brilliant sky outside. The room wasn't that loud either, just the ambient hum of people speaking simultaneously.

“You met Mia?” said Otero as they weaved through the aisles of the desks.

Vega saw cops, most of them plainclothes—mostly men with some women. White, black, brown.

They came to a long desk in the back of the room, almost flush with the window, what Vega assumed was the corner office equivalent. Otero offered Vega a seat and then went to his chair on the other side. The surface of his desk was sparsely covered: a yellow legal pad, a pen, a slim desktop monitor.

“You were saying,” he said. “About Mia.”

“I met her,” said Vega.

Otero waited a second, quickly realized she wasn’t adding anything. He nodded.

“What did you make of our Janes?”

Vega wasn’t sure if she was at a job interview, wasn’t sure if she wanted a job, but there was no sense in holding anything close. As of now she wasn’t hired or fired, just a regular citizen being asked for her opinion.

“Similar cause and manner of death,” she began. “Similar age, ethnicity. I’d guess the first girl was found indoors. Second girl outside.”

Vega paused, remembered the dirt under the second girl’s nails, the scowl on her face. She pushed the images from her mind and continued: “Both showed signs of recent intercourse, both with IUDs in their uteruses; considering their ages, I’d say they were commercially sexually exploited and possibly victims of human trafficking.”

Vega looked over Otero’s head, out the window, which seemed for a moment to be without glass, the sky so blue it looked liquid, like it would soon start flooding the panes and spill onto the floor where they stood.

“The IUDs with serial numbers five apart,” she said. “Would imply there are other girls somewhere with IUDs numbered 526 through 529. At least.”

Otero studied her for a moment and then stood.

“That’s our conclusion as well. If you wouldn’t mind coming around, I can show you some photos.”

Vega joined him on his side of the desk. He typed his password into his computer and scooted the mouse around. Screens opened, and he double-clicked on a file labeled “JD1 8-16.”

“This is Jane One,” he said.

Vega recognized her from the medical examiner’s morgue: curly

hair, slim build. It was a tight shot of her, curled on her side in the backseat of a car, naked except for a lacy bra and underwear, fresh stab wounds leaking blood like oil.

“Found in a parked car on a street in El Centro.”

“That in San Diego County?” asked Vega, trying to picture a map of the state.

“Imperial,” said Otero. “Sheriff passed it to us because we have more resources, facilities. We have pathologists like Mia.”

“Car registered?” said Vega.

“Yes, reported missing six a.m. on Friday.”

“Does the owner’s story make sense?”

“On the face, yes.”

“Prints?”

Otero nodded. “Partial from the wheel, didn’t bring anything up on past offenders.”

He moved the mouse over the screen and closed the photo.

“Would you like to see the second girl?”

“Sure.”

He double-clicked, and another photo came up: it was the second girl in a ditch outside, wearing boy shorts and a white tank top with a flowering patch of blood on the side where she’d been stabbed. Dusted in dirt, bare feet.

“A trucker spotted her in a ditch near Brawley and called 911. This was yesterday morning.”

“Assuming the trucker checks out,” said Vega.

Otero nodded.

“We can trace his route to where he started in West Texas. Plenty of alibis,” he said, with a quick sigh. “Not much to say about the second girl besides what Mia already told you. Similar stab wound pattern.”

Otero closed the files, and Vega took that as a sign to return to her side of the desk.

He smiled politely with just a dash of something fake in it, and Vega felt like there was something he wasn’t saying. She didn’t necessarily mind. There were things she wasn’t saying either.

Finally he spoke.

“Do you have any questions for me?” he asked.

“Sure,” said Vega. “What was in the second girl’s hand?”

If Otero was caught off guard, he did well in hiding it, just barely tilting his head so his chin pointed in another direction.

“Not sure what you mean,” he said.

“Her right hand,” said Vega, holding up her right hand to demonstrate. “Looked like it was starting to close in rigor. Either trying to make a fist or holding something. I doubt she’d try to defend herself with her fists—not many women do. They use”—Vega opened her hand wide again—“nails. So I’m guessing she was holding something.”

Otero nodded almost imperceptibly, then pushed his chair back from the desk.

“Would you like to see our evidence room, Miss Vega?”

“Sure.”

She followed him out a side door, down a flight of stairs. They came to a vestibule with an armored door next to a transaction window, an officer standing on the other side. The officer passed a tablet to Otero, who typed in a number and passed it back. There was a tissue box of latex gloves on the ledge below the window. Otero took four gloves and handed two to Vega.

