

1.

The call that they found the body came in at a little before eleven in the morning, but Detective Dan Rossi, tied up with another matter across town, didn't arrive until an hour later.

"What do we got?" he barked before he was all the way through the door, pulling on a pair of blue nitrile gloves. The snapping of the material reverberated throughout the small living room as he hunched down over the body, careful not to touch anything while they waited for the guys from the crime lab to arrive.

Rossi was a force to be reckoned with, not only because he was 6'5" and 250 pounds of pure muscle, but because all the guys on the force literally looked up at him with equal parts respect, admiration and fear. Before joining the Half Moon Bay, California Police Department six years ago, he'd left the Army after three tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, and, rumor had it, had led several successful missions to take out prominent enemies of the United States. ...Not that he ever talked about those days. All he'd ever say now was that he devoted ten years of his life to the Army Rangers, ultimately becoming a Staff Sergeant stationed out of Fort Benning, Georgia. The rest was subject to speculation.

He was a quiet man, but one whose silence was interpreted as strength, not weakness. Since joining the HMBPD he had been personally responsible for the arrest of several of the areas most dangerous felons and had earned himself quite a reputation on the job. The second in command under Police Chief Aaron Gervais, he was the one no serious investigation could start without.

The room, previously buzzing with a frenetic energy had fallen silent.

"I'm waiting," he reminded them, his eyes glued to the body. Anxiously, the officers looked from one to another, no one wanting to risk

the embarrassment of being shown up by perhaps the greatest detective their department had ever seen. Somehow the great Dan Rossi could spot something out of place in seconds that had taken others hours to see. No doubt, he already knew more than most of the men who had been at the scene since the call came in.

The deceased was a man in his early thirties with reddish blonde hair and blue eyes. He was about 5'8" with a strong, stout build and it seemed incongruous that he was bent in the manner he was. He lay at the bottom of a curving staircase that separated two bedrooms and one bath from the rest of the small condo.

"Correas!" Rossi barked again, his eyes soaking in every detail of the crumpled body beneath him. "Tell me something."

Officer Steven Correas, Dan knew already, had responded to the call and had been the first officer on the scene. He was a careful and observant man, even more so now that his words were going to fall under Rossi's scrutiny. "Umm," he began anxiously, "the victim appears to be Martin Pierce, of this address." From there, he didn't trust himself to accurately recite the facts of the case from memory so he consulted his notes. "A call came in at 10:53 a.m. from a Ray Poole, the postal carrier that services this route. He had a delivery that needed Mr. Pierce's signature, so he came to the door, knocked, and as he waited, happened to look in that window." Correas nodded towards the large bay window beside the front door. "He saw a body laying at the foot of the stairs. He tried opening the door, but it was locked, so he called 9-1-1. We arrived on the scene at 11:04, kicked the door in, and after checking for a pulse, determined that Pierce had no pulse, was very cold and likely dead."

Pleased, Dan finally looked up to catalogue exactly who was in the room with him. Three officers, one technician from the medical examiner's office and a pair of EMTs were immediately within his line of sight, and another cluster of people were standing in the adjoining

kitchen. He strained to make out who was in the kitchen with Chief Gervais, but as the other two, a man and a woman both in suits, had their backs to him, their identities would have to remain a mystery for the time being.

Glancing back down at the body, he frowned. Under normal circumstances, he would have asked if his officer was certain that the victim in front of them was really the individual whose name appeared on the lease, but this time there was no doubt. The person laying on the floor in front of them was Martin Pierce, a man very likely to go down in HMBPD's history as the one that got away, alleged to have set a series of fires throughout the community. All in all, the prosecution had linked him to six arsons resulting in three deaths, one of them a four year-old boy. It was just over a month ago the District Attorney had been able to sell eleven of the twelve jurors on the notion that Pierce was responsible for setting the fires, but there had been one holdout that neither four days of witness testimony nor nine days of deliberation could convince to convict.

There wasn't a person in that room that hadn't worked with, interviewed or testified against Pierce. They knew this face, his address, the address of his closest relatives and friends, his blood type, shoe size, work history, previous supervisors, and even, if pressed for it, likely knew the names of every girlfriend he had had since high school. But for all they knew about this man's past, they knew nothing yet of what had killed him.

