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Opening extract from
Kill You Last

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CHAPTER 2

AFTER SCHOOL, I drove to Dad's studio and parked next to his bright red Ferrari. That car, I sometimes joked, was my only serious competition for his affections. I'd just gotten out of my Jeep when two men I'd never seen before came out of the studio's back door. They got into a dark green sedan, with a laptop computer mounted inside, and drove away. It didn't take a rocket surgeon to figure out that they were police.

I let myself in and started down the wood-paneled hallway that was lined with autographed head shots of famous models and actors. Almost all the photos were autographed to Dad in black Sharpie with personal thanks and salutations. In the kitchenette, Mercedes was making coffee. Petite and pretty, with dark hair and gold hoop earrings, she was Dad's stylist and general modeling agency gofer.

"Hola, Mercedes." I stopped in the doorway. *"¿Cómo está Pedro?"*

Pedro was her little boy, and, at the mention of his name, Mercedes would usually respond with a big smile and a story about his latest achievement or mischievous behavior. But today her brown eyes slid away, and she fingered the gold cross on her neck. *“Está bien, gracias.”* Her English was fairly good, but I liked to practice my Spanish with her. After high school, I planned to travel around Central America for a few months before starting college.

I wondered if Mercedes’s lack of enthusiasm had something to do with those detectives. “What did they want?” I asked.

“You should ask your father.”

Her solemn mood was unsettling. “Okay,” I said. “How do you say, Give Pedro a hug for me?”

Mercedes smiled weakly. “Pedro *dar un abrazo para mí. Gracias, Miss Shelby.*”

I continued down the hall to the office, where Janet, Dad’s modeling agent and office manager, was standing at a file cabinet with her back to me. I didn’t want to startle her, so I knocked gently on the doorframe.

Despite my cautious approach, Janet jumped, the stack of files in her arms spilling to the floor, papers and head shots going everywhere. “Ahhh!” she sort of gasped.

“Sorry,” I said.

Someone else might have said, “It’s not your fault.” But Janet stared haplessly at the papers, photos, and files on the floor. Gray roots showed along the parting in her

brown hair. "Now what am I going to do? How am I ever going to figure out what goes back in which file?"

"I'll help." I knelt down to gather the files.

"No!" she practically barked. "Leave it alone."

"But—"

"I said leave it. *Please*, Shelby?"

You could see that she was in an extra fragile mood today. When I straightened up, she was trembling. The tiniest things could send her into histrionics, but it usually took more than a few dropped files.

"What a freaking day." She plopped down on the corner of her desk, crossing her arms tightly and looking jittery. Like the floor, the desk was covered with loose papers and photos. You had to wonder why Dad had hired someone so disorganized to be his office manager.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Two girls are missing. The dicks wanted to know what we knew about them."

"Were they models?" I asked. Dad's studio and agency did photography and got work for the models he represented.

"We did their head shots," Janet said.

"What happened to them?"

She gestured with a shaky hand to the pile of photos and papers on the floor. "They're probably there somewhere."

"Not the head shots," I said. "I meant, what happened to the girls?"

“Their parents reported them missing. They’re probably runaways.”

Across the hall, the door to the photo studio opened and Gabriel Gressen, ridiculously gorgeous hunk, part-time model, and Dad’s photo assistant, came out with a plate of Chinese food. I felt my heart flutter ... and not because I found beef with broccoli irresistible.

With his dark eyes, wavy black hair, and chiseled looks, Gabriel was nothing short of drop-dead dreamy. Half the reason I stopped by Dad’s studio so often was to gaze upon his Greek-god beauty.

He crossed the hall and stepped into the office, holding out the food. “Anyone interested?”

If only he’d been offering himself, I thought.

“I’ll take it.” Janet reached for the plate and began to eat hungrily with her fingers.

Gabriel glanced at the papers on the floor as if it was nothing unusual, then smiled at me. “Hey.”

