

Day 1 – *early evening*

One

Heat from the Mobile Data Transmitter radiated onto Zoey Kozinski's arm. The interior of the patrol car cooked, muggy and close. September brought the hottest weather to the central coast of California, anxiety about fires flaring as the oak leaves curled and undergrowth crisped. Thankfully, Officer Austin kept the windows of the patrol car open even as the sun started to set.

"Must be boiling with your vest."

"Better to sweat than bleed." Austin's profile was sharp angles, pointed nose, strong chin.

"How much does that thing weigh?" Zoey already knew, but the officer didn't seem talkative. She needed to crack the façade and dig out some grist to apply to Officer Horne, the character in her book. Her stalled, barely-started book.

"Six pounds."

Officer Austin rolled along Scenic Drive, a main thoroughfare through Playa Maria County. Zoey wished they could listen to music, something to go with driving on a sultry evening, maybe Ella Fitzgerald's "Summertime." Instead, the police radio spat information, filling awkward silence. Zoey jotted down that a list of stolen cars was tucked on the left side of his dash. She'd chosen a night shift, hoping for a modicum of action but nothing on the radio stirred Austin's interest.

“How do you feel about ride-alongs?” She flipped her legal pad and the printed-out opening pages of her manuscript winged to the floor. All two of them. A whopping three hundred ten words. She bent down to retrieve them.

“It’s part of our Community Policing.” Austin kept his focus forward. “To increase civilian awareness of what police work entails.”

She didn’t bother to write down the canned response.

Austin must be a rookie to receive the crappy assignment of hauling a ride-along, but he didn’t look like one. Silver highlighted his short hair. Older than her fictional Officer Horne. Her protagonist Horne should be young, freshly free of his training wheels, a more credible character to rush toward a terrible mistake after witnessing the shooting of a fellow officer.

In the margin of the legal pad, she scribbled: *A hot-head. Temper=hubris. Too eager to prove himself?*

Then she wrote *Stan* and put a question mark after it. The name of the murdered officer in her manuscript had appeared in a magician’s puff of smoke, typed by her fingers before she was conscious of a choice. Not a common name for guys of her generation, the lost kids born between Generation X and the Millennials. The name had merit—easy to pronounce, but not overly used. Why had it popped into her head?

She slipped her pen through her tangle of red hair and scratched her scalp.

Austin shot her a glance, maybe thinking she didn’t know she was using the ink end.

“Writing off the top of your head?”

She smiled slightly. *Witty for a police officer.*

He quirked a brow. “Making headlines?” His tone was dry. No smile. Was he being funny or busting her balls?

Zoey tapped the legal pad. Her next question wasn't on it, but Austin's age and his quips begged for it.

"What did you do before becoming a law enforcement officer?"

Long fingers curled around the wheel, maneuvering the vehicle through the rush-hour clog of Scenic Drive. He scanned the lanes of traffic and sidewalks long enough that she thought he wasn't going to answer.

"I was a teacher."

"Really?" Her voice squeaked with unveiled surprise. Heat rose up her face. With her coloring, there was no playing off a blush. When she was a kid, her Grosse Pointe classmates had pinned her with the nickname Tomato.

"High-school history." In the parking lot, he'd offered a firm handshake and introduced himself formally as Officer Austin, although he'd added with a trace of humor 'at your service.' Over six-feet with ropy muscles, he was a bit old for her, maybe forty-five, but a hottie, nonetheless.

"That's a strange career trajectory."

"Not really. In both jobs you deal with a lot of young punks."

As part of the outreach program, he probably was not supposed to refer to members of the community as *punks*. She was making progress.

"In policing I bet you have more flexibility about how you deal with *punks*?"

His lip curled, but he didn't respond.

"So why the career move?"

“In teaching, the more you work, the less you’re paid,” he said. “Police work offers time-and-a-half for overtime. Ten-hour shifts and four-day work weeks. More money and time for my family.”

“Kids?”

“Three.”

She felt a twinge of disappointment. Her sex life had been reduced to her Magic Wand, and Austin wasn’t wearing a wedding ring, so a bit of fantasy had slipped under her normally guarded door. Since she didn’t want a *relationship*, a hot cop could be the ticket. *Married* killed that idea.

And three kids! With the world’s exploding population and global climate change, that was self-indulgent. One of her least favorite character flaws—in reality. In fiction, it was a great character flaw.

“My wife’s the one who should have made the career move to cop,” Austin volunteered. “She’s a tiger. Can outshoot me.” He shook his head in admiration.

Another twinge. She had a serious weakness for men who complimented women in absentia.

Zoey touched the cool metal of the AR15 propped in front of the passenger seat. “This is some serious fire power.”

The creases in his uniform lifted infinitesimally, a hint of a shrug. “You should see what they have on the street.”

She ran her finger down her list of questions. Nothing so far had gotten the juices flowing. “What kind of handgun do you carry?”

“Smith & Wesson. Officers with more seniority get Berettas. The most senior officers have Glocks.” Jealousy tinged his voice. “But if you want a better gun, you can buy one. I’m looking at a Glock.”