When Pierce had been released on bail after the mistrial, the community had rightfully been outraged, but no one thought it would come to this.

"Man," Dan sighed, standing up, still shaking his head, "I'll be damned. It really is him."

"Would we lie to you?" Officer Correas chuckled.

When Rossi looked over his shoulder at him, Correas shrunk back and his expression faded to one of remorse. “Don’t know. Would you?”

“Uh, no, sir.” Correas walked away slowly, trying to avoid drawing any further attention to himself. He weaved cautiously through the crowd, seeming to not make contact with anyone he passed in the small, cramped room. Rossi had that effect on people; everyone was smaller when he was around.

“Rossi, Correas, Hamilton, Jones!” A deep voice rumbled from behind them. Every head in the room turned to see Chief Gervais emerge from the kitchen, trailed by a man they all recognized as CC Teixeira, the Assistant District Attorney who seemed to handle the bulk of the priority homicide cases in their part of the county, and a curvaceous woman in a simple black suit. “There’s someone I’d like you all to meet.”

Dan’s eyes shifted to the woman and then he froze. Looking up at him from underneath a long fringe of lush, black lashes were the greenest eyes he had ever seen, eyes that were equal parts question and answer, the effect dizzying.

Despite there being eight other people in the room with them, she only seemed to take notice of him. Not even bothering to disguise the fact that she was checking him out, her gaze—as rich, sweet, thick and rife with tempting sweetness as molasses—traced its way from his head, deliberately down his chest and arms. There was something about this woman that made him stand a little taller and push his shoulders back a little further, drawing his hunter green polo shirt, adorned with the department logo, snugly across his shoulders and chest, accentuating the tight pecs underneath. From there, her gaze lingered at his waist for a moment to admire the badge clipped to his belt and the enormous black leather holster hanging off his right hip, then slowly dipped past his khakis all the way down to his plain leather shoes before flicking back up to tilt her head in approval.

He cut an impressive and imposing figure, especially when coupled with his expression, an eyebrow cocked, almost daring her to find fault with anything she could see. His lips were curled up in a smug, self-assured smile as she drank in every last detail of his face: the evenness of his bronze skin, the force of his gaze—piercing deep brown eyes, edged by short, dark lashes and underneath brooding eyebrows—a strong nose speckled with hardly visible freckles, jutting chin and square jaw. His hair was trimmed close at the sides, a little longer up top, and shining just enough that she knew he used a generous amount of gel to keep his hair as rigid as his glare.

The woman's long, black hair hung behind her shoulders, as smooth and as straight as the horizon over the Pacific Ocean, and a knowing smile danced on her sienna-red lips. There was something all too familiar about the guarded curve of those lips, the sharpness of her nose, the flawless warmth of her Mediterranean skin, the innocent allure of her gaze and the defiant rigidity of her posture that made it feel as if they had known each other almost all their lives. And then he realized they had.

While Dan and this woman exchanged a smile borne of causal amusement and delicious intrigue, Chief Gervais was still babbling, but Dan didn't hear a thing until "...joining us from North Carolina, this is Assistant District Attorney"—

"Zara Romanos," he interrupted.

The woman's smile deepened as she shook her head slowly. "Of all the crime scenes in all the towns in all the world..." she purred, holding out her hand for him to shake.

Dan glanced down at her outstretched hand with bewilderment and skepticism. He didn't reach for it, however, content to visit his past from a distance, afraid that if he touched her he could no longer deny that what they had all those years ago had been real. "Go figure."

Neither one said anything else for a moment, allowing Chief Gervais to continue as Zara quickly shook hands with the rest of Dan's team. "I take it you know each other?"

Zara looked Dan up and down one more time before responding. She would have liked to have said nothing had changed about the man since the last time they had seen each other, but everything had. ...Everything except the tingling in the pit of her stomach when she looked into his eyes. He had gotten taller. And bigger. He had a few grey hairs dotting his temples. His hair was shorter. "We went to high school together," she said at last.

"We went to high school together," Dan repeated, the statement somehow sounding less momentous.

