

Last Girl Dancing

[By Holly Lisle](#)

Chapter One

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Deep blue satin bustier, blue satin G-string, carefully applied make-up that covered and filled in the gapped half-inch incisions over each jugular vein. A halo of night-blossoming jasmine around a shining fan of long, silky brown hair. Sweet brown eyes, open, unblinking, beginning to dull and cloud.

The makeup over the abraded wrists and ankles hadn't covered as well this time as it had for the last two girls. This sweetheart had fought harder. She had been especially fun to hurt. To possess. Finally, to kill. But the make-up? Not good.

The photographer, still crouching, spread the dead dancer's legs wider, into a lewd pose. Appearances mattered. They told the story – pretty, wicked, filthy girls and the three friends who gave them what they deserved.

Click. Flash. One Polaroid slid out into a latex-gloved hand, and – click, flash – another. A third. And, quickly, one last lovely shot, because the photographer was working in a public place, and those flashes could bring attention. But everyone needed one final souvenir of this adventure.

That's what friends were for.

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Heading up the back steps of the Special Crimes building, Jess felt like she was walking into a cathedral. She was on her way to the home of the Grand Old Men of Murder.

For the last eleven years, her goal had been to become one of the Grand Old Men, not all of whom were old, not all of whom were men. Because what all the Grand Old Men had in common was that they were the best. They got the toughest, most baffling, most frustrating cases. They got the murders no one else could solve. Becoming an HSCU detective touched at the very heart of the reason she had become a cop.

Jess knew her chance of reaching her goal was better than the odds of winning the jackpot in the state lottery, should she ever decide to play. But not much.

HSCU consisted of twenty detectives, two lieutenants, and one captain in charge of the unit. You had to have already been the best just to get a chance to apply. The waiting list stretched on forever.

And yet Jess had received word the night before that she was going to be on loan from her own Major Crimes' robbery unit, and that she would be reporting to HSCU for as long as she was needed, starting first thing next morning.

No word about why. No explanation beyond a mention that she had been asked for specifically, and a comment that the HSCU team had a tendency to show up for work early, and she probably ought to be there half an hour before the official start of shift.

Jess figured she had this one chance to make a great impression. So she'd dressed conservatively, in her best suit. She wore a navy silk blazer specially cut to fit comfortably around her shoulder holster, and a lean, just-above the knee skirt in nubby silk. She'd put her hair in a French twist. Skipped the jewelry, skipped makeup beyond a bit of lip gloss. Wore her good watch with the leather band and the sweep hand. She looked professional. Respectable. Solid.

Every choice she'd made that morning had been an agonizing decision. Each one had felt momentous. In the end, she'd been

too nervous for breakfast.

She felt like she was auditioning for a job seven years before she could hope to qualify, and she didn't even know what they were going to ask of her. Why did HSCU need her?

Jess came out at the top of the staircase into a wide corridor. Junk food and drink machines stood immediately to her left on the landing. Beyond them, the corridor stretched before her, with dark speckled linoleum and walls painted mustard yellow, fluorescent lights humming and flickering overhead. Doors to the left and right bore brass plates: Rape Special Crimes Unit, Robbery Special Crimes Unit. The third door left was Homicide Special Crimes Unit. HSCU.

Jess walked up to the HSCU door, swallowed hard and opened it.

Industrial gray cubicles lined the side walls. A few windows on the back wall let in the first glimmerings of dawn. The gray file cabinets beneath those windows had seen better days. Maybe, she thought, eyeing them uncertainly, better decades. In the center of the open area between the two rows of cubicles, a big wood table squatted – pitted, scarred, and ugly – surrounded by a lot of comfortable-looking and surprisingly modern swivel chairs.

And though she was over half an hour early, the place was hopping. Detectives sat in their cubicles thumbing through thick notebooks or typing at computer terminals or talking on phones. Two detectives sat at the table in the center of the room, suit coats off but holsters on, sleeves of white shirts rolled up, papers and three-ring notebooks piled in front of them, coffee and candy bars scattered around them in drifts. Behind them stood a tall detective wearing a silk suit.