The officer reached down and pressed a button, and the door buzzed. Otero pushed through.

It was a clean evidence room, blue archive boxes on shelves, at least ten aisles. There were two long steel tables with folding chairs at the front of the room.

“I’ll be honest,” said Otero, walking toward the stacks. “That wasn’t the question I’d thought you’d ask.”

He grabbed a box from a shelf on the aisle closest to them. Most recent toward the front, thought Vega. He placed the box on the table between them, and they stared at each other for a minute.

Otero smiled and said, “I thought you’d ask why you’re here.”

Vega leaned on the table, pulled herself a little closer to the box, and kept the stare.

“Why am I here, Commander?”

Now the smile went away, and he avoided her eyes, suddenly sad and almost nervous. But perhaps that was just the appropriate expression for the work he did all day.

He opened the box and began to remove the transparent evidence bags, one by one. Each was labeled with a six-digit number and the date, 08-21. Two of them appeared to contain boy shorts and a white tank top.

“You are right, of course,” said Otero. “The second girl was holding something.”

He picked out the last bag, which had a scrap of paper inside, no bigger than the palm of the second girl's hand, Vega thought. Otero opened the bag and reached inside, pinched the scrap with two fingers and pulled it out slowly.

He handed it to Vega and said, "As you see, it answers both questions."

Vega read it a couple of times, examined the shapes of the black letters blurred by sweat, smeared by dirt and blood, and it all made so much sense.

Otero and Vega sat across from each other, again, at a table in a large conference room on the third floor. The room was bright, another wall-wide window on one side exposing another blue sky. Vega felt like she was in a Silicon Valley start-up instead of a police department.

"Any minute," said Otero, glancing at his phone. Small jittery shake of the head.

They sat a few more minutes in silence. Vega did have more questions but got the impression that Otero couldn't say much more. So they waited.

Soon the door opened, and the two men they were waiting for came in. Vega stood slowly and looked at them down and up. One was tall, broad-shouldered, blondish. His hair looked wet with a sculpted little wave in front.

The other was shorter, not fat but fuller in the face, with small eyes, brown hair that was a little too long and absolutely not sculpted in any way. They both looked about forty.

"Christian Boyce, DEA," said the blond one. "This is my partner, Mike Mackey."

"Alice Vega."

She shook their hands, and they walked around to the opposite side of the table and sat on either side of Otero.

"Commander Otero's briefed you on what we know about the Jane Does?" said Boyce.

Vega nodded.

"There was something on *48 Hours* last week, an anniversary, where-are-they-now piece about kidnapped kids," he continued. "There was a segment on about the boy in the tank, what was his name?"

Vega didn't respond right away, and Otero said quickly, "Ethan Moreno."

“Right,” said Boyce. “We think the second Jane sees the show, gets stabbed, knows she’s going to die, and writes your name down. Questions,” he said, touching a finger on his right hand with his left as he listed them. “Are the Janes foreign-born or domestic? Was the first Jane killed in the vehicle where she was found or just dumped there? Are there more? If they’re being trafficked for prostitution, are they also being used as mules?”

On that last question, Boyce paused and linked his index fingers around each other. He looked to Vega for a response.

Vega looked back at him, waited.

“Nothing found in organs or cavities of either girl, as far as narcotics go,” added Otero.

Though he addressed Vega, she had the feeling he was correcting Boyce indirectly.

“Labial and vaginal lacerations, right?” interjected Mackey, his voice a little nasal.

Vega nodded.

“And IUDs in the uteruses of both girls,” he added.

Vega glanced at Otero, who looked away from her, his gaze falling on his phone. What did people do before phones when they wanted to avoid confrontation? Vega thought. Must have been a lot of clean fingernails in the world.

“So,” Boyce said, not acknowledging that his partner had spoken. “Here is where you fit in.”

Then he smiled, flashing straight white teeth. Vega pictured him with an enamel strip across the top row.

“We could use your help. We have a significant tunnel problem in this part of the state, as I’m sure you’re aware. Three this year alone. Difficult to know how long they’d been operational, but we estimate about a hundred thousand dollars’ worth of meth, cocaine, and marijuana coming through per week, per tunnel. With an overwhelming degree of certainty we can say it’s either Eduardo Montalvo or the Perez cartel. We’ve got DEA, FBI, police,” he said, tilting his head toward Otero. “All of us working to contain this. You understand?”

