



*Today California buried Supreme Court Justice, Fritz Rayburn. Governor Joe Davidson delivered the eulogy calling the judge a friend, a confidant, and his brother in service to the great state of California. The governor cited Fritz Rayburn as a man of extraordinary integrity who relentlessly pursued justice, continually uplifted those in need and, above all, protected those who were powerless.*

*It was a week ago today that Judge Rayburn died in a fire that swept through his Pacific Palisades home in the early morning hours.*

*No formal announcement has been made regarding who will be appointed to fill Justice Rayburn's position, but it is speculated that Governor Davidson will appoint Rayburn's son, Kip, to this pivotal seat on the California Supreme Court.*

*KABC News at 9 O'clock*

**1**

"Strip."

"No."

Hannah kept her eyes forward, trained on two rows of rusted showerheads stuck in facing walls. Sixteen in all. The room was paved with white tile, chipped and discolored by age and use. Ceiling. Floor. Walls. All sluiced with disinfectant. Soiled twice a day by filth and fear. The fluorescent lights cast a yellow shadow over everything. The air was wet. The shower room smelled of mold and misery. It echoed with the cries of lost souls.

Hannah had come in with a bus full of women. She had a name, now she was a number. The others were taking off their clothes. Their bodies were ugly, their faces worn. They flaunted their ugliness as if it were a cruel joke, not on them but on those who watched. Hannah was everything they were not. Beautiful. Young. She wouldn't stand naked in this room with these women. She blinked and wrapped her arms around herself. Her breath came short. A step back and she fooled herself that it was possible to turn and leave. Behind her Hannah thought she heard the guard laugh.

"Take it off, Sheraton, or I'll do it for you."

Hannah tensed, hating to be ordered. She kept her eyes forward. She had already learned to do that.

"There's a man back there. I saw him," she said.

“We’re an equal opportunity employer, sweetie,” the woman drawled. “If women can guard male prisoners then men can guard the women. Now, who’s it going to be? Me or him?”

The guard touched her. Hannah shrank away. Her head went up and down, the slightest movement, the only way she could control her dread. She counted the number of times her chin went up. Ten counts. Her shirt was off. Her chin went down. Ten more counts and she dropped the jeans that had cost a fortune.

“All of it, baby cakes,” the guard prodded.

Hannah closed her eyes. The thong. White lace. That was the last. Quickly she stepped under a showerhead and closed her eyes. A tear seeped from beneath her lashes only to be washed away by a sudden, hard, stinging spray of water. Her head jerked back as if she’d been slapped then Hannah lost herself in the wet and warm. She turned her face up, kept her arms closed over her breasts, pretended the sheet of water hid her like a cloak. As suddenly as it had been turned on the water went off. She had hidden from nothing. The ugly women were looking back, looking her over. Hannah went from focus to fade, drying off with the small towel, pulling on the too-big jumpsuit. She was drowning in it, tripping over it. Her clothes – her beautiful clothes – were gone. She didn’t ask where.

The other women talked and moved as if they had been in this place so often it felt like home. Hannah was cut from the pack and herded down the hall, hurried past big rooms with glass walls and cots lined up military style. She slid her eyes toward them. Each was occupied. Some women slept under blankets, oblivious to their surroundings. Others were shadows that rose up like specters, propping themselves on an elbow, silently watching Hannah pass.

Clutching her bedding, Hannah put one foot in front of the other, eyes down, counting her steps so she wouldn’t be tempted to look at all those women. There were too many steps. Hannah lost track and began again. One. Two. . .

“Here.”

A word stopped her. The guard rounded wide to the right as if Hannah was dangerous. That was a joke. She couldn’t hurt anyone – not really. The woman pushed open a door. The cock of her head said this was Hannah’s place. A room, six by eight. A metal-framed bed and stained mattress. A metal toilette without a lid. A metal sink. No mirror. Hannah hugged her bedding tighter and twirled around just as the woman put her hands on the door to close it.

“Wait! You have to let me call my mom. Take me to a phone right now so I can check on her.”

Hannah talked in staccato. A water droplet fell from her hair and hit her chest. It coursed down her bare skin and made her shiver. It was so cold. This was all so cold and so awful. The guard was unmoved.