All three men at the central table looked up at the sound of the door thudding shut behind her. And there was Jim Hennicut. Same shaved head. Same military bearing, same lean runner's build. Grinning at her.

" Princess Grace. We meet again."

Her heart felt a little lighter.

" Jim," she said, and returned the grin. "Are you the reason I get to be here?"

He stood and nodded. "We needed someone with your skills and your intangibles. I vouched for you."

Jess had done the hooker walk as an undercover cop on a couple of trick task forces for Jim back before she'd made detective. She didn't like undercover, but the experience had been useful – and she'd been good at it. Jim had made her better. Her theater background from high school and dance school had come in handy, as had her looks. But Jim had taught her how to fade into the scene, which was not something anyone in theater ever tried to do. Jim had lived and breathed the job back then, and his zeal had benefited everyone who worked with him. She'd become a chameleon, and johns had flocked to her. One of them had intended more than sex for pay, however, and had without warning grabbed her by the throat and dragged Jess through the window into his SUV, speeding off with her, intending rape. She'd had to get him under control while her backup scrambled like hell to reach her.

Her abductor had turned out to be a serial offender. Jess's observations had been critical in obtaining search warrants, developing lines of questioning, and eventually in offering testimony that had helped convict him of the rapes of more than twenty women in the area.

Jess had made detective not long after that performance. Jim, seeing his own zeal and sense of mission in her, had been one of her staunch supporters in that promotion.

" So I owe you again," she said.

Jim, fifty, still married to his work, and if rumors were

correct, recently divorced for the third time, said, "You make your own breaks, Gracie."

Jess rolled her eyes and smiled at that nickname. It had dogged her throughout her career, but it wasn't insulting when Jim said it.

" My name is actually Jessamyn Brubaker," she said to the other two detectives. "I prefer Jess."

" And yet *everyone* calls you Princess Grace," Jim said.

Jess sighed. "But you're the only one who does it to my face."

Jim laughed and turned to his colleagues. "See, she looks like Grace Kelly. And when she *wants* to," and here he rolled his eyes, "she has these finishing-school airs."

Jess looked at Jim sidelong, and saw that he was laughing at her embarrassment. "Someone long ago once told Jim he was amusing." She looked him in the eye and said, "Whoever told you that lied to you, Jim." She kept a straight face while she said it.

Jim snorted. "Like I said, finishing school airs. Anyway, this is Captain Howard Booker, supervisor of HSCU."

Booker, the standing detective in the good suit, nodded to her.

Jess studied him with interest. Fifty-ish, she decided, very tall, with a short-cropped afro going to gray, coffee-brown skin, and dark, watchful eyes. She leaned across the table and shook his hand. He had a thin hand, long spider-leg fingers, a good grip. She said, "It's an honor to meet you."

Booker smiled politely. "Thank you for coming out this morning," he said. His voice, high and reedy, wasn't the voice she'd expected.

The captain excused himself, leaving Jess with Jim and the detective she hadn't met yet.

Jim said, "And this is Charlie Sweeney. My partner. Charlie has a wife problem." Jim winked at Jess. "He's still married to the one he started with."

Charlie didn't laugh. "Only two more years of you," he said to Jim, then reached across the table, smiled at Jess, and shook her hand a little too hard.

She guessed that Charlie was a few years younger than Jim. He had a body-builder's physique, a street cop's brush-cut that made him look younger from a distance, and a wary, seen-it-all gaze. Short, stubby, wide hands with a lot of hair on the backs.

Jess asked Charlie, "Is Jim still leasing child brides on the two-years-and-trade-'em-in plan?"

"You really do know Jim," Charlie said. "Glad you could join us, Jess." He would have sounded like Darth Vader, if Vader had come from Georgia. "Welcome aboard. They tell you anything about our little mess here?"