He nodded at her, his eyes a little too big and glassy, the way he looked in his pressed shirt and sleeveless fleece vest a little too much like a dad trying to get Princess to brush her teeth nice and good. Just a dash of patronizing.

“I think so,” said Vega. She folded her hands and leaned forward. “So,

to clarify, if the girl had written down Bugs Bunny instead of me, you'd be looking to hire him?"

Otero looked up from his phone. Boyce turned a little pink in the cheeks. That's the shitty part about looking like a Ken doll, thought Vega. Can't hide any color in the creamy skin. Vega thought she saw Mackey repress a grin.

"You're more than qualified for this type of work, Miss Vega," said Mackey quietly.

"Sure," she said. "You know about me, right? I don't do a lot of charity."

"I think you'll find the compensation adequate," said Boyce. "You'd be a consultant for the DEA, but we need to keep it quiet, keep out the media. You'll report to Commander Otero, and he'll report to Mackey, who'll report to me."

"We'll share findings," added Mackey.

"Right, share findings," said Boyce.

Vega restrained a smirk and said, "Are you paying me by personal check?"

"Cash, actually," said Boyce.

"Huh," said Vega. "You going to tell me how much it is or do we have to pass a chit back and forth?"

Boyce appeared to take a short breath in and hold it.

"Ten K for two weeks," he said. "Then we evaluate and decide how to move forward."

They stared at each other a minute. Vega rapped her knuckles twice on the table softly and said, "No thanks."

"Sorry?" said Boyce.

"No thanks," said Vega, louder now, standing.

Boyce and Mackey both stood up too, then Otero. Boyce was too polished to stammer, but Vega thought she saw him flinch a little in the eyes. Mackey licked his lips.

"How much then, Miss Vega?" Boyce said quickly. "How much is acceptable?"

"It's not the money," said Vega. "It goes without saying I'll keep everything we've discussed confidential. Pleasure to meet you all."

She turned and left the room, took the stairs down at an efficient pace. The stairwell spit her out in the big room on the ground floor, and she took a last look around at the panoramic windows, then went through the door leading to the lobby, then out the front doors.

She could feel the heat in the air even though the sun wasn't directly

on her. It was hot where she lived too, up north, but it was far more aggressive here; the air had a weight she could feel, pressing on her chest. She put her sunglasses on and walked down the paved path toward the parking lot.

Vega was halfway to her car when she heard someone behind her. Between five and ten feet, she thought. Rushing, not running, steps on the ground hitting almost at the same intervals as her own.

She reached her car and pulled her phone from her jacket pocket, opened up her map app and let it load. The steps behind her stopped. Between four and five feet behind her, she guessed. She did not turn around.

“Forget something, Commander?”

Otero didn't say anything at first. She turned to face him. He scratched the back of his head and squinted.

“I get it,” he said. “Why you might not want to take this job.”

“Yeah?” said Vega, leaning against her car. “Why I might not want to take a cash payment under the table from the DEA for busting a sex trafficking ring?”

Otero nodded.

“Then?” she said, barely shrugging.

“Then,” he said with a sigh. “There are things I can't tell you. What I can tell you is that Mackey wants to get it taken care of. Since we have no weeping mothers coming forward, no missing persons reported fitting the description of the Janes, it hasn't been difficult to keep it quiet.”

Otero paused. Something dark crossed his face and put a frantic twitch in his eyes.

“I've followed your career,” he said. “Ethan Moreno, Christy Poloñez, the Brandt sisters.”

Vega felt ice on the back of her neck at the mention of the Brandts, which was the way it had been for some time. If Otero hadn't kept talking, she might have corkscrewed down and landed right back in the woods in northeastern Pennsylvania, living through those long, cold minutes again.

“Jane Two,” he continued. “I think she knew she was going to die and wanted to find you so that you could help the others.”

Vega was glad for her sunglasses. Otero took a step closer, and Vega didn't move a thing.

“I think you could make this right.”

Vega held her breath when he said that. It hit her in a certain way.

“I can loan you one of my detectives. All my contacts here and in Imperial,” Otero continued, sensing that she was listening close. “I’m tied up on the tunnels like everyone else, but I’ll help you any way I can.”

Vega took off her sunglasses.

“Is Boyce paying out of pocket?” she asked.

