

Last Girl Dancing – Chapter 2

written by Holly

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Jess looked over the murder books. Stared at the pictures, read the interviews, studied the forensics reports, the crime scene diagrams, the previous detectives' notes, and Jim's and Charlie's notes – not much of their stuff, yet, of course, because they hadn't had these cases for long.

I don't want this case, she thought. I don't.

A hand dropped on her shoulder, and she jumped.

Jim said, "You managed to miss all the strip club action when you were in Vice, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I only did the Hooker Walk," she said.

"Okay. Well." Jim put a scrawled address on the table in front of her. "You and Hank are going to go to a couple of strip clubs tonight so that you can watch how things work. I want you to go over now and get to know him. Tonight, get out, watch the dancers, watch the club scene. See what you'll be doing, get a feel for the atmosphere in these places, and start working out how you're going to work together."

"All right. I'll go look."

"Hank will be in Goldcastle posing as a a friend of yours whenever you're working. We want you to get to know the girls who dance there as well as the other employees. And the customers. You'll be wired, and we'll get everything anyone tells you via the wire. Aside from talking everyone up, you'll

be providing things for Hank. He'll let you know what sort of things to look for, and how to obtain samples. Tomorrow we'll do your permits, fit you for your wire, create your fake drivers' license and Social Security card and carry-concealed permit and all your other goodies, decide on your name, and work out your backstory. The day after, you'll go in and apply for a job at Goldcastle. If you don't get it first try, we have back-up plans – but the club is short on dancers right now. Rumors have evidently started to spread, and Goldcastle is running great big ads in every Help Wanted section in town. Odds are good they'll give you a shot."

Jess started to ask Jim another question, but Jim said, "Go meet Hank first."

She looked down at the address he'd given her, mentally placed it, and raised an eyebrow. "Cheshire Bridge Road? Not a great neighborhood."

"Good place for a dojo, though. He lives above his business."

She started to make a smartass comment and stopped herself before the words escaped. "On my way," she said instead.

Jim said, "Seriously – find a way to get along with him. He's a good man. Get to know him, get past your problem with psychics. We need to break this case quickly – get you into Goldcastle, solve this, and get you back out before any of us get caught – and both you and Hank are going to be in a position to help that happen." He walked her to the door and said, "This thing is only a loser if we let it be a loser. You and I have turned other losers around. We can do this. You shine on this, Gracie, and you'll be one of the Grand Old Men before you know what hit you."

Jess tucked the slip of paper into her jacket and said, "Thanks for giving me the shot, Jim. I won't let you down."

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The dojo was a converted storefront in a seedy strip mall, stuck between a Korean restaurant and a store selling adult clothes and novelties. It had the usual yin-yang sign painted on the center of the glass, and above it Kamian Martial Arts painted on the glass in red and black block letters. No teaching style mentioned, which Jess found odd. Generally, martial arts places would announce that they taught JUDO or KARATE, or whatever, with a giant illuminated sign that sprawled across the storefront. Maybe he couldn't afford one of those signs, she thought, and got out of the car and strolled up to the door.

Hank Kamian had a list of classes and times posted there. Beginner. Intermediate. Women's Self-Defense. Advanced. Law-Enforcement. Translucent white rice paper screens fitted inside the windows provided privacy to those inside. A few cars were scattered through the parking lot – mostly old. None of the stores in the strip mall seemed to be doing a brisk business. In that parking lot, Jess's shiny white Crown Vic looked exactly like what it was. She was going to have to make a point of driving her personal any time she went to Kamian's in the future. Good covers had been broken by way less. Time to start thinking like an undercover cop again.

Kamian didn't look to Jess like a breathtakingly successful businessman, but first impressions could be deceptive. And no matter what Jim said, the dojo probably fronted for some mystic psychic-crap-of-the-orient shtick anyway.

Jess walked through the door into a makeshift lobby. She saw a small desk, phone, sign-up book, a rack full of Japanese-style uniforms in black, and two cabinets with different kinds of gear and belts of various colors. Nobody at the desk, though. Behind the lobby, a solid wall and the sounds of thudding and grunting, and a deep voice issuing curt, quick commands.

A little shiver uncoiled low in Jess's belly. God, that was a good voice. She had always noticed two things about men first.