Jess rolled her eyes. "Yeah. Two things. Dress nice. Be early."

Jim laughed. "That's all I gave them. We're trying to keep this case from landing in the papers with hundred-point headlines, though it's going to eventually. It would be a very good thing, however, if it did it about the same time we solved it."

Jess took a seat beside Jim, across from Charlie. "So what do you have? And how can I help you?"

"What Jim and I have," Charlie said, "is probable serial homicide. We have three victims so far that we know of. The first was murdered eight months ago – white twenty-one year-

old Mila Petushka, stripper at Goldcastle Gentlemen's Club. Then two months ago, same MO, Bernadette Chevalier: white, twenty-three, stripper at Goldcastle Gentlemen's Club. And finally, three days ago, Gloria Houseman. Twenty-one. Also white. Stripper at Goldcastle Gentlemen's Club."

"Correct me if I'm wrong," she said, "but I thought serial killers were careful not to take their victims from the same place each time."

"You're not wrong," Charlie said. "But that's only one of the irregularities with these murders."

Jim nodded. "The first known body was found eight months ago on a softball field pitcher's mound in Rhyne Park in Cobb County, and the Cobb County Sheriff's Department picked it up and started working it. The second known body was discovered four months ago on a picnic table in the pavilion at Pinckneyville Park in Gwinnett County, and the Gwinnett County Sheriff's Department started working that case. Both bodies were found within hours of death; the killer left them very prominently displayed. The third girl landed in a flower bed on a bit of green south of the zoo in our very own Grant Park three days ago, which was when the Atlanta PD got involved. However, the officer responding to the call happened to have a friend on the force in the Gwinnett Sheriff's Department who'd been talking about their stripper find, and our officer realized that his body fit the same MO. So he did some digging, located the other case that fit his parameters, triangulated the killer into the heart of Atlanta based on the body dump locations, and passed the three cases on to Homicide/Robbery. And they, in turn, passed everything they had on to us. They don't have the manpower to expend on this. We do."

Jess nodded. HSCU ended up with the cases that would run the overburdened zone homicide departments into the ground. It got the cases that crossed jurisdictional lines, had multiple

victims, extended timelines, celebrities on either end of the bullet, or other complications.

" I'm guessing we assume we haven't located all the victims?" she asked.

Charlie sighed. "Good guess. After we were brought onboard, the FBI and the Georgia Bureau of Investigations showed up, of course. To the great joy of all involved," he added with a snarl. "Though the FBI and the GBI are enough of a pissing contest with each other over territory that they might leave us alone to get some goddamned work done. Before he locked horns with the GBI investigator over turf, though, our Feeb consultant gave us a profile. Killers are – he says – white males, late twenties to mid-forties, neat and well-organized, college-educated and working in well-paid white-collar or executive jobs."

" Killers? Plural? Serial killers working together?"

" We'll get to that," Charlie said, voice grim. "The killers are planning the killings, are meticulous in the handling of the bodies, and are unlikely to leave us any crime scenes in the future. All three known victims were murdered elsewhere and dumped in locations that involve police organizations which historically have not worked well together."

Jim said, "So the killers have given this some thought. To this profile, we can add that crime MOs are identical – and all have the marks of organized killers who have had time to work out their method. We aren't getting the practice kills, before our murderers had their kit together or had all the elements of their fantasy in place."

" But ... more than one serial killer working together. That's not unheard of, but –"

Charlie cut her off. "There are three of them," he said. "That's unheard of."

" Christ. And the GBI and the Feds," Jess muttered.

Jim and Charlie made identical growls, and Jim said, "Oh, yeah. Everybody wants want to get a dick in this one. But it's Booker's job to entertain the Feebs and Geebs. So far, he's been on top of it."

Jess thought for a moment. "The profiler give any suggestions on how long these guys might have been in business?"

" Years, probably." Jim sighed.

