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UNCLAD

by

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Chapter 1

Monday

If you had told me five years ago I'd be scraping eucalyptus leaves off a rich woman's ass for a living, I probably would've decked you. But here I am, doing it gladly. And for about a quarter of the pay I was making as a PI.

This particular rich woman is rather skinny, not in the good way, but in the bony way of actresses around here; the skin sags across her bones where flesh used to be, like a helium balloon three days after the party's over. I also notice some of those tiny "unnoticeable" liposuction scars. When she flips over I look at her face again and groan inwardly; sure enough she's either one of those desperate housewives or a mother of a bratty teen on a rich-kids-at-the-beach show. I don't watch much TV, but honestly, you can't get around knowing some of this entertainment shit when you live in LA. I used to be a lot more familiar with the famous as a private investigator; now I still know their secrets, but just the physical ones.

"Desperate" has been blathering on her cell phone throughout the entire massage, even though it's strictly against spa policy due to the noise (and the thin walls). Celebrities, especially minor ones, love to flaunt the rules. I can't imagine this massage has been relaxing for her, as it sure as hell hasn't been for me. "Maria, has the baby had leche? Leche. Has she had her leche?"

Each time she enunciates the word louder as if Maria will suddenly recognize her native language, despite the butchered pronunciation.

I end the massage by pressing my thumbs on her "hundred meeting place," an acupressure point at the very crown of the head which is thought to be calming to the mind – something she clearly needs. Then, behind her head, I very quickly and subtly cross my right arm over the left at the wrists, and then swap them so the left arm's on top. This is something we massage therapists do, which clients don't even know about. It's supposed to break the connection, or flow of shared energy between us and the client; a gesture that means: "what came with you, goes with you; what came with me, goes with me." I'm not sure how much of this new age bullshit I really believe, but I figure, it can't hurt to let go of the any angst and problems I might've absorbed from the client. Like in this case, whether her baby's nanny understands Spanglish.

Desperate finishes her call, then gets off the table and nods her head at me, which I take to mean I am to leave. I don't even bother telling her the usual "drink lots of water" because she'll drink and eat as she likes, which is nothing, and besides she's somewhat bitchy and probably won't leave a good tip so who cares if she stays hydrated. You'd be surprised at how poorly stars tip – especially females ones. There's something about "making it" here that turns people stingy; they think the world owes them for their beauty and talent, however manufactured both are. Before I leave the room, however, she whispers in a soft voice she probably imagines as engaging, "I'd like to keep the leaves." Wet, crumpled, used eucalyptus leaves just scraped from her butt? I can only imagine what for. She's probably afraid I'll sell them on eBay. I drop the

dark green slop into one of the baggies we use for product samples and leave it on the table as I exit the room to wait.

A few minutes later Desperate emerges, and I walk her from the treatment room, up the long hallway and back to the Women's Locker Room. It's easy to get lost in the low-lit labyrinth of endless hallways and doors. The men and women share a common waiting area, but each has their own locker rooms with separate steam rooms, saunas, whirlpools and baths.

"What was your name again?" she asks, turning to face me.

I brighten, thinking maybe I was wrong; maybe I'm in for a decent tip after all. "Ruby," I say, smiling in a way I hope conveys grace, warmth, and professionalism. "Ruby Sloane."

"Ruby," Desperate says, promptly slipping out of her flip-flops and wrinkling her rhinoplastic nose. "Those are scratchy."

I watch Desperate and my generous tip disappear through the Women's Locker Room door, leaving only the flip-flops and my dashed dreams for me to pick. I hate her like the Prom Queen. Thankfully, she's my last client because now I'm in a wretched mood. As I make my way to the employee lounge, I pass Francie in the hall. Her mounds of red, curly hair are pulled back into a severe bun highlighting her furrowed, freckled brow.

"Can I borrow five bucks?" she asks. "I need gas money."

"I don't have any on me," I answer, feeling the slightest twinge of a migraine coming on. I press my temples with my index and middle fingers, "I have to ice my hands in the next minute or they'll be so stiff I won't be able give anyone the finger on the ride home. But you can get money from my locker. Actually, can you just bring my purse to the lounge? I need an aspirin."

"Sure. Combination?"

“36-24-36, same as...”

“...an ideal woman’s measurements. Right, how could I forget?” Francie says as she walks hurriedly toward the Employee Lounge. It was a joke I made often; can’t expect a laugh every time.

I stop briefly in the bathroom to plunge my hands into icy water to keep them from swelling and do a few quick stretches to loosen the tightness in my back. By the time I get to the Employee Lounge, my purse sits on the table. But Francie is already gone; no one is in here except Antonio who is eating his dinner before he begins his nightly cleaning duties.