Unaware that there was still an unspoken conversation going on between them, the Chief picked up right where he had left off. "Well then, I can save us all the long, drawn out introductions. CC had brought Miss Romanos over to introduce her to us as she'll be our point of contact now with the DA's office. I expect you all to extend her every courtesy you would anyone else from their office. Also, let this be a reminder to us all that these folks have the burden of proof in making these cases and getting the convictions, so do them a favor, and do us a favor, by not screwing anything up. I don't want any mistakes. This is going to be a high profile case. ...Assuming there is a case here. Is there a case here?"

Every head swiveled in Dan's direction expectantly, but he was still staring at Zara, unable to see anything else in the room and still waiting for some clue as to how she wanted to handle this unfortunate reunion. He hadn't heard a word that had been said to him.

"Rossi. We alright here? This isn't going to be a problem is it?"

Zara raised an eyebrow as she waited on his reply, daring him to produce a reason as to why they couldn't work together. "Uh, no, sir."

“Good. Then I have to get back to the office. Zara, CC, did you guys want to head out, too?”

CC immediately deferred the question to Zara who couldn't resist staring deeply into Dan's eyes as she replied. “If it's all the same to you, I think I'd like to stay here for a while longer. Get to know everyone. Maybe take another look at the body.” Across the room, Dan shook his head in disbelief that she could still make an innocent statement drip with innuendo.

He glanced down at the corpse lying on the floor one more time, desperate to look away from those eyes, and then back up at his men. “I don't need all of you standing around here wasting time,” he snapped, sending the uniformed officers scattering throughout the apartment. “Find me some answers.”

Dan took one more look at Zara before he forced himself back into work mode. For the time being, he couldn't even begin to deal with how he felt about the woman standing two feet to his left and the implications of having her so close. He had a feeling that no matter how old they were at the time, no matter how much bad blood there was between them, his first impulse would always be to whisk her off her feet, confessing how much he'd missed her. And then he'd set about hurting her as much as she had hurt him.

“So what else do we know?” he barked, squatting down for a closer look and then peering up into the eyes of the bewildered EMTs. As Dan waited, he rolled up the sleeves of his shirt with the same laser-like precision he likely made his bed in the morning. Everything about the man, from the pleat in his trousers, to the cut of his jaw and his always-freshly-cut hair was corners and hard lines.

“You!” he barked pointing at the closest paramedic. “What's your name?”

“George B-brown.”

“Well, Mr. Brown, what have you guys learned?”

Although the young man had been on the job for over a year and seen his fair share of homicides, he froze with panic, buckling under the force of Dan’s stare. His cheeks flared red. “I... I...” he continued to stutter. “I don’t h-have all the details. He’s d-dead. Y-you need to talk to the M.E.”

Impatiently, Dan squinted his eyes at the man. “Jesus Christ,” he moaned. “Can someone please go get him for us then?”

Detective Curt Hamilton squatted down beside Dan for a quick tete-a-tete while the others searched for the M.E. before the tensions in the room could escalate. “Ease down,” Hamilton reminded his friend. “What the hell is wrong with you today?” Dan tilted his head to one side but his gaze remained firm, a non-verbal acknowledgement that while Hamilton may have a point, he was being a little aggressive, he wasn’t going to cut anyone working a crime scene with him any slack. ...Especially in the early stages of an investigation. He expected everyone to be on their game at all times.

“Would your...” Curt paused, searching for the right word, “... *shortness* with us all today have anything to do with you stopping by and seeing Victoria last night?”

“What are you talking about?” Dan hissed, the mention of his most recent ex-girlfriend’s name knocking him even further off kilter.

“I saw your car there on my way home from Jill’s last night. Trying to patch things up?” Dan said nothing, but his nostrils flared. “Okay, I take it you two are still broken up. I only ask because Jill wanted to have you guys over for dinner. I guess that’s a ‘no.’”

Perched on the balls of his feet, his forearms resting on his thighs, Dan hung his head then turned to look at Curt. “Can we not discuss my personal life in the middle of an active crime scene?”

Curt glanced up, about to assert that no one was even listening to them anyway, but the gazes peering down on them scattered away like a school of frightened fish.