Jess frowned. "Three killers working together. That doesn't work too well over the long haul. They will have made mistakes. Over a period of years, one or the other of them will have been stopped, taken in for questioning, maybe arrested for something related to a victim. Serial killers almost always have close calls for years before justice catches up with them. And with three of them, one or the other should have had turned state's evidence on the other two by now."

Charlie gave Jim a meaningful look and said, "Okay. Now I believe you."

Jess was curious about that comment, but not all that curious. She was used to being doubted, written off as a Barbie doll with a gun. Police work was still very much a man's world. She'd found that excellence was the best defense against prejudice, so she strove to be excellent. But excellence had to be proven face to face, so she ended up winning her colleagues over one by one. She didn't let it bother her. Much.

" Those thoughts have crossed our minds," Jim said, ignoring Charlie's remark.

" Any chance it's one killer, and that what looks like evidence ... isn't?"

" Well, there's always a chance, but it doesn't seem like the best chance. First off, forensics has cleared the semen samples of any lubricant or spermicide traces."

" Which would make semen obtained from condoms unlikely," Jess said.

" Yep." Charlie glowered down at the stack of murder books. "Second, fiber and hair samples from three assailants are consistent across all of our known victims. The possibility of lab screw-ups exists, of course. Or that the actual killer reacted violently to either seeing the victims having sex with multiple partners, or as a follow-up to being a participant himself."

" That would work," Jess said.

" Not as well as you might think. We are keeping that possibility open. But see ..." Charlie sighed.

Jim took over. "The MO on each of these is ugly. Signs on each girl of bondage, forcible rape, and torture before death. According to the medical examiner, death is by exsanguination, with the dancers hung upside down by their ankles while their jugulars are cut with surgical precision."

" Good God," Jess murmured.

" That's not all. Postmortem, the bodies are washed, hair is done up, makeup is applied, and the victims are raped again by each participant. As a final step, the girls are dressed in stripper costumes and removed from the scene of the crime to various dumping sites."

Jess sat there for a moment, staring down at her hands, feeling sick. She took a long, slow breath, looked up at Jim, and said, "All the surviving samples, then, are post-mortem."

" Right. Same three men every time. So Mr. Fucking FBI assures us we have a three-member serial killers' club on our hands."

" You don't like Mr. FBI?" Jess asked, managing a small grin. FBI intervention in his cases had always been a major sore spot with Jim.

" He's a pompous ass who keeps waving his doctorate in our faces like it's a bigger dick. And if he says, 'That isn't the way we do things at Quantico' one more time, we're going to show the arrogant prick how we do things in Georgia." Jim paused and glanced over at Charlie, who nodded, assumed an exaggerated, menacing expression, and cracked his knuckles slowly.

Jess laughed.

Jim said, " Charlie and I hate the serial-killer-club scenario, for the reasons you mentioned and more. But we haven't been able to come up with anything else that works."

"Here – have a look." Charlie passed Jess the three murder books, one labeled Petushka, one labeled Chevalier, and one labeled Houseman. Each was a thick ring-bound notebook with a photo of the victim taken when she was still alive on the cover, and pages of daily work on the investigation, lab results, witnesses questioned, and other details inside. Jess skimmed the daily work, then pulled the crime scene photos.

They weren't at all usual for murder victims. All three women were completely dressed, albeit scantily. G-strings, high, high spike heels, bustiers. Dressed for work, Jess thought.

Each girl's features were composed. Eyes open, no sign of distress, anguish, or fear. Makeup was unmussed. So was their hair. None of the girls had visible wounds. No visible blood. The ligature marks on wrists and ankles were almost invisible, as were the small, neat incisions over each jugular. Jess could see where makeup had been applied as a cover-up for the injuries, as well as cosmetically.

Each victim was pretty. Good figure, good face. Each was

young. Each had been posed in a magazine centerfold position.

Jess looked up and frowned. "What kind of make-up was used on these girls?"