“Pretty quiet for a Monday night, huh?” he asks, his rough, calloused, dark hands wrapped around a pork torta bigger than his head. Antonio might be the one person in LA not worrying about carbs.

“Yeah,” I answer, rubbing my temples and rummaging in my huge carryall for Imitrex. Got to nip these things in the bud or you’re out for the night. As Antonio continues to eat, I notice how much thinner he looks, his face more drawn and... is it older looking? I guess that’s what the flu will do to you these days. He’d only been out of work for a few days and already he’s aged. But for his first day back he’s surprisingly energetic. Antonio pops the last scrap of pig into his mouth just as Margot, the manager, comes galloping into the room. She’s got a gait like a drunken colt, that one, all gangly legs and arms. Graceful, the woman is not.

“Ruby, thank God! I need a huge favor,” she says huge with her eyes bugged out and I already know where this is going. “I’ve got to go lick BBQ sauce off someone’s fingers.”

“Seems like a sponge would be easier.”

Margot rolls her eyes. “Funny. It’s for a last minute audition. A commercial with national airing!” Her voice lilts just slightly, in that way wannabe actresses have when they think this might be their Big Break. You can hear it in the timbre of every waitress, barista, store clerk, hostess, receptionist, and valet in town.

“Really,” I say, noncommittally. I can feel the back of my tongue thickening and the nausea starting. I down a huge glass of spa water – which is really just cucumbers soaking in tap – as I continue my fruitless search for pain-numbing drugs.

“Yes!” she continues, as if her sheer exuberance will bleed into me and I will jump at the chance she’s about to offer. “And I was won-der-ing....”

Here it comes. Whenever her words become more polysyllabic than necessary, the evening ends with me locking up. It’s her tell. Be strong, Ruby. Just say no fucking way.

“Could I pl-ease get you to lock up for me? Francie is leaving any minute, so no one will be here but you and Nin. I just saw Joe head toward the Men’s Wet. He’s got one last client so he’ll be done in an hour, tops! I swear.” She says this as if Antonio is not sitting there right in front of her; another human being who will in fact also be here for me to monitor when she leaves. But Antonio doesn’t even blink. He’s used to being invisible.

“Nin’s at the front but you know I can’t trust her – the one time I did the idiot forgot to close the back door.” She looks over her shoulder, as if to ensure Nin is not eavesdropping, then continues, “You don’t have to do an-y-thing! Just kill an hour, then make sure the doors are locked when everyone leaves. I would really appreciate it. I’ve got to run home and get one of my trademark hats and I won’t have time if I don’t leave right this very second.” The eyes bug again at ‘really.’

“You’re the only one I can trust,” she adds, with an implied wink; ever since she learned of my background I’ve become the only one she can trust to do lots of mundane things.

I am tempted to decline, if only because I don’t want to abet Margot’s pathetic attempts to stand out at auditions. She has a collection of British-made hats worn by royals to royal events, such as the gray feathery concoction that looks like a dead tarantula perched on a headband, which the Crown Princess Mette-Merit of Norway supposedly wore to Charles and Camilla’s wedding. These hats are often auctioned off at charity for causes Margot could care less about; she just wants to own something once owned by Someone Important. It gives her confidence, she says, and she uses it as a conversation piece, a way to differentiate herself with casting directors from the thousands of other blondes with fake tits. If she wants to do that, she should just learn to ‘perform’ on her knees.

She gives me the big eyes again. “Ru? Please?”

Despite my crankiness and impending migraine, I know I should do her a favor because Margot is a friend. It’s a new concept for me. She and Francie are my first and only girlfriends. Those shows, you know the ones where four girls go to brunch and talk about men and shoes? Never related. It’s not that I don’t like shoes or men. I just don’t open up to people, and friendships with women depend on divulging secrets. So my Sundays are mostly brunch-free. Which is fine, because I hate eggs.

If I were compelled to go to brunch with someone at gunpoint though, I’d probably call Margot. She’s one of those people who force you to be friends with her. We met at massage school and I guess she took a liking to me. She doesn’t care if you never call back, or never ask her over, or don’t talk much – she just keeps at it. Even when she moved up the ranks at the spa

to Massage Manager, she still kept at it. I guess it's those people skills at work. If she decides she likes you, that's it. You're friends. She also takes in strays, so maybe that explains something.

In addition to being my friend, Margot is also in charge of scheduling and could really screw me with the shifts. And I have always known where my bread was buttered; or in the case of Los Angeles, where my diet rice cake was lightly sprayed with non-fat margarine substitute.

"Sure, no problem. I'll stay," I say. Driving home right now in LA traffic with this headache would be nightmarish anyway.

Margot squeals in delight and tosses me the keys without a moment's hesitation, without an "Are you sure?" or a second thought. And just as quick, she's out the door and I'm left holding the spare keys on the "Relax Now!" chain.