“Bed down, Sheraton,” she said flatly.

Hannah took another step. “I told you I just want to check on her. Just let me check on her. I won’t talk long.”

“And I told you to bed down.” The guard stepped out. The door was closing. Hannah was about to call again when the woman in blue with the thick wooden club on her belt decided to give her piece of advice. “I wouldn’t count on any favors, Sheraton. Judge Rayburn was one of us, if you get my meaning. It won’t matter if you’re here or anywhere else. Everyone will know who you are. Now make your bed up.”

The door closed. Hannah hiccupped a sob as she spread her sheet on the thin mattress. She tucked it under only to pull it out over and over again. Finally satisfied she put the blanket on, lay down and listened. The sound of slow footsteps echoed through the complex. Someone was crying. Another woman shouted. She shouted again and then she screamed. Hannah stayed quiet, barely breathing. They had taken away her clothes. They had touched her where no one had ever touched her before. They had moved her, stopped her, pointed her, and ordered her, but at this point Hannah couldn't remember who had done any of those things. Everyone who wasn't dressed in orange was dressed in blue. The blue people had guns and belts filled with bullets and clubs that they caressed as if they were treasured pets. These people seemed at once bored with their duty and thrilled with their power. They hated Hannah and she didn't even know their names.

Hannah wanted her mother. She wanted to be in her room. She wanted to be anywhere but here. Hannah even wished Fritz wouldn't be dead if that would get her home. She was going crazy. Maybe she was there already.

Hannah got up. She looked at the floor and made a plan. She would ask to call her mother again. She would ask politely because the way she said it before didn't get her anything. Hannah went to the door of her – cell. A hard enough word to think, she doubted she could ever say it. She went to the door and put her hands against it. It was cold, too. Metal. There was a window in the center. Flat white light slid through it. Hannah raised her fist and tapped the glass. Once, twice, three, ten times. Someone would hear. Fifteen. Twenty. Someone would come and she would tell them she didn't just want to check on her mother; she would tell them she needed to do that. This time she would say please.

Suddenly something hit up against the glass. Hannah fell back. Stumbling over the cot, she landed near the toilette in the corner. This wasn't her room in the Palisades. This was a small, cramped place. Hannah clutched at the rough blanket and pulled it off the bed as she sank to the floor. Her heart beat wildly. Huddled in the dark corner, she could almost feel her eyes glowing like some nocturnal animal. She was transfixed by what she saw. A man was looking in, staring at her as if she were nothing. Oh God, he could see her even in the dark. Hannah pulled her knees up to her chest and peeked from behind them at the man who watched.

His skin was pasty, his eyes plain. A red birthmark spilled across his right temple and half his eyelid until it seeped into the corner of his nose. He raised his stick, black and blunt, and tapped on the glass. He pointed toward the bed. She would do as he wanted. Hannah opened her mouth to scream at him. Instead, she crawled up on to the cot. Her feet were still on the floor. The blanket was pulled over her chest and up into her chin. The guard looked at her – all of her. He didn't see many like this. So young. So pretty. He stared at Hannah as if he owned her. Voices were raised somewhere else. The man didn't seem to notice. He just looked at Hannah until she yelled 'go away' and threw the small, hard pillow at him.

He didn't even laugh at that ridiculous gesture. He just disappeared. When Hannah was sure he was gone she began to pace. Holding her right hand in her left she walked up and down her cell and counted the minutes until her mother would come to get her.

Counting. Counting. Counting again.

Behind the darkened windows of the Lexus, the woman checked her rearview mirror. Damn freeways. It was nine o'clock at night and she still had to slalom around a steady stream of cars. She stepped on the gas – half out of her mind with worry.

A hundred.

Hannah should be with her.

A hundred and ten.

Hannah must be terrified.

The Lexus shimmied under the strain of the speed.

She let up and dropped to ninety-five.

They wouldn't even let her see her daughter. She didn't have a chance to tell Hannah not to talk to anyone. But Hannah was smart. She'd wait for help. Wouldn't she be smart? Oh, God, Hannah. Please, please be smart.