Charlie sighed. "Your basic drugstore brands. We got lab results and I went out to see where I could find the brands listed. Everybody has them. We had some hope that we'd find something exotic or expensive that we could track, but no chance. If the store has Dollar or Mart in its name, all this shit is there."

"This is a complicated case," Jess said, looking over the murder books. "But you have everything well in hand. So why do you need me?"

Jim, who had been staring at the victims' pictures, turned to Jess. "Because you've worked undercover. You were a damned good cop when I worked with you. You've maintained an excellent record as a detective since. Your one shooting was righteous, you're marksmanship records are top of the line. Your partners and your superiors praise your work without reservation. We've been through your packet, looked over your commendations and your background. Plus, you used to dance." He smiled a little. "Something you never bothered to mention to me."

"Never seemed much point," Jess said. "I was going to make dancing my career. But I ended up doing this instead."

"Any chance you've kept up with the dance?"

"I use ballet as part of my daily physical training regimen. Minimum of an hour a night, four nights a week." She smiled a little, and lied a lot. "One of those inexplicable obsessions, you know?"

"For us, it turns out to be a good thing. Good obsession. You have the skills we need. I'm hoping you're still fairly calm

about gender issues, because if you aren't, in about three seconds I'm going to get myself sued for sexual harassment."

Jess laughed. "I'm still me, Jim."

"That, too, is a good thing. Glad to hear it. Then – and please don't take this the wrong way – you also have the look we need. You're pretty. You have a good body. And unless things have changed, you move well in high heels."

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

Jim and Charlie looked sidelong and shiftily at each other, and Jim said, "Neither the captain nor the department would approve that. The department would like you to go undercover as a drink server at the club. A ... you know ... waitress."

And then there was a long pause.

A very long pause.

And Jess looked from Jim to Charlie and back to Jim and said, "The department would ... but a stripper would have access to people and places that a waitress wouldn't."

Both of them nodded, saying nothing.

"And we're talking about a serial killer, and about a case that looks to get really ugly," Jess continued.

Again, the nods.

Jess got it. Jim trusted her. Trusted her enough to keep her mouth shut about something that needed to be done, and that couldn't be done officially. Trusted her not to blow the whistle on him and Charlie even if she turned them down. And she trusted Jim enough to know that she could turn him down for this assignment – this unspoken request – and he would still be there for her. Because what he and Charlie were

asking without asking was big.

Big enough that she couldn't sit there and flat out say, "I'm in," because she didn't know if she had what it took to do what they needed her to do.

She stared at the murder books. At the pictures of the dead dancers.

"How good would my backup be?" she asked, and she wasn't asking how quickly help could reach her if she got into trouble dancing on the stage or working out on the floor. She was asking – if the case went bad and she got in trouble for acting outside of department approval, if anyone would be there to act as a safety net. If the captain would cover them, if anyone would stand up for them.

"Very bad," Charlie said bluntly. "All three of us would die on this one."

"You already have your twenty," Jess said to Jim. "You're risking your pension on this?"

"We're looking at the tip of an iceberg, Gracie," he said. "Ugly fucking iceberg. I can feel it. What else am I supposed to do? Be a good boy, dot my I's, cross my T's, let these girls keep dying?"

She looked at Charlie.

"I'm only two shy of my twenty," he said. "My goal in life is to get my pension in two years, retire, and move to the country so I can get to know my wife and the kids again. But I'm with Jim. Some cases, you do what you have to do. Of course, we aren't the ones who would be flashing our tits in the face of a serial killer, so we have the perspective of the chicken looking at a bacon and egg breakfast. All we have in this is eggs. The one who's being asked to contribute the bacon has the right to decline without prejudice."

Jim nodded again. "You're my first choice. Our best choice, I think. But you are not our only choice."

Those pretty, blank, dead faces stared up at her, and, like Jim, she knew they weren't the only ones. More dead girls were waiting to be found. More live girls were waiting to die.