* * *

"Do you mind if I take a bath in the big tubs? They're so much roomier," I ask Antonio. It's a slight inconvenience for him, since the large Jacuzzis are in the Men's Locker Room, where he usually cleans first.

But he crumples up his brown paper bag and says, "No problem. I'll just do the men's side all at once when Joe's finished."

Moments later, I grab flip flops and a new clean robe from the linen closet, but then think of Antonio and the piles of laundry awaiting him in the back room. I don't need to add to his cleaning duties tonight, especially since he's being cool about the tub. Besides, people are so wasteful at spas, using three towels where one will do; something about spending \$175 for a hot

stone massage makes them feel entitled to abuse the underpaid staff. Feeling guilty, I grab a barely used robe from the top of the laundry basket and turn it inside out – how dirty could it be? – and as I put it on I notice there's a small white ribbon pinned discreetly on the lapel with a gold safety pin. Irritated, I wonder who had this robe before me, which new Cause has a white ribbon – Albino Chihuahuas for peace? Underprivileged youth who need skin brightening? – and why, even at a spa, did this woman feel the need to trumpet her devotion to it? Must've been another narcissistic actress, though I realize the phrase is redundant.

The locker rooms – both men and women's – have a faux Italian villa luxury to them, with painted murals of gardens and statues in muted tones. There's an antiseptic feel to the spa, as if, in order to relax– Now! – properly, people need to know it's cleaner than an operating room. Everything is lined up perfectly, products in size order, towels starched whiter than white. It's meant to be peaceful but I always find in situations where I'm supposed to be calm, like a yoga class, I usually have a giggle fit. For the first three months I was here I couldn't walk into the Quiet Room without stifling a laugh. Though one thing that is relaxing about the spa is how deadly silent it is at all times. Doesn't matter if there are three people here or three hundred – you could hear a pin from a Cause Ribbon drop. With all its side doors and tucked-away spaces the spa gives you the sense of ultimate privacy, of being the only one here.

The extra large tub takes a while to fill, and as the lavender-scented bubbles form, I find the joint I keep stashed in the inner zippered lining of my purse for emergency migraine purposes. I once worked on a case for a doctor-to-the-stars (who had, let's call it a penchant, for teenage boys) who told me marijuana can help block the serotonin released during my episodes. I've carried some with me ever since. I know it's illegal, but if you've ever felt the dull thud of a

migraine behind the eyeballs, the crown of pain on top of your head, the tingling nerve endings shooting down into your teeth, you'd be willing to kill a man for relief. Or at least break a minor possession law. I light up and slip into the hot water, which is instantly soothing. I take a cool compress from the ice bucket, put it over my eyes and lay back in the comfortable tub, so big my feet don't even touch the nozzle. I feel the slightest pang of guilt using a clean towel under my neck, but the feeling fades as my migraine does. I take a final hit off the joint, then extinguish it in a cup of spa water as I drift off to sleep.

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I awake with a start, good and pruned. After drying off, I cross back through the dark green-carpeted hallway to the Women's Locker Room. I see Antonio, head down, earphones in, vacuuming. I try not to catch his eye as I slip past; watching someone else clean makes me uncomfortable. Once safely on the Women's side, I make sure to use every one of the fancy hair and body products the spa has laid out for its customers. In my own home it gets about as stylish and expensive as Neutrogena, but I'm not above using the good stuff for free.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I feel momentarily pleased. Since I started my new life as a masseuse, my skin tone is healthier, my eyes look clearer, and I have more muscle definition in my arms than ever before. I've lost some weight, and though I'm not thin – and never was – I feel strong, solid. This self-reflective joy is immediately dashed however, when I spy a single gray hair hiding out among the dark ones like a fugitive. I frown as I yank out the offender; the third one this month.

I have no idea how long I spend drying my hair with the two hundred dollar turbo hair dryer the spa has delicately and discreetly chained to the counter, but at this point I realize it's been quite a while and Nin hasn't come back to tell me the last client has left. Margot is right, Nin is an airhead. It's possible she's hard at work, dusting the products for sale at the front desk. Or she just forgot and abandoned the front desk without notifying me. I could find out, but decide to check on Joe instead.

The Wet Rooms are where we perform the spa treatments that involve scrubs and wraps, which need water to rinse the clients off between steps. God forbid they should have to stand up and use a shower. Wet Room treatments are elaborate and ritualistic, with names like romance novel titles: Savannah's Retreat involves three separate fruit enzyme scrubs. Heather's Run will exfoliate you within an inch of your life. Hunter's Passion utilizes more eucalyptus leaves than a koala bear ever will.

The men's and women's Wet Rooms are connected