Thankfully, before Dan could find another reason to bite someone's head off, the M.E. pushed through the small crowd and, knowing how efficiently Dan Rossi ran his crime scenes, launched directly into a narrative. "Martin Pierce, like Correas said. Thirty-three. Dead about six hours." He ran his hands over the man's body slowly, probing for anything out of the ordinary. "Cause of death seems to be a broken neck. He's also got a dislocated jaw, three broken fingers, several cracked ribs and a broken femur. All likely the result of falling down the stairs."

"He sustained this much damage falling down the stairs?"

The entire group swept their collective gaze up the carpeted stairs.

"No way," Zara sighed, drawing a harsh glare from Dan, despite it being what everyone in the room was thinking. There was no openly apparent reason why Martin Pierce should have, or could have, accidentally fallen down the stairs. There wasn't anything to trip over. There was nothing out of place. Intuitively, they all knew his body was too far away from the last step. Even the pile of the carpet adorning every tread was neatly facing the same direction, as if it had just been vacuumed.

"Okay," the M.E. quickly replied. "Perhaps he was pushed down the stairs, but it isn't my job to determine that. It's yours." Bracing himself on the arm of the sofa beside him, the man stood up. "If you want to know anything more, you're going to have to get out of my way so I can perform a proper inspection."

Zara pushed her long locks over her shoulder as she bent closer for one more look causing Dan to glare up at her anew, his space obviously invaded. She made an attempt to hold her ground, but eventually withered away. "I'm just going to wait outside in case you guys need me."

Dan reacted only by nodding once, intently focused on the body in front of him, while everyone else traced the sway of her hips out the door. “Gaines,” he growled to the M.E. across the body from him. “When can we expect your full report?”

“End of the day. Tomorrow morning by the latest.”

Having reached some conclusion he wasn't going to share with the rest of them, Dan stood up, skirted behind the small group and headed upstairs, examining the carpet, the walls, the photos on the walls, and the handrail as he went. Just as had already been reported to him in the phone call he'd gotten half an hour prior, there was absolutely nothing to suggest a struggle or foul play. Nothing, that is, except for a healthy, strong, agile man, who was despised by most of the locals being found dead at the bottom of a freshly cleaned staircase.

Having already been inside Pierce's home the day they arrested him two years ago, Dan Rossi was better acquainted with the residence than he wished to be. He knew the kitchen had been repainted, the window coverings installed, new books had joined the bookcase, and the floor lamp broken in the struggle to arrest the ex-firefighter had been replaced. Even knowing now what he hadn't known at the time of the arrest, he still struggled to come to terms with the fact that this was the house of a serial arsonist. It all looked so ordinary. The photos that chased him up the stairs were somewhat sparse, but showed the personal side of a once-decorated, now defamed, local hero. There were two pictures of the man with his family—a mom and dad in their sixties, two brothers and one sister—two more of him with some of his firefighter buddies, one of Pierce on horseback, and another of him sitting at the beach, drinking a Coke.

At the top of the stairs, the hallway curved to the left and gave way to two bedrooms and one bathroom. Dan already knew they wouldn't find much of interest in the first bedroom, so he headed straight into the second. There were no clothes in the hamper or on the floor. The same

vacuum lines that marked the stairs striated the floor here. The bed was made. The pillows were neatly fluffed. All the dresser drawers were closed, as was the drawer of a small writing desk jammed into the far corner of the room. The stack of paper located in the middle of the desk was somewhat haphazardly arranged, but it looked neither rifled through nor overly cared for. In the adjoining bathroom two towels hung neatly on the rack. There were no smudges or spots on the bathroom mirror. No toothpaste residue in the sink. Even the glass shower door was spot-free.

“Well,” Dan muttered to himself, “looks like someone knew what they were doing.” He strode over to the window and looked out into the courtyard below. Letting out a long breath, he then drew in another. “Hamilton. Nunez. Get up here!” he shouted into the still air around him.

He waited until two sets of footsteps had come to a stop behind him. Turning around, he quickly rattled off a set of instructions to the officers. “Hamilton, I need you to make sure we get fingerprints from every surface in this place. Whoever did this was thorough, but they must have missed something. I want every bottle of cleaning solution fingerprinted. The trashcan. The vacuum. Everything. Nunez, have you checked for signs of forced entry?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well?”