“I’m not at liberty to say,” said Otero, firm and polite.

“Right,” said Vega. “Tell him I’ll do it if we start with twenty, not ten. Your detective can do research? Stitch up loose threads.”

“Sure.”

Vega got into her car and started the engine, the door still open.

“Can I tell them you’re in?” Otero said, leaning on the door.

Vega pulled her belt on.

“The money, the resources, your contacts, all the photos and reports,” she said. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

Otero seemed humbled, his eyes soft. Unusually grateful, thought Vega. As if this was a personal favor to him. Maybe he just took his job that seriously.

“Thank you,” he said.

Vega nodded at him, then at the door, implying he should stop leaning on it. He backed away, and she shut it, powered the window down.

“One more thing,” she said. “I need to bring in someone else. He can keep quiet. I’ll pay him.”

“I have to clear it with Boyce,” said Otero.

“Deal’s off without my guy,” Vega said, shifting to reverse. “So clear away.”

She pulled out of the space, then the lot, didn’t look at Otero anymore, kept her window rolled down and felt the hot wind hit her skin. She was thirsty as hell but didn’t want to stop. She had an unusually good feeling; it was like suddenly finding the exact thing you wanted in a store where you’d been a million times.

4

THE TEMPERATURE ON CAP'S DASHBOARD READ 84, BUT THE HIGH dew point was the real killer, the thickness in the air. Everything was sticking—his shirt to his back, pant legs to thighs, drops of sweat on his scalp threading through his hair.

But once the car cooled from the AC, he had an urge to turn it back off and open all the windows. The air was still hot and still wet, but he suddenly wanted to feel all of it, let his skin get slick as a tropical plant leaf. So he did, stuck his head out the window like a dog and even opened his mouth to feel the condensation bud on his tongue.

Then his phone buzzed.

“Ralz cell,” announced the Bluetooth lady.

Cap squinted at the name on the screen, thought what reason could Detective Brad Ralz have to call him. They'd parted ways after the Brandt case with a mutual respect they'd never fostered as colleagues at the police department, but Cap wouldn't call what they had a friendship, exactly. Must have been a misdial. He let it ring out, drop to voice mail.

He tilted his head again toward the window. He thought about Vera and her offer and tried to make sense of what he was feeling, his tepid response. ALLERGIC TO SUCCESS blinked an off-ramp motel sign in his head. He wasn't sure where he heard that; it sounded like something Jules might have said in one of her more passive-aggressive moments, or a book title by a celebrity shrink.

But he wasn't, he hadn't been—the last sixteen months he had embraced the work and the respect and the money. No bad reaction to any of it, no rash, no itchy eyes. Then what, he thought.

Again, the phone buzzed.

Again, the Bluetooth lady: “Ralz cell.”

“Goddammit,” Cap muttered.

He tapped the Call Answer button on the screen.

“Ralz,” he said loudly. “Stop calling me.”

“Cap, that you?”

“Yeah?” Cap said, confused. He had been sure the phone had been in Ralz’s pocket. “Uh, how’re you doing?”

“Okay. You going to be home soon?”

“Yeah, about five minutes away. What’s going on, Ralz?”

“It can wait five minutes. See you then.”

“What? Where?” said Cap, but Ralz had hung up.

“Call Ralz cell,” Cap said to the Bluetooth lady.

It rang once, then straight to voice mail. Cap had a bad feeling, shook his head. He let up on the brake and sped up a little. Slowed when he took the corner to his block, and as he got closer to his house, he knew he wasn’t imagining what he was seeing in his driveway, but still the picture didn’t make sense.

It was definitely Brad Ralz, leaning on his car, and the person he was talking to was definitely Cap’s daughter, Nell, in front of the permanently loaned hatchback from Jules’s parents. She stood in what Cap considered a standard teenager pose, arms crossed, the knee of one leg bent to the side, slightly bored expression. When she saw Cap approaching, though, she stood up straight.

Cap felt a surge of panic but talked himself down quickly. She’s right in front of you, safe, breathing, uninjured. Cap parked across the street from his house and stepped out. Ralz lifted his hand in a wave.

“Hi,” said Cap, crossing the street. “What’s happening?”

He shook Ralz’s hand and kept his eyes on Nell, who looked away.

“That roundabout off Highway 30,” Ralz began. “I noticed this car taking it a little quick, so I tailed. Then down Lowell I had to go forty to keep up, so I pulled her over.”