The crackling voice of dispatch relayed a report of a middle-aged black male dealing drugs in Playa Maria Park.

Austin swung off Scenic onto a street that cut along the seedier edge of downtown, where the homeless population dwarfed the number of university students. He slowed at the park.

Dusk had sifted into darkness, but streetlights illuminated the perimeter of the grass. Young men played basketball in a well-lit court. A lone man leaning against a light pole straightened at the cruiser’s arrival. Austin put the windows up, parked the car, and plucked a wood baton from the base of his door. “Remain in the vehicle.”

Another patrolman rolled up and joined him. She noted details. *Suspect’s dreadlocks glisten in bluish light. Tan pants bag around skinny legs.*

Austin questioned the man, while the other officer patted him down and dipped into the pockets of his army-fatigue jacket. With the window closed, Zoey sweated.

In the end, the man bumped away and swaggered toward the basketball court.

Talking together, the officers watched him, then turned in the direction of the vehicle. Austin nodded. The other man laughed. They were talking about her. The inside of the cruiser steamed like a sauna. Austin was letting her marinate in a patina of sweat.

Zoey opened the passenger door, which prompted Austin to step toward the cruiser. Before he plopped into his seat, he thunked his baton into its spot.

“I asked the suspect if we could search him and he said no,” he started before Zoey even asked. “But he has a Search Clause.” Austin cleaned his hands with foam sanitizer. “That’s a bargain he made for probation. He relinquished his right to probable cause.”

She scribbled the information. This was good stuff, strengthening her knowledge of the law.

“But you didn’t find anything?”

“Maybe he sold out.”

Dry humor. Deadpan delivery. Her favorite. To curtail a blush, she cast her eyes to the pocket of his door.

“Don’t most officers these days carry whip-batons?”

He gave her a look.

Amazing eyes—way greener than her own. He yanked the baton from its spot and held it across his lap, the top grazing her thigh.

Phallic symbol, for sure. The air inside the car shifted subtly.

“See all those nicks?” he said. “My T.O. gave this to me, said the riff-raff on the street notice the dents. They’re mostly from getting in and out of the car, but hey,” he returned the baton to the door pocket, “they don’t know that.”

He gave his hand a second squirt of the sanitizer. “I tell you one part of this job I don’t like. The grime. You’d have to get up close to appreciate how much that guy . . . how grubby he was.” Austin started the car. “Tell you the truth, I’m more afraid of an accidental needle poke than a gunshot.”

“Was he dealing?”

“I imagine.” Austin put down the windows. Fresh air rushed into the compartment. “He doesn’t have any other means of income.”

The radio called Austin to roust a panhandler near the entrance to the freeway. *Civilian complaint.* Austin zoomed back up to Scenic. At the intersection before the freeway entrance, he stopped at a red light with the rest of the traffic. The girl panhandling on the median spotted the cruiser, folded her sign, and meandered down the sidewalk.

Austin turned and rolled along the street across from the girl. In spite of a curvaceous figure packed into tight jeans, with her wavy brown hair hitched into pigtails she looked all of fifteen. The girl ignored them.

Zoey twisted toward Austin. “Are you going to stop?”

“She’s not doing anything illegal now. She didn’t even jaywalk.” He sped up. “We got her off the median.”

“Yup. Sure did.” He knew, and she knew, that as soon as they were out of sight, the girl would return to her spot.

How do they negotiate spots? She wrote. First come, first served?

If she asked Austin about the girl—did he know her—what was her story—she sensed he’d blow off the questions. The police department had picked the wrong officer to give ride-alongs. Austin lacked a gregarious, empathetic personality.

Zoey tried to unpack how she’d arrived at this conclusion. Maybe because he’d chosen policing over teaching. Police work had to be more frustrating than high school teaching, certainly less rewarding.

She shook her head. *Don’t assume.* She asked about the girl.

“Espie Gonzales.”

“You know her?”

“Yeah.” His forefinger tapped the steering wheel a few times. “She lost her baby in that shooting.”

“Oh, that’s her.” Zoey strained to see the girl disappearing into the darkness. Her tragic case had dominated the front page.

“Hell of a way to start this job.” Officer Austin looped around the block back to Scenic Drive. Rush hour traffic had thinned. “I was there earlier when they arrested her piece-of-shit boyfriend, too.”

She was sure Officer Austin was not supposed to say that. Zoey chewed on her pen and scribbled an idea: *Stan dies b/c he harbors a secret?* She doodled hashtag symbols on her paper.

Maybe Austin recognized zoning-out behavior from all those past students because he volunteered, “As a mystery writer, you’re probably looking for something more exciting. Let’s see if I can find a car to pull over.”

Within two minutes, he pointed out a white sedan. “Burned-out taillight.” He unclipped his seatbelt.

“Why are you doing that?”

“Your car is your coffin. Cop training 101. If someone jumps out of a vehicle, you don’t want to be fumbling with a seatbelt.”

She unlatched her seatbelt, too. He didn’t object.

He called in the license plate, citing the letters phonetically. “Old model white sedan. Make unclear. One male.” He concluded the call with their location and lit up the patrol car.