“There was none, sir.”

“There is plenty of landscaping around the edge of the building. Check for footprints in the mud.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is anyone talking to the neighbors?”

Before either man could answer, Zara walked into the bedroom, thoroughly derailing everyone’s train of thought. She had removed her jacket and the sight of all that skin was unsteady: thin, delicate arms emerging from a low-cut, sleeveless silk blouse—which, itself, was so

barely transparent that, while still tasteful, hinted at nudity—and long legs, bare from the hem of her knee-length skirt down to her patent leather, stiletto heels. “Oh, don’t let me intrude. I was just coming in to see how things are going up here.”

“H-haven’t found much of anything yet,” Curt replied for all of them, having trouble speaking and maintaining eye contact.

Dan was having no trouble, however, something in his eyes making it perfectly clear that whatever lingering sentimentality had made it seem like he was happy to see her earlier had since evaporated. Now, there was nothing but a smoldering hatred. “Thank you for interrupting us. Again.”

Zara forced an uncomfortable smile. “Well, let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“I have no idea why you think you’d ever be of any help to us,” Dan retorted, demonstrating his indifferent hostility wasn’t reserved for those who worked under him.

Zara’s smile faded, realizing that perhaps she had been wrong in her initial assessment; maybe nothing about him had changed. “In that case, Detective Rossi, Detective Hamilton, Officer Nunez,” she chirped, looking each in the eye before returning a pointed glare at her ex-classmate, “I going to get back to the office.”

“You’re leaving? I thought you wanted to stay to get to know us all a little better?” Dan hissed sarcastically, now obviously trying to bait her.

Zara shrugged and looked down at her watch. “I hadn’t realized it was so late. I need to get back to the office and take care of a few things. Anyway, like you said, you guys don’t need my help.”

A chuckle, unprofessional as it was, escaped Dan’s lips. “Damn right.”

She turned to go, but stopped. “Oh. I understand that you’ve got some documents that need submitting to our office. I’m supposed to make sure I get those from you today before I leave.”

Dan let out a heavy sigh. “Can you wait just a few more minutes? In case you haven’t noticed, I’m in the middle of something here. I don’t know to who you’ve been speaking, but my first priority is investigating a possible homicide, not playing courier for the District Attorney.”

She kept her expression frozen. “Whom.”

“Excuse me?” Dan gasped, eyes narrowing.

“It’s ‘with whom’ I’ve been speaking, not ‘with who.’”

Detective Hamilton and Office Nunez each averted their eyes, bowing their heads in discomfort lest they should get dragged into the middle of whatever was going on.

Zara looked down at her watch, the first to blink. “You’re going to have to make it fast. I’ve got a meeting in an hour.”

Dan looked at his own watch. “The files are in the car. I’d have to go get them. Can you give me fifteen minutes?”

When she acquiesced, everyone in the room got the impression that it was merely professional courtesy, not any sort of magnanimity, that had bought him the time. “I’ll be downstairs.”

As she left, it was like all the oxygen had been sucked from the room. No one spoke, no one moved, their eyes fixed on the last place she’d been.

“Well? Hamilton? Nunez?” Rossi spit impatiently once he’d rediscovered the will to speak. “The neighbors?”

“Umm,” Nunez mumbled, stalling while his brain struggled to engage. “We’ve started asking around and so far...” He drew out the last syllable as he pulled out his notebook and scanned the page until he found what he was looking for, “neither of the apartments immediately adjacent to

him saw or heard anything, and we've just started canvassing the rest of the complex. I'll have more for you later."

"Good." Dan was standing with his hands on his hips, in the center of the room, eyes bouncing haphazardly throughout the room, seeing, but no longer processing, its contents. It was obvious to everyone that Detective Rossi had been thrown off his game.

Hamilton and Nunez swapped wowed expressions. "We are also trying to get a copy of the surveillance video from the leasing office," Hamilton added.

Dan wheeled around to face him. "Surveillance video? There's a goddamned surveillance video? Why the hell didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Yeah. Well. The camera only covers the front of the complex, but should have recorded every car in and out of the parking lot."

"Well, hot damn." Rossi was rubbing his hands together as he eagerly surveyed the rest of the scene. "This case'll be closed by bedtime."