Cap felt his heart rate spike and took an aggressive breath through his nose. He stared at Nell while Ralz continued.

“I didn’t recognize her at first,” said Ralz. “Then I saw her name on the license.”

Nell still wasn’t looking at Cap, gazing over the roof of her car. She’d cut her own hair and dyed it black a few months ago, in the downstairs bathroom. Now it was short, just below the ears, the strands splitting off in different directions like falling fireworks. And her personal dress code had changed too; instead of the sportswear that used to be her uniform—khakis and baggy hoodies—now it was jeans with gaping

holes in the knees and fitted tank tops or T-shirts, also with jaggedly ripped seams and edges. Winehouse-black makeup on the eyelids. Cap didn't have a problem with her dressing more maturely (or so he liked to tell himself) but was periodically disturbed at the signals her fashion choices were sending about her mental state: shredded into strips and pieces.

"I said no harm in a warning," said Ralz.

Cap's mouth was too dry to form a proper thanks so he put on a tight smile and nodded.

"I just escorted her here so I could tell you face-to-face."

Cap swallowed and finally spoke: "How much would the ticket be?"

"Street speeding?" said Ralz. "It's one fifty."

Cap glanced back at Nell. She was still doing the freeze-out thing, looking straight ahead.

"Issue it," said Cap.

That got a reaction from her. She jumped back from the car like it was hot and stared at Cap, shocked.

"What's that now?" said Ralz.

"Issue the ticket," Cap said, slower.

He and Nell kept their eyes fixed on each other. The same eyes, really, acorn brown with an amber glint in the light.

"Dad," Nell began.

Cap held out a hand to stop her.

"Don't," he said.

They were all quiet but it didn't last. Ralz looked from Nell back to Cap and spoke.

"I'm not going to do that, Cap," he said. "Nell and I had a talk. It's a warning this time."

"Thanks, Detective," Nell said calmly. Then, as if she were the parent making an excuse for Cap, she added, "Sorry about all this."

"It's okay," said Ralz, even keel. "Just make friends with your brake."

She nodded quickly, hiked her backpack from her hand to her shoulder, and hustled up the stairs into the house.

Cap let out a breath and pinched the sweat from his upper lip.

"I couldn't give your kid a ticket. Sorry, Cap," said Ralz.

Cap shook his head, said, "I appreciate it. I just wanted to make her sweat for a second."

"She was real polite," added Ralz helpfully.

"Yeah, she can be," said Cap, looking toward the house.

Ralz put his hand out to shake Cap's.

“Take care, Cap,” he said.

“Thanks.”

Ralz got in his car and pulled out of the driveway, drove away. Cap flexed his fists, open and closed, and said aloud to himself, “Watch it, watch it.” He walked up the stairs to the porch and then went inside the house, felt the wave of AC douse him.

Nell was in the kitchen, leaning into the fridge. She emerged a moment later holding a slice of leftover pizza and glanced at Cap before heading for the stairs.

Cap summoned whatever scraps of patience he could gather so he wouldn’t yell.

“Nell,” he said quietly.

She stopped and turned, had a look that reminded Cap of Jules: it was the I’m-too-exhausted-by-the-day’s-events-to-be-annoyed look.

“Can you tell me what happened, please?” he said.

She sighed undramatically.

“It was just like Ralz said, Dad,” she said. “I didn’t realize how fast I was going.”

“That’s not good enough,” said Cap. “There’s Jonas Middle on Lowell, do you realize that?”

“There were no kids around; school hasn’t started yet,” she said.

“That’s not the point,” said Cap, his voice rising. “You can’t speed ever. *Ever*. It’s not just about you. There’s a whole world of people you could hurt.”

“But I didn’t hurt any of them,” said Nell, still calm but growing defensive.

“No, see, that’s the problem—you get cocky and think, I’ll never hurt anyone, I’ll never get hurt—”

He realized too late what he’d said, and Nell stared at him, her eyes glassy, perhaps with tears.

“I said I was sorry,” she said, almost whispering.

Cap got quieter as well but still struggled to keep it together.

“That’s not enough,” he said.

All the features on Nell’s face flared.

“What’s enough then, Dad? You want me to send written apologies to all the middle schoolers I *didn’t* hit?”

“Let’s watch the tone.”

Nell made a sound of frustration, somewhere between an “ugh” and a scream.