Their voices, and their hands. This was one of those voices that rippled through her like the low-notes of a well-played cello. She felt her skin prickle, and stared down at her arms. Goosebumps.

She waited in the lobby, but no bell had rung when she came through the door, and no one seemed to be interested in heading out to see what she wanted. After a few minutes, she kicked off her shoes and put them in one box of the shoe rack beside the door, then walked back toward the sounds of bodies whooshing through the air and crashing back to earth.

Six men and three women occupied the room. They wore black uniforms, black belts, no patches or badges. One man had his back to her – he was the one with the voice, and he was issuing commands. The others were throwing each other and attacking each other with amazing precision. There were some big guys, and some small women. But everybody was doing the throwing, and everybody was doing the flying. It looked rough, and painful. And impressive.

She didn't recognize the style.

She stood quietly, and the people facing her ignored her completely. The man with his back to her ignored her, too. She was okay with that, actually. She didn't have anywhere else to be, and she was impressed enough by what she saw to think that she might be interested in adding some of the moves to her regular workout.

Besides, some of the men made for nice scenery, including the one in front of her, who along with his excellent voice had very good hands. Muscular, nicely veined, sturdy, with squareish fingertips. He had a nice set of shoulders, too, and hints of a great ass, though in baggy black judo-jammies, it was hard to tell.

She wasn't shopping, but it was always fun to look.

Since he was the one in charge of the class full of black-belts, she guessed the man leading the class was Hank Kamian, the person she had come to meet.

The class went for a good ten minutes before he said, "Break," and everyone stopped, and bowed.

Then, and only then, did one of the men say, "You have a guest, sensei."

And the man in front of her turned, and she had two impressions of him, one right after the other. The first was a stupid little thrill as his face came around and she caught a quick glimpse of a chiseled jaw, Roman nose, and gorgeous dark eye, and the second was shock as he came the rest of the way around and she saw that something horrible had once happened to the other half of his face.

And she thought, Meet the eyes, don't stare.

He was like looking at two people. He'd had a lot of very good reconstructive surgery, but it had been good surgery on massive damage. He still bore scars from it. The scars weren't as visible, though, as the immobility of the right side of his face when contrasted with the mobile, vital left side.

She bowed – force of habit from too many years in too many dojos – then held out her hand and said, "Jess Brubaker. Jim sent me over," and felt his hand clasp hers. Warm. Strong. A good, good hand. A good voice. A great body. And that face. She couldn't help but wonder what his story was, and at the same time, she didn't want to know what his story was. Because the story might make him someone she could like, and she didn't want to like him.

She gave him a polite smile and thought, He's a psychic. Concentrate on that.

She'd seen a flicker of surprise in his eyes. That vanished

quickly, though, as he looked her up and down as if he were a food critic presented with a bad meal. "Hank Kamian," he said in the voice that gave her goosebumps. He released her hand. "I have another twenty minutes on this class. I'd like to finish it out, if you don't mind, and then you will have my full attention." His voice was polite. Cool. Distant. All-the-way-to-the-moon distant.

"Not at all," she said, feeling irrationally hurt by his dismissal. "You mind if I watch?"

"No, ma'am. Not as long as you keep off the mats."

And he led his students back into hand-to-hand techniques, then two-on-one defenses, and then a flurry of stick-fighting. And then into a cool-down.

Jess had recognized some jujitsu in the fighting style, and some Kempo, and maybe some karate. But it was an odd style that looked to her like something Kamian might have developed on his own. It looked efficient. And fierce. Nice combination of offensive and defensive moves, of upright and grappling styles.

Kamian turned to her once the class filed out, and said, "How much did Jim tell you?"

"I know what I'll be doing. And that I'm way out on a ledge with this. Not a lot of assets, whole lot of liabilities. All he told me about you, though? That you teach martial arts, which I could have figured out on my own, and that you're a psychic."

And that you hate pretty women, she thought. But she didn't throw that in.

She had to make a concerted effort not to reach out and touch the scars along his right cheek and jaw. Time had silvered them to the point where they were less noticeable than the

stillness beneath and around them. She would guess Kamian had had some of his jawbone rebuilt. Probably his right cheekbone. The right side of his mouth didn't move much when he spoke, and the muscles on the right side of his face seemed almost frozen.