"Hot date tonight, Rossi?" Nunez teased. "Going to go catch up with the new ADA?" The look he got in return was enough to make him go pale and excuse himself from the room.

With little else to examine, Dan marched over to the desk and studied the top page of a stack of papers, but started to show the first signs of disinterest when he became aware he was thumbing through old bills and other tax receipts Pierce had likely been gathering up for the impending April 15th deadline. Determined to find something of actual use in their investigation, he jerked open the only desk drawer and was disappointed anew to see nothing but pens, one pencil, four rubber bands, a handful of paperclips and an rather abused stack of new sticky notes.

"Jones?" He called, again without looking around. "Jones?" he shrieked somewhat louder when he didn't get a reply. "Where the hell is Jones?" he groaned, turning around to look for the crime scene photographer.

“Right here, sir.”

Dan stepped out of the center of the room then gestured all around it. “I want pictures of every inch of this apartment. We cannot miss anything. You got it?”

Matt Jones nodded then sought refuge behind the lens of the camera, snapping photos of, literally, everything.

“Hamilton,” Dan sighed again. “You’re in charge up here. I gotta run down and talk to Romanos before she takes off.”

“Okay.”

With a surprising gracefulness, Dan floated down the stairs, using the bottom newel post to anchor himself as he tried to round the corner as efficiently as possible. The living room area was still dotted with police officers, crime scene investigators and staff from the medical examiner’s office, but a quick glance outside revealed that, thankfully, the press hadn’t been alerted quite yet.

Zara was waiting patiently outside, chatting with CC Teixeira.

“Dan,” she smiled emotionlessly, seeing he was done terrorizing his officers.

His defenses went straight up. “Zara.”

“I wasn’t trying to give you a hard time up there. I really do have to get going. Can we speed this up a little?”

“Sure.” His eyes stayed locked on hers for a few more beats. It was the same stare he used when interrogating criminals. But unlike those he usually had in handcuffs, she didn’t crack under the pressure. Her gaze stayed just as fixed, and, in fact, her will seemed stronger than his.

Around them, the crowd was starting to thin out a bit, the EMTs leaving in search of someone they could actually save, and most of the police officers who had only responded to the call out of morbid curiosity being sent back to their regularly scheduled jobs. Those that had remained and worked frequently with Dan—Nunez, Correias, Hamilton

and one senior crime scene investigator—were watching this exchange from inside with a special interest. Notwithstanding the fact that Zara Romanos was a captivating creature and it was unfathomable that someone would willingly be as openly hostile towards her as Dan had been, it was astonishing that she wasn't backing down.

They all watched him leave her side, peeling off his gloves as he went, and coming back a minute later, a thick manila envelope in hand, her boss's name printed in big black letters across the front. He thrust it towards her. "It's your problem now."

"Of course."

"Good." It seemed that was all she was going to get from him. He took three paces back toward the condo before he stopped dead in his tracks. "...And Romanos?" he sighed, not turning around.

"Yes?"

He waited one more second before moving to face her. This time when he spoke there was an unexpected softness to his voice. "It's good to see you again."

Zara dropped the envelope into the cordovan leather attaché case at her side, tilting her head in recognition of the strength it must have taken him to say those words. "You, too."

He used going through the motions of digging in his pockets for a fresh set of nitrile gloves as an excuse to look away. "Am I going to see you again?"

"Probably. But not today."

Both his hands carefully clad in gloves, he turned to head back inside. "Good. Well, take care."

She wasn't sure what to make up the first part of his response so she left it at, "You, too."

Dan said nothing more, pleased the conversation ended where it had. Amid smirks and hushed giggles, he mounted the stairs two by two, head

down. When he rounded the corner into the master bedroom and saw that only Hamilton remained there, he let out the breath he hadn't known he'd been holding.

Standing with his arms across his chest, Curt Hamilton was waiting for his friend. "Who was that?"

Dan reached out to steady himself on the bedframe, his head spinning, his pulse racing. For a moment he wondered if he was having a heart attack, now acutely aware there was a part of him that would forever be in a Chevy Camaro during the summer of 1995. "That was the girl who ruined my life."