“You know what?” she said through locked teeth. “I’ve had about a

half a beer in my life and a puff of one cigarette. Never tried weed.” She cast her eyes down and added, “Never had sex.”

Cap was shamed by her honesty. He felt himself begin to calm down. She was fine. She was alive. The evening would turn peaceful, and they might watch some TV. Then there would be tomorrow and the next day. She would not die before him.

“It felt good to punch the accelerator today,” she said. “So maybe you can give me a little break and let me off with a warning like Ralz.”

He didn’t know what to say, so he nodded.

Nell turned and loped up the stairs, and Cap felt like a bunch of shit. When Brad Ralz, who had never been a model of restraint, was the voice of reason, it gave one pause.

Cap went to the kitchen, got a can of beer from the fridge, and trudged to his office, feeling like he’d been awake for a couple of days.

The AC was weaker in his office—to save money he’d shut the room off from the central air in the rest of house and used an old window unit instead. He felt fresh sweat gather on the back of his neck and cranked up the AC to ten.

He went to his desk and sat, finally took the tie off over his head and threw it on top of some papers. He opened the beer and sipped the foam off the top. He tapped the keyboard on his desktop; his computer woke up. He saw that it was 3:22 and could not believe the day wasn’t almost over. He knew he had to wait a little bit before he approached Nell again, figured he would go up at 4:00. For now, just email.

Eleven new emails since this morning. He squinted to see clearly, trying to remember where he left the reading glasses that Nell had finally convinced him to buy, decided his eyes were just fine without them, and scooted his chair back another inch so he could see the type on the screen.

Mostly junk. One from Vera with the subject “Great speaking with you.” Cap skipped over it, put a mental bookmark on it. Another from Nell, obviously sent before she’d been pulled over, forwarding him an article from the *Denville Tribune* about the increase in hate crimes. And then one with a time stamp of 2:54 p.m. from A. Vega. Subject: “Job.”

Alice Vega, his partner in the Brandt case. The elusive, the conundrum, the deviously lovely. Right after she’d left town she’d communicated through a steady flow of emails for about a month as they cleaned up details, filled out paperwork, answered the FBI’s questions, made statement after statement. But since then, not much, or more accurately, hardly anything at all.

Every once in a while Cap sent her an email out of desperation for some contact with her, anything, to hear her voice if only in his head as he read the words in front of him. His messages to her were lame ducks, links to stories about missing or found persons, cases that ended unexpectedly or cold cases finally solved.

MaxCaplan74 thought you might be interested in this story. Cap never knew what to write and usually just added, “Thought you’d like this. Cap.” Her response was always the same. Just “Thanks.”

But here it was. A. Vega. Job.

Double-click.

Cap didn’t realize he wasn’t breathing until his vision began to cloud and then he took a quick inhale and began to read:

“Hi. Got a job here in San Diego for you. 10K to start. Let me know if you can make it.

—Vega.”

Cap read it a couple of times, then stood up and read it again from a standing position. Then he read it aloud. If he’d known another language, he might have translated it and read it aloud in that language. He started to laugh, then covered his mouth as if he didn’t want to wake anyone.

He took a large sip of beer.

Then he clicked PRINT on the message and grabbed the sheet of paper from the printer, left his office, went upstairs, and knocked on Nell’s bedroom door. She didn’t answer at first, and he knew she had her earbuds in. He pounded with his fist.

She opened the door and appeared annoyed, one of the earbud wires thrown over her shoulder. She held a rind of pizza crust in her hand.

“Hi,” said Cap. “I know we’re arguing, but I really need to talk to you.”

She raised her eyebrows, her face brightening up.

“I just got this,” he said, handing her the paper with Vega’s message.

Nell read it, chewed on the pizza crust. She turned the paper over to see if there was any more.

“I don’t know if I should do it,” said Cap.

“Sure you should,” said Nell, holding the crust in the corner of her mouth like a squirrel. “It’s Alice.”

“Vera Quinn also offered me a permanent position.”

Nell gaped at him. “When?”

“Today.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“We’ve been a little preoccupied.”

Nell almost allowed a smile, then said, “What do you think you’re going to do?”

Cap thought for a moment.

“Vera’s offering a good job with health insurance.”

“No way,” said Nell.

“Oh yeah,” said Cap. “Everything. Benefits, vacation, sick days, probably some kind of retirement plan.”

Nell’s eyes searched the wall behind Cap as she thought.