The driver continued along Scenic toward the outskirts of town. Austin tapped his airhorn. The silhouetted head, wearing a hat, lifted as though checking the rearview.

The dispatcher reported back on the license plate. No red flags.

Austin used the airhorn again. But the white sedan tooled along. The number of businesses thinned. Traffic dwindled.

Muscles jumped in Austin's jaw.

Zoey jotted. *Wants authority obeyed!* No wonder high school kids drove him crazy.

Austin like Camille? Camille, her mother, was a first-class control freak.

He eyed her notepad and frowned. Closing the windows, he put on the siren and left it on, wailing, but this could hardly be called a chase. They were traveling thirty miles per hour.

"Why isn't he pulling over?"

Austin didn't have an answer, at least not one he could utter with her in the vehicle.

Finally, he said, "Could be absorbed in his cell phone."

That was not the reason. She was an eagle at spotting drivers using a device and, in this case, the hat would have accentuated any dip of the head. He was not using his phone, and his actions were sure to piss off a cop, especially this cop—an authoritarian personality with an audience to impress. Zoey planted her Keds against the cruiser's floor and stretched her torso, staring at the car ahead, anxiety percolating up her legs.

"His car could be sound baffled." Austin's voice tightened as he offered the flimsy possibility.

Rationalizing. Even if the driver couldn't hear, he could see the cruiser lights. The situation reminded her of the pursuit of the Bronco carrying O.J. Simpson up the 405. That day in June, 1994, she'd come into the house after swapping mix tapes with her middle school friend. Her mom, in impossibly white Capris, so raptly watched the television that Zoey popped one earbud of her Walkman in the middle of Warren G's "Regulate" to see what was up.

She heard the song now in her head as the white sedan left Playa Maria proper. Scenic Drive opened onto coastal highway along the Pacific, an empty stretch of dark two-lane highway. The driver put on his blinker. She sighed in relief. The car crunched onto the steeply-graded gravel shoulder.

Austin pulled in behind it. She slouched down in her seat, taking notes on the pad propped against her thighs. Her heart hammered. A routine traffic stop, but it felt off. *Austin pissed*. She drew an anger emoji. And he had not called for back-up.

Too macho? she wrote.

She shrank in her seat as Austin approached the sedan, his hand on his weapon. She scribbled details. The car's window glided open. The man stuck his head out, glancing back.

At the turn of the driver's head, Austin crouched and drew. A gun muzzle appeared out the window opening.

Three pops split the silence.

Austin collapsed onto the asphalt.

Zoey's stomach lurched. The white car roared to life. Its tires spat gravel and squealed onto the pavement, the back-end fishtailing. She opened the passenger door, her pulse throbbing in her head, the world awash in swirling blue and red. Her shoes skidded on the gravel. She caught herself by grabbing the door. With the tilt of the car, the door continued to fly open, whirling her toward the drainage ditch.

Regaining her balance, she crept forward, the night so quiet she could hear the distant whoosh of the ocean. Or was the whoosh inside her head?

Officer Austin lay splayed on the edge of the pavement. He'd landed so the exit wound faced her, the back of his head a bloody pulp.

She swallowed bile and recoiled behind the cruiser. There was no way he was alive.

Her body felt floaty, unreal, tethered only by the pain of pebbles under her knee.

A red sportscar passed headed toward town. The driver slowed. Hope surged in her. Help had arrived. She started to rise on wobbly legs.

The car zoomed off, leaving her.

She forced herself to draw a breath but couldn't get it beyond her throat. Austin had been hit close range with something high caliber. Leaving the cruiser door gaping open, she leaned across the seat divider and grabbed the police radio, her hand shaking wildly. She tried another breath, but air kept going in and out in sharp jags.

The radio would be faster than her cell phone, skirting any telecommunicator and going directly to dispatch. Officers in the area would hear the transmission. She wanted someone to come right now.

The radio suddenly squawked to life in her hands. Her heart slammed her chest.

"555 are you 10-4 on your stop?"

Hell no. Nothing was 10-4. She keyed the mic.

Another set of headlights zoomed toward her. Maybe when she'd gotten out, the killer had spotted her and was returning to take care of loose ends. Her whole body shook. Shrinking down, she identified herself to the dispatcher.

"The ride-along?" the suspicious voice snapped. "Where's Officer Austin?"

"He's been shot!"

An intake of air. A tiny pause.

The car in the opposite lane sped by. A white car! Its bright lights were blinding, the driver in too big of a hurry to be bothered with the odd appearance of a lone police vehicle at the

side of the road, overhead lights flashing. Or maybe the driver didn't slow down because he already knew what was there.

"Where are you?" the dispatcher's voice steeled into all business.

Zoey wished she had the dispatcher's nerves, hoped she could get through her report before fainting or puking. Sweat slicked her palm. "Edge of town on the coast highway headed north, about a mile past where Officer Austin called in the stop."

"Help is on the way. Stay put."

As though she were going to do what? Run up the deserted, dark highway? The white car that had sped by flipped a U-ey and roared back toward her, skidding to a stop behind the cruiser.

The sedan's lights remained on bright. Her stomach shriveled. A man strolled toward the cruiser.

Maybe she should run.