Ahead a pod of cars pooled as they approached Martin Luther King Boulevard. Crazy she thought they looked like a pin set-up at the bowling alley. Not that she visited bowling alleys anymore but she made the connection. It would be so easy to end it all right here – just keep going like a bowling ball and take 'em all down in one fabulous strike. It sure as hell would solve all her problems. Maybe even Hannah would be better off. Then again, the people in those cars might not want to end theirs so definitely.

Never one to like collateral damage if she could avoid it, the woman went for the gutter, swinging onto the shoulder of the freeway, narrowly missing the concrete divider that kept her from veering into oncoming traffic. She was clear again, leaving terror in her wake, flying toward her destination.

The Lexus transitioned to the 105. It was clear sailing all the way to Imperial Highway where the freeway came to an abrupt end, spitting her out onto a wide intersection before she was ready. The tires squealed amid the acrid smell of burning rubber. The Lexus shivered, the rear end fishtailing as she fought for control. Finally, the car came to a stop angled across two lanes.

The woman breathed hard. She sniffled and blinked and listened to her heartbeat. She hadn't realized how fast she'd been going until just this minute. Her head whipped around. No traffic. A dead spot in the friggin' maze of LA freeways, surface streets, transitions and exits. Her hands were fused to the steering wheel. Thank God. No cops. Cops were the last thing she wanted to see tonight; the last people she ever wanted to see.

Suddenly her phone rang. She jumped and scrambled, forgetting where she had put it. Her purse? The console? The console. She ripped it open and punched the button to stop the happy little song that usually signaled a call from her hairdresser, an invitation to lunch.

"What?"

"This is Lexus Link checking to see if you need assistance."

"What?"

"Are you all right, ma'am? Our tracking service indicated that you had been in an accident."

Her head fell onto the steering wheel; the phone was still at her ear. She almost laughed. Some minimum wage idiot was worried about her.

"No, I'm fine. Everything's fine," she whispered and turned off the phone. Her arm fell to her side. The phone fell to the floor. A few minutes later she sat up and pushed back her hair. She'd been through tough times before. Everything would be fine if she just kept her wits about her and got where she was going. Taking a deep breath she put both hands back

on the wheel. She'd friggin' finish what she started the way she always did. As long as Hannah was smart they'd all be okay.

Easing her foot off the brake she pulled the Lexus around until she was in the right lane and started to drive. She had the address, now all she had to do was to find friggin' Hermosa Beach.

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## HOSTILE WITNESS

### BOOK CLUB DISCUSSIONS

1. Should children who commit violent crimes be tried as adults? Should chronological age enter into the discussion given the severity of the crimes we see being committed by children?\*
2. Is it truly possible get justice in this day and age where trials are discussed simultaneously in the media spotlight and by men and women who have agendas that reach beyond guilt or innocence?\*
3. Can there be any sympathy for Linda? Is her desire to secure her future extreme, or the norm?
4. Was Linda jealous of Hannah? Her youth? Her beauty? Most of all her sense of right and wrong? Was Hannah a mirror that reflected only her mother's failings?
5. Were Linda's actions throughout the book calculated or simply reactive as the situation spiraled out of control?
6. Was Hannah's loyalty to her mother understandable, pitiful, or heroic?
7. Children mature physically so much earlier these days. Do we (adults) burden them by mistaking physical maturity for emotional, spiritual and intellectual maturity? Do we do them a disservice by not helping them pace their childhood? Is this driven by mothers, fathers, media, friends or all of the above?
8. On some level, was Josie as selfish as Linda? Does she use Hannah to fill a void in her life, or are her intentions purely honorable in terms of helping Hannah find a safe harbor?
9. Did Josie have a right to insert Hannah into her life without discussing it with Archer and Faye? Both of whom she made a commitment to – one professional and one personal.

\*Recently the news reported a Supreme Court decision striking down mandatory life in prison for children. This in response to two fourteen-year-old boys sentenced to life for killing in the course of a robbery. The news has reported children as young as ten deliberately killing their victim.

\*\*Think OJ Simpson, Robert Blake. Celebrity and showmanship played their part but so did the District Attorney's choice to change the venue and the assignment of prosecutors.