“I gotta get some water,” she said, walking past him. “And Alice is offering what—ten K? How long?”

Cap followed her down the stairs.

“You read it. She’s not big on details.”

In the kitchen Nell pulled a bottle of water from the fridge.

“You should probably call and ask her,” she said, pointing the bottle at him. “And then you should probably take it.”

“I have no idea how long I’d be gone,” he said.

Nell shrugged.

“How long do her cases usually last?” she asked before offering her own answer. “A month?”

“Something like that,” said Cap. “What about you?”

“I can stay with Mom. She’ll be thrilled.”

Cap knew she was not being completely cheeky. Jules actually would be thrilled to keep closer tabs on their daughter, a luxury she couldn’t afford the days Nell was at Cap’s.

“She won’t be thrilled with me,” said Cap.

“What else is new?” said Nell, unimpressed by his argument. “Tell you what, I’ll handle Mom if we can maybe keep the speeding thing between us.”

Cap’s mouth fell open and then he laughed.

“Are you kidding me?” he said. “Can we just play out that scenario? I don’t tell Mom, and you don’t tell Mom, and then one day she runs into Brad Ralz—”

“Where the hell would that happen?” Nell interrupted. “Your scenario doesn’t have legs!”

“Immaterial,” said Cap. “She runs into Brad Ralz *somewhere*,” he enunciated. “He says, ‘How’s Nell? Still speeding?’”

“So unrealistic,” muttered Nell. “Brad Ralz doesn’t talk like that.”

“Are you aware of the storm of shit that will rain down on me?” Cap said, running his hands through his hair as if to stretch out his scalp. “They do not make a big enough umbrella.”

Nell was quiet, tapped her toe against the base of the counter.

"Withholding information isn't as bad as lying," she offered.

"So not true."

"But it will just worry her to death, and you know it," said Nell.

Cap knew she was right. But he also knew he and Jules had maintained a relatively congenial relationship since the divorce. He'd seen and heard of so much worse—ugly custody battles, long-term harassment. What a bit of good luck it was that he and Jules just naturally agreed to stay out of each other's way. But it was a tenuous accord, which had been rattled by the Brandt case the previous year, and every small fracture since felt like a rift in the earth.

"I'm not trying to snake out of it," said Nell. "I swear."

Cap shook his head, felt himself running out of gas.

"I can't keep it from her," he said. "And besides, that never works. I'm the king of It'll-just-worry-her-so-don't-tell-her."

Nell looked at him skeptically, knew she was winning a little.

"Yeah, but you were never good at it. You could never hide it. *I'm* good at it," she said.

"Goddammit, you're right," Cap said weakly, rubbing his eyes. "Okay, Bug, just this once I will not tell your mother."

Nell smiled now, wide as a lake.

"But just because I'm not squealing doesn't mean you're off the hook. We still have to talk about consequences from today."

Nell's smile dissipated and she furrowed her eyebrows, confused.

"You mean, like a punishment?"

"Yeah, like a punishment," said Cap, sounding unsure of himself.

"What, like, ground me?" she said, before erupting in laughter.

Cap felt disarmed.

"What's so funny?" he said loudly, over her. "I could ground you. It's within my rights as a father."

"Dad, you've never grounded me, ever. I don't think you'd even know how to do it."

"Sure I do. Don't I just say, 'You're grounded'?"

"Yeah," said Nell, wiping her eyes. "I think you have to add, 'Young lady.'"

"Okay, now you're just making fun of me."

"Little bit," said Nell. Then she breathed deeply through her nose. "How about if I just say I won't do it again ever-ever?"

Cap looked at her face. No combination of cop training and dad training would lead him to find a lie in her earnest eyes.

“I honestly feel like shit about it,” she said. “I wish I could just replay the whole day, you know?”

Cap nodded. He knew. Wanting to replay the day was a ritual of at least a third of his days.

Then Nell hugged him around the neck and kissed him on the cheek. She smelled like the oregano from the pizza.

“Call Alice. Then you should go to California.”

She let go and went up the stairs, shut her bedroom door gently.

Cap was cold suddenly, the sweat cooled on his forehead and back. He went back to his office, sat at his desk, tapped the keyboard.

The message from Vega was still there; it had not evaporated. A thin line pulsed horizontally through the letters in her name. Cap knew it was because the screen was old, something to do with the monitor’s magnetic field, but it made the word look alive, like it had a shaky little heart.