Kamian sighed. "Shrapnel," he said. "From a grenade. Quite some time ago now."

Jess jumped and met his gaze. "What?"

"My face. You were wondering."

"I apologize, Mr. Kamian. I hadn't meant to stare."

"You weren't staring. But your focus was on the left side of my face, which is what polite people do rather than stare at the right side."

Yeah. He probably did get a lot of that. "What happened?" she asked, deciding she might as well get it over with.

"Beyond the fact that it was military and classified and I don't do that sort of work anymore – nothing I can talk about."

Jess nodded. Which meant that he could have been Special Forces of some sort, or black ops, or regular service, or God only knew what else.

So why was he teaching martial arts and sidelining as a psychic consultant for the cops?

Jess said, "I'm here so that we can get to know each other. This will be an initial give and take, an opportunity for each of us to feel that we're on solid footing working with the other." She withheld a sigh; she didn't think she was good enough at mind games to pretend she was happy about what was coming, but she could at least be polite. "So that we have something to work with when you take me around to strip clubs

tonight –”

“When I what?”

Jess stopped. “Jim told me that was the plan.”

“Then that will be fine, detective.” Hank looked annoyed, but it was the sort of annoyance that expressed itself in chilly politeness.

Jess frowned. “Mr. Kamian, clearly you dislike me. That’s fine. I have to admit that I don’t like... psychics. So we’re both starting with a disadvantage in working with each other. But I don’t see why that has to be obvious. Do a little acting. Pretend you like me. I’ll do the same.”

His mouth twitched at the left corner. “Pretend. Sure. Guess I’ll go buy a sugar-daddy suit for tonight.”

“Sugar-daddy suit?”

“Some rich-stiff silk crap that will make everyone think they know why you’d be willing to be seen with me.”

Jess tipped her head to study him. “You have a great body. Good hands. A terrific voice. A face with... character. The fact that you’re a flake isn’t visible, so why couldn’t I be your girlfriend?”

“Flake?” He laughed, but it wasn’t a friendly laugh. “Nice line otherwise. Very smooth.”

Jess shrugged. “Jim told me he needed both of us on this case – not that we had to like each other. But you know why we’re doing this, right?”

“Jim was very clear about why we’re doing this.”

“Then dress like a normal guy and pretend you like me. Or don’t. You want to treat me like shit, I’ll pretend I’m the sort of woman who gets off on that, and we’ll do our jobs that

way." She suppressed an unprofessional burst of anger. "I can't imagine how Jim thinks a psychic will help us, but he does. And I trust Jim. He and I go back a lot of years. So I'll work with you, and I'll get along with you to the extent you get along with me." She kept her body relaxed, though her hands wanted to clench into fists. She was angry, but she was also a professional in a line of work that didn't tolerate emotional outbursts. "But you remember why we're doing this, and then you remember that, whatever job you're doing for Jim, your other job is to not fuck up our case. Because we get only one shot to put this case together and prosecute it; if the case is ruined by anything, including things I do or things you do, the killers will walk, and no one can touch them on any of these murders again. Ever. What we're doing here matters, Mr. Kamian. And we won't get a second chance to do it right."

"I'm not going to screw up your chances of catching these guys," he told her. "And I'm not going to turn this series of crimes into some sort of self-promoting media circus, either, which is what you're worried about, right? Jim and Charlie are the only people who know that I do the... ah... psychic thing, and I only do it for them, to give them a little extra edge from time to time. Jim knows about me because he's been a friend of mine for quite a few years, and when I fell across the psychic talent, I had to tell someone. He was the guy I trusted."

Jess maintained her appearance of composure. "Well, now I know, too."

"Yeah," he said. "Now you know. But you're not going to tell anyone, right?"

"Not a chance."

She wouldn't, either. She had no intention of admitting to anyone that she was partnering up, however temporarily, with a self-designated psychic.

Hank sighed. "So I'm supposed to take you to strip clubs tonight."

"So says Jim."

He sighed. "I'm not a frequenter of the strip-club scene. There are some in this neighborhood, though."