" Phew ..." Jess said under her breath. Get up on a stage, take off all her clothes, have strangers touch her, even if only to slide money into a G-string or a garter.

And dance her way right across the part of her life that she'd been hiding from everyone.

Jim didn't know. Charlie didn't know. Jess didn't talk about Ginny. It hurt too much. But this case ...

" How is this going to run?"

Charlie started to say something, but Jess saw the captain heading their way again. She gave her head a microscopic shake, and Charlie's face let her know he'd gotten the warning. "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 who were already 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."

Jim said, "So there will be Vice cops around snagging DNA samples out of trash cans and off sidewalks and anywhere else they can legally get them, 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 waitresses. You'll wear a wire and stay in deep undercover. Once you're in place, you won't come into the station, and

when you're ... working ... you'll have three undercover guys in a surveillance van who will be taping everything you say and anything anyone says to you, and who will also get help if you run into trouble. You'll only call us when you're alone or with your partner. The only other people who will know who you are will be our bouncers – you'll meet the off-duty guys later today. Also, Bill the Tech Guy, who will fit you for your wire." He cleared his throat. "And your partner, of course."

The captain had been listening in. Now he stopped beside them and leaned on the table. He said, "You're going to help us with this, then, Detective Brubaker?"

" Pretty sure I will," she said.

" Excellent. One less thing to worry about." And he walked away.

Jim waited until the captain was out of earshot, then said, "He did not want HCSU to get this case. He deeply resents the likelihood that it's going to generate negative publicity for the unit. I think he would be happiest if we could prove the three cases were unrelated and send them back to their original departments."

" The full resources of the department—" Jess started to ask, and Jim cut her off.

" –will not be spent," he said, "on solving the murders of three strippers who, early evidence suggests, may have also been prostitutes. And who are all white, which, since it looks like we're dealing with serial killings, suggests three white killers killing white women."

Jess sighed. "Which, inside the Perimeter, makes it a minority crime of no threat – and therefore no importance – to the majority."

" Bingo," Charlie said.

" This case is a loser all the way round, then," Jess said.

Charlie shook his head. "Don't get me wrong – if we solve it and generate favorable publicity for HSCU, we're golden. We solve it, and you're made as one of the Grand Old Men, Jim'll get his Detective III and go on to greater things, and have a chance to keep my fingers locked on the ledge long enough to get that pension." Charlie's weary eyes tracked the path of the captain as he walked into his office and closed the door, and he added, "But we don't solve this ... well, we were chosen for this case because it won't break Howard's heart to sacrifice us."

Jess sighed. "Inner-Perimeter politics?"

Jim shrugged. "You know how it is. He's political, he and the mayor are great friends, he's new to the department and we weren't his picks. He'd be just as happy to have an excuse to replace us with guys who were."

" I'd sort of forgotten, actually," Jess said. "I've been outside the Perimeter the last eight years. Different ballgame. Well – same ballgame, but National League rules, not American League. Go Braves. Rah."

Jim and Charlie both laughed.

" Most serial murders remain unsolved for years before the killer is caught – and they generate bad publicity for the departments working them the whole time. So basically, I'm on a sinking ship," Jess said. "If I sign on, my best odds are that I'm going to lose my career over this – that we aren't going to solve it, and that the three of us are going hang as scapegoats."

" That's it."

She gave Jim a tiny smile. "And I was your first pick?"

Jim shrugged. "Figured you'd bring something solid to the

team. And, since our only assets on this are us, we'd very much like to solve it. Charlie and I want to be still employed on the other side of this case. We think you can help make that happen."

Jess nodded. "You mentioned a partner. Who would be...?"

" Well, along with putting in a special request for you, Charlie and I have called in a ... private consultant," Jim said. "An old friend of ours. We've worked with him before. We're paying him out of our own pockets. He's going to be sticking close to you in his role as a customer, and you're going to get friendly so you can sit and talk to him without raising suspicion. And so you can ... 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. "The bacon is getting a bad feeling about this," she said. "Well, a worse feeling, anyway. What kind of things?"

