

First Snippet from Last Girl Dancing Posted

By Holly Lisle

Here's the setup. Jess has been pulled from her own unit to work with the Homicide Special Cases Unit, and has found out that she'll be helping track down a serial killer specializing in exotic dancers.

She's about to find out the details of her assignment.

Last Girl Dancing – unedited first draft, by Holly Lisle

“This is a complicated case,” Jess said, looking over the murder books. “But you have the situation well in hand.” She studied everything laid out before her, trying to keep on a steady keel. She hadn't had the nightmares in a few years – not regularly, anyway. But now, Jess could hear the screaming again.

Crying to be saved. Begging in vain.

Rubbing down sudden goosebumps on her arms, she asked, “So why do you need me?”

Jim, who had been staring at the victims' pictures, turned to Jess. “You've worked undercover. You also have an excellent record as a detective. Further, we've been through your packet, looked over your commendations and your background. You used to dance.” He smiled a little. “Something you never bothered to mention to me.”

“Ballet. Modern. Yeah – at one point I was going to go pro.”

“You've kept in shape. Any chance you've kept up with the

dance – or at least with the physical training?”

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Yes,” she said. “I have a room in my house that I’ve modified. I work out as often as I can.”

“Good. You have the skills we need. You have the face we need. And to all appearances, you have the physique.”

Jess was putting two and two together. “You want me to go undercover as a stripper?”

Jim and Charlie exchanged startled glances, and Jim burst out laughing. “God, no! The captain would never approve that. Besides, where the hell would we hide the wire? No, no, no. We want you to get a job in Goldcastle as a drink hostess. They’re fully dressed, though the costumes are pretty skimpy, but you have to be pretty and have a good figure to get any job in there. And you have to be able to walk well wearing high heels; I remember you used to be pretty good at that, too. We want you to mingle with the customers and the employees and talk to the dancers in a casual situation where they can point out clients and complain about employees to you or maybe drop something that we can use. We went through our list of young, pretty, well-built detectives, and it was a pretty short list. You aren’t the only one on it. But you’re our first choice.”

Jess nodded. “I can do it.” It was a chance to work in HSCU. It was a chance to be a key player in a massive ongoing serial homicide investigation.

Maybe it’s a chance to silence the screaming.

Jess would have paid to do this.

Charlie said, “We’re putting together a multi-county task force. The captain is coordinating. GBI and FBI will be in the way, no doubt – we’ll work around them as we can and with them

as we must. However, the undercover part of the operation is small, because there's no way we can make it any bigger. We've commandeered the personnel in an ongoing Vice undercover sting working inside the club – and they're pissed, of course, but murder beats vice in the poker game of life. And serial murder is the royal flush of hands. So there will be Vice cops working through the club snagging DNA samples for us by stealing and labeling drink glasses and other goodies and ferrying them outside to our pickups. We couldn't get a bartender or a DJ in place, though we tried. We have you as our inside eyes with the dancers and hostesses. You'll wear a wire and stay in deep undercover; once you're in place, you won't come into the station, we won't drop by your house, we'll listen in on the wire and we'll be there, but you won't see us, and you'll only call us from home when you're alone; the only people who will know who you are will be our bouncers – you'll meet the off-duty guys later today – and Howard and Charlie and me." He cleared his throat. "And the partner we're assigning you."

Something about the way he said that sent warning signals down Jess's spine and into her gut. "Oh?"

"I've called in a ... private consultant," Jim said. "An old friend of mine. Charlie and I have worked with him before. We're paying him out of our own pockets. He's going to be sticking close to you, and you're going to get friendly with him in your role as a drink hostess, so you can sit and talk to him and ... um ... pass things to him from time to time."

Jess studied Jim and Charlie. Their eyes had gone all hinky, and they looked like they were trying to slip something past her. She knew Jim – he had a hell of a poker face, and it had just fallen apart. So this made her all kinds of suspicious. "Like?"

"Notes. Items you pick up. Information about people you think he should check out."

This sounded completely wrong to Jess. "Guys. What are you doing here? What kind of consultant is this?"

Jim's voice dropped lower. "A psychic."

Jess rolled her eyes and stared at the ceiling. "Jee. Zus. Christ. You're shitting me. We've working a serial killer and we're going to take a trip to woo-woo land?"

"The psychic is solid."

"Solid? Oh. My. God. So when this turns into a media circus, we're going to make sure we have the clowns right up front."

Charlie said, "I get the feeling you're not crazy about psychics."

"I'm not. I like good police work. I like rational thought. I like good science – forensics and DNA evidence and careful note-keeping and preserving the chain of evidence. I like using all my senses to put the pieces together into a sharp, coherent picture that a goddamned shitweasel defense lawyer can't pull apart by floating the case out in front of a jury and discrediting it. And the second some shitweasel defense lawyer dangles fucking Madame Griselda communing with the spirits for the benefit of the police in front of our twelve upstandings, all our credibility goes right down the shitter."

Charlie looked sidelong at Jim and said, "Yon Princess Gracie hath a potty mouth, m'lord."

Jim sighed heavily and told Jess. "If it makes you feel any better, Hank is going to hate you, too."

"Hank? Your psychic is named Hank? Hank the Psychic?" Jess couldn't help herself. She laughed, but then shook it off. Because this mattered. Because psychics screwed up cases and discredited detectives and made shit up after everything was over when they were talking to the press. With their hindsight a hell of a lot clearer than their foresight, they told the

goddamned reporters that they'd told the police way back when this started how to solve the case, but that nobody would listen to them. And they got in the way during the case. And they made juries roll their eyes and wonder, if the cops were consulting psychics, why anyone needed cops. Yeah, Jess had a chip on her shoulder about psychics interfering in cases. But it was a well-earned, perfectly legitimate chip. "He's going to hate me? Why? And who the hell would go to a psychic named Hank?"

"To answer your second question first, only Charlie and me," Jim said, and Jess didn't miss the quiet note in his voice. "Hank doesn't do psychic work professionally. Right now, he teaches martial arts and self-defense courses. The psychic thing is something he does just for us, by special request."

He stood up. "As for why he's going to hate you ... you're pretty." He took a deep breath and said, "You may have good reasons for hating psychics, but I guarantee you he has equally good ones for hating pretty women. In spite of which, the two of you are going to have to work closely together, because we need both of you."

Jess understood that this was not her house, it was not her party, and she was a guest who could be removed for bad behavior and replaced by one to whom this case did not matter so much. By a detective who would do a competent, but not passionate, job. To Jess, this mattered. So she caught her breath, and turned off her anger – just set it aside for later, when she could give it a good airing in private – and nodded. "All right. Bring on the clown. I'd work with Bozo himself if it meant I got to be a part of this case."

"That's all I ask. I have to make a phone call," Jim said. "Go ahead and look over the files, pay special attention to our interviews."

Charlie stood, too. "I'll leave you to read. If you have any

questions,I'll do what I can to answer them.”

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