Jess rolled her eyes, which she knew wasn't terribly professional. But... please. "Some? Close your eyes and throw a rock. And nothing personal, but this is a crap-ass neighborhood. The strip clubs here are going to be shit-holes."

Hank looked startled, but only for a second. "Darlin'," he drawled, "I'm guessing you didn't spend much time in Vice."

"As little as I could manage."

"Right. From my days in the Army, I can state categorically that all strip clubs are shit-holes," he told her. "Some of them just have prettier furniture."

She grinned a little. And then she cocked her head to one side and said, "Army, huh? I still have a couple of friends in the Army. What was your MOS?"

"11BV." And when she raised an eyebrow, he translated. "Ranger infantryman."

"Rangers. Wow," she said, and for a long moment she didn't say anything else. She was impressed, She tried fitting the Rangers thing with the psychic thing, wanting to figure out which part of him would be the part she would be dealing with – the part she admired or the part she detested. At last she said, "Well, I'll take your word for it on the strip clubs, then. The one I walked into back when I was in school was awful, but I figured it was a bad example."

The second it was out of her mouth, she wanted to take it

back. He was staring at her like she'd just said the most fascinating thing in the world. "You? Went into a strip club in college?" He chuckled and touched the back of her hand with his fingertips again and asked her, "Why?"

She almost couldn't breathe. She pulled away from him, feeling her muscles locking up, feeling her heart starting to race. She glanced down at her watch and said, "Look at the time," and with pulled her keys out of the hidden pocket in her suit jacket. "I'll meet you back here, shall I? Since your last class for the day is at seven, why don't we say eight tonight? And I'll be dressed appropriately for going to sleazy places." She knew she sounded exactly like a society matron being panhandled by a bum. But she couldn't stop herself.

She stalked to the front door, grabbed her shoes, and was outside getting into her car before he even had a chance to respond.

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Hank was discovering he could not have been more irritated at Jim. A friend would have warned his buddy about what was coming. A friend would not have dumped this icy Viking on him and expected him to deal with her.

Jess Brubaker was Hank Kamian's nightmare, and what was worse, Jim had to have known that when he chose her. Because she was another tall, beautiful blonde, and when Hank looked at Jess, he was right back in Walter Reed again, discovering his brand new psychic gift of psychometry – of knowing hidden truths about people by touching them or things they had touched – by holding the hand of his beautiful blonde fiancée and discovering all the different men she'd been screwing while he'd been fighting for his country overseas and sending most of his paycheck back to her.

Hank looked at Jess, and she wasn't the blonde bitch. She was ... He didn't know what she was. Something different. Someone

honest. But looking at her sent shivers running up and down his spine.

He stood staring after her, the echoes of everything that question had set off vibrating like little explosions from his fingertips straight into his brain. And his gut.

"Hell," he whispered.

When Hank first saw Jess, he thought he'd known what to expect. He knew the type: beautiful, self-centered, bitchy, unfaithful.

When he shook her hand, he discovered he'd been wrong. She felt straightforward and solid to him. And she wasn't repulsed by his injuries. She was startled. Interested. Curious. Surprised.

But not repulsed.

And with that second touch, he'd discovered that she hadn't been kidding about liking his voice and his hands, either. Or about hating the fact that he was a psychic. She'd been flat-out honest with him, which was something he'd come to believe women were incapable of being.

Her honesty was bad, because she was beautiful in a careful, frostily perfect way. But that single touch also insisted she was nowhere near as frosty on the inside as she was on the outside. And his body was entirely capable of thinking wicked thoughts about this stranger who'd looked at him and almost liked what she saw, while his mind knew that pursuing those thoughts would be disastrous.

He walked to the phone, thoughtful. Called HSCU, asked for Jim, and waited.

And when Jim got on the phone, he went straight to the heart of the issue. "You bastard. You had to pick her?"

Jim said, "Hated her that much, huh?"

"Actually, I sort of liked her," Hank said. "I didn't want to, but I did. But... man... watching her walk in here was like reliving my worst nightmares."

"She has qualifications for this that would make your jaw drop," Jim said.

"Maybe so. But I thought fucking Lise had materialized, first glimpse I caught of her."

"She doesn't look anything like Lise," Jim said.