My insides turning to Jell-O, I calmly replied, “Hi, what’s up?”

“Big glamour shoot today.”

“Really? Who?”

“General Tso and his friends Moo Shu and Ginger.”

“Hardy-har-har.” I showed him I got the joke, then pointed across the hall at the photo-studio door. “Can I go in?”

“Sure. The prawns won’t mind if you see them undressed.”

I went into the photo studio, which, not surprisingly, smelled like a Chinese restaurant. Dad was focusing a camera on a brightly lit plate of chow mein. On a table near by, a dozen other Asian dishes waited their turn in the spotlight.

“This for a food magazine?” I asked.

“Not exactly.” Dad fired a few shots. Strobes popped and flashed, leaving spots in my eyes.

“Advertising?”

“Sort of.” He repositioned the plate. “A menu. For the Whacky Wok.”

The Whacky Wok was a hole-in-the-wall takeout place on a side street in Soundview. A sign over the counter displayed photos of the various menu items along with corresponding numbers. A wisp of sadness swept over me. In the world of commercial photography, shooting menus was about as low as you could go, especially for a man who’d once done \$10,000-a-day fashion shoots. More pops and flashes followed, then Dad replaced the chow mein with what looked like cashew chicken.

“What’s with the detectives and the missing girls?” I asked.

“You got me.” He adjusted a light. “Seems that we did some shots for their books.”

“Books” was model-business slang for the portfolios in which models carried their photos.

“Did they say what they think happened to them?”

“Nah, just asked some questions.” Again strobes popped

and flashed. Dad seemed totally unconcerned. I decided to show him the strange email from vengeance13773288@gmail.com.

“Interesting,” Dad said after reading my BlackBerry.

“Any idea what it means?”

He rubbed his hands together, made his eyes bulge, and grinned maniacally. “I could tell you, my dear, but then I’d have to kill you.”

“I’m serious, Dad.”

“Seriously?” His shoulders sagged. “Not a clue. Probably just someone playing with your head, you know?”

Sounded logical, I thought. But who?

Dad picked up his camera. “Gotta get this done before the food starts to look soggy. Feel free to take home anything I’ve finished shooting.”

“You won’t be home for dinner?”

“Looks like I’ll be here pretty late.”

I accepted the news with resignation. Dad always had a reason to stay away from home. And not just for late nights at the studio, but on weekends, too, when he’d go out of town to shoot weddings and anniversaries.

I put my arms around his neck and hugged him. “Why don’t you have dinner with us tonight?”

“Too much to do here,” he said, hugging me back. “But I promise we’ll do something special on Sunday, okay? Just the two of us?”

I kissed him on the cheek, took the chow mein, and went back out to the hall. There was no sign of Gabriel.

In the office, Janet was thumbing through a file cabinet, the contents of the dropped files still scattered all over the floor, and the half-finished plate of beef with broccoli on her desk. I thought of saying goodbye but didn't want to risk startling her again.

As I passed the kitchenette, Gabriel stepped out. I practically wound up in his arms. "Ah!" I laughed nervously and backed away, feeling my face grow hot. "Sorry!"

He smiled calmly, as if women stepped into his arms all the time, which, come to think of it, was probably true. "Nothing to be sorry about. That was nice." His words had a slightly teasing quality. Meanwhile, those dark eyes burrowed in. "You look pretty."

"Thanks," I said, and almost replied, "You look gorgeous."

"Got a boyfriend?" he asked.

"No one special."

"That's surprising."

"Not if you saw what Soundview High has to offer." That wasn't really the case, but I never let the truth get in the way of snappy repartee.

He smiled again. This wasn't the first time I'd felt attraction vibes emanating from him. But something always seemed to hold him back. I suspected it was because he worked for Dad and was worried that if we started dating and things went sour, it might make for an awkward situation.

Which was too bad.
Maybe I'd have to talk Dad into firing him.
Just kidding.