" Notes. Items you pick up – bits of costumes, stuff lying around backstage – nothing that could be useful as evidence. Just ... things that belong to the women who work there."

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. He won't be contributing in an official capacity, of course. He's off the record."

Jess rolled her eyes and stared at the ceiling. "Jee. Zus. Christ. You're *shitting* me." She kept her voice low, but it was an effort. "We're working a serial killer case, we're tiptoeing down the wrong side of a very fine line, we already have everything to lose ... and we're going to take a side trip

to woo-woo land?"

" The psychic is solid."

" A solid psychic? Who is best friends with the reliable politician, no doubt. 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."

Jess looked sidelong at Jim. "You were there the night all of us watched that nutjob destroy our credibility on the Bleeker case. We had a good, solid, case, and that monster walked because the defense found out the department had used Madame Whassername, and they dragged her in to testify in their behalf. She killed us with the jury. Shadow of a doubt? She was a whole fucking eclipse."

She turned back to Charlie. "'Not crazy about' is too mild a term. I loathe ... I despise ... I detest psychics. I like good police work. I like rational thought. I like good science – forensics and DNA evidence and careful note-keeping. Preserving the chain of evidence – very big on that. 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."

Jess heard herself getting loud, and noticed a couple of heads in cubicles turning her way. She took a long breath and lowered her voice. "Pardon me. That should be Mr. Shitweasel Defense Lawyer. Must remember to show proper respect to officers of the court. But the second Mr. 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 laughed and told Jim, "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 snickered, 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.

And psychics were frauds, too – money-grubbing scammers out to wring every last cent out of desperate people who had run out of other options. Yeah, Jess had a chip on her shoulder about psychics. But it was a well-earned, perfectly legitimate chip.

The psychic, on the other hand

"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 determination 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 only for us, by special request." Jim rolled a pen back and forth over the table with his palm, hesitating. "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 Hank has equally good ones for hating pretty women. In spite of which, the two of you are going to have to work together, because we need both of you. Furthermore, we need both of you to pose as

friends – platonic friends – because that will give him a reason to be there every time you’re there without raising suspicion, and will still let him circulate around the dancers and waitresses.”

Friends. Oh, good. Jess understood that she was not in her house, this 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. And Jim was giving her a shot at getting into HSCU. It wasn’t a good shot, maybe, but sometimes a bad shot was the best shot you got.

There was more to it than that, of course. She was driven; she had been driven for every day of the thirteen years since her world fell apart. This case had all the earmarks of a loser, a disaster, the reef upon which she could wreck her career. She had a clear, simple out. She could say “No thanks,” and walk away, and nobody would think the worse of her. She might not have another shot at HSCU – but she wouldn’t be flushing eleven years with the APD down the tube, either.

She wanted to say “no.” It would be the smart thing to do. It would demonstrate that she had developed a reassuring instinct for self-preservation in the last few years.

Instead, she said, “All right. Bring on the clown. I’d work with Bozo himself to be a part of this case.”

” Thanks, Gracie. 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, Jess. And thanks from me, too. If you have any questions, I’ll do what I can to answer them.”

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Twin six-year-old girls, blonde and blue-eyed, sat

breathlessly beside their mother as the curtain went up on "Firebird" and the dark, low notes from Stravinski's score shivered out over the audience. The Prince crept onto the stage, into the evil ogre's forest, and discovered the glorious Firebird, and the little girls sat silent, enraptured, won over by dancers who – weightless, glorious, gaudy and beautiful – flew and spun and leapt across a stage transformed into a bewitching universe. The fairy tales unfolded one by one, lovely and magical, and watching, the sisters' hands met and fingers intertwined, and the two of them breathed as one.

When it was over, Ginny, the elder twin by eight minutes, turned to her sister Jess and said, "We have to do that."

And Jess said only, "I know."

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