"Same height, same coloring, same build. The face was completely different, of course, but after what happened in Walter Reed, I don't react well to that combination. I was... cold."

"Don't be. Jess is honest, she's dependable, she's not looking for anyone to give her any free rides. When I worked with her, she was just one of the guys. Not a bullshit bone in her body."

Hank rubbed his temples and leaned his head against the wall. "I know. I felt that. There is something not right about her, though – which is the real reason I called. Not sure if it's a problem. Figured I'd run it by you."

"Shoot."

Hank said, "We were talking about tonight's work, and my uninspiring neighborhood, with its walking-distance strip clubs. She mentioned in passing having walked into a strip club while she was in college. I followed up, thinking it was kind of funny – and all the color drained out of her face, and she turned into the ice Viking and stalked out of here. You have any idea what I fucked up?"

"Yeah. I know what it was." Jim was silent for so long Hank

started to think their connection had been cut. Then Jim said, "It relates to the thing that killed her dream, the incident that changed her life. The reason she's a cop. But it isn't my place to tell you, any more than it would be my place to tell her that you were blown up saving the life of one of your men, or how your fiance financed her acting career." He paused. "Or how you had to fight to get your life back."

Hank sighed. "I understand." If he closed his eyes, he could still feel the shrapnel ripping into him. He could feel the warmth of his own blood, the heady floating feeling of bleeding out. Could hear the chopper blades pounding the air, the medics shouting at him to hang on, to stay awake. Could remember the surgeries, the nurses, the doctors, the pain.

A handful of years and endless surgeries let him walk, move, chew, and swallow. Allowed him to walk on the streets in daylight without little kids screaming at the sight of him and bursting into tears. The surgeries, though, couldn't fix him up well enough that he would ever be a Ranger again – and being a Ranger had been the only thing he'd ever wanted.

So he knew about the death of dreams. About pain in the past kept inside, and pushed out of sight. He knew about searching for meaning in the ashes.

Jim said, "She'll tell you when she's ready. Or she won't. She's never talked with me about it, and we've been friends for years. I only know because I've read the deep digging someone along the way did and filed in her jacket. I can only tell you that she couldn't be more motivated to solve this case."

Hank said, "Then I won't push. If she tells me, she tells me."

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Jess hadn't handled that at all well. She'd fled, which was ridiculous. If she hadn't been such an idiot about her exit,

she might have hoped for a graceful recovery – some blas story that brushed close enough to the truth that it would satisfy, but dull enough to make the issue never come up again.

Instead, she'd managed to send up a flare the size of Texas regarding her dance school years and the whole strip club issue.

And she had never done that before. Had never faltered regarding the details of her past. She didn't think Jim knew about Ginny. If he did, he'd never said anything. None of her partners had ever known. A lot of cops followed up on cold cases in their off time, and Jess was, as far as any of them had known, only doing what a lot of others did. She didn't talk about the case, she didn't leave notes around, and she didn't let her investigations into her sister's disappearance interfere with her on-duty work. Her department psych evals had never shown anything wrong, so she'd never had to discuss those formative events with the department's psychiatrist. She figured she'd had no trouble with anyone because she was so good at compartmentalizing things.

Until today, when something fell out of the box.

What did that mean?

She walked to her car, unnerved. She didn't know what to make of Hank Kamian. He wasn't at all what she'd expected. She'd disliked him on principle before she met him, and after standing in a room with him and talking to him, her principles remained. She simply wasn't sure they applied to him.

He didn't seem like a psychic.

He'd been a Ranger, for godsake. He was someone real. Someone who knew about the line, and who'd made his stand on the right side of it. He seemed like someone she could like. A lot.

She ought to turn around, walk back into the dojo, and say,

"Look, I don't have anywhere I'm supposed to be right now, and I'm sorry I reacted so badly. Can we go someplace and sit down and we'll figure out how we're going to work together and see if we can get to know each other enough to understand what our roles are going to be with this job."

But she didn't do that. She wasn't ready to go back in there and talk to him.

Why?

She almost felt like she was afraid of Hank Kamian, and getting into the Crown Vic and driving toward home, she explored that a little. She was going to have to work with this man in a situation that put her safety at risk. She had to know what buttons of hers he was pushing and why he was pushing them.

She wasn't physically afraid of him. In no way did she think that he would turn on her or hurt her. Not the least because he was a friend of Jim's, who would not have put her with someone who would turn vicious.

She wasn't unnerved by the way Hank looked. The scars had been startling, but they hadn't been disturbing. She considered his appearance for a moment. As she did, a quick image of a friend's old Kevlar vest flashed in her mind. The vest had taken some lead, and he'd shown it to her afterwards. The bullets had torn it up. But not him. And that, she thought, was Kamian's face.

He'd taken some damage, but it hadn't destroyed him. And that made him interesting. Oddly attractive. Certainly not repulsive.

But...

In light traffic, home hadn't taken too long. She pulled into her apartment complex and parked her car in her reserved space

and sat there staring up at the dingy four-story building.

She could afford better, but she'd never gotten around to looking for better. The only person in her life was her, after all, and all she had was her work.

She closed her eyes.

"Jess?"

"Yeah, Ginny?"

They'd been doing arabesques together in the garage their father had renovated so that they would have room to practice without destroying the house. They were sixteen, not quite ready for pointe yet, wanting pointe so badly, but already hearing their dance instructor explaining to their mother that both of them were too tall. That they would never be anything but chorus dancers in the ballet. That they had the talent and the fire and the beauty to win lead roles, but...

Ginny said, "You heard what Dame Gerta said, right?"

"I heard."

"You going to stick with ballet?"

Jess had sighed. "I suppose the chorus wouldn't be so bad. But I've been thinking maybe theater. Or modern."

Ginny had nodded. "I've already decided to switch to modern. I don't have the voice for theater. And I already know I want lead roles. I've been looking at the North Carolina School of the Arts. I think I could get what I need there."

Jess sighed. "I thought we were both going to try to get into Harrt School. It has one of the best dance programs in the country."

Ginny shook her head. "Be practical. You want us to endlessly be fighting each other for parts? I don't. You take one

school, I'll take the other, and we won't each be competing with our double for every single slot."

"I wanted to be your roommate, though."

"I know," Ginny had said. "It would have been fun. But this is about the two of us being dancers. For real, up on the stage. With lights, and music. And applause."

Jess opened her eyes and stared up at the four-story apartment.

She and Ginny had figured it all out. Then fate threw Jess's new path before her as clear as a broad highway in midday. She'd had no choice. She became a cop, with her goal from the very first to make detective.

On patrol, and soliciting johns on the Tricks Task Force, and at the bar when she celebrated making detective with her new partner, she'd privately shared every moment with Ginny, and with a pain that Jess never admitted to anyone.

At the beginning, even after the dream of dance was dead and buried, Jess had still tried to have it all. She'd seriously dated a nice man, a man who could have been worth marrying. She'd gotten engaged, and she'd struggled to be everything to him and everything to her work at the same time. But she'd discovered the same truth a lot of other women had already discovered: having it all was a lie. She could be an overworked cop and a frazzled wife and a mother who never saw her kids. Or she could choose to do one thing with everything in her, and make the sacrifices that took. Every path she followed meant turning away from all the other paths.

It was the same for everyone. Life had costs, and to live, she paid, just like everyone else.

So, as she'd walked away from dancing, she walked away from the dream of marriage and children. She said goodbye to any

hope of a normal life lived among good people; traded it in for a life lived amid criminals and their crimes.

Years later, she didn't know if she even believed in good people anymore. One thing she'd found, first as a uniformed officer and then as a detective, was that in almost every situation, almost everyone lied. She trusted other cops. And not always them. She never looked at civilians without wondering what sort of games they were running, what nasty secrets they were hiding, who they were hurting and how.

She was disillusioned with humanity. She didn't have dreams anymore. She had work instead, and the single goal that stretched out in front of her like an open maw that would never be filled. Save them. The innocent few, the helpless, the victims of the cruel, the violent, the insane, the evil.

Sitting in that car looking at her life, she abruptly realized why she was afraid of Hank Kamian.

He made her realize there was more to life than work, which was a deep, dark truth she had spent years avoiding. And she wasn't sure she could deal with that. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Some dreams were better off dead.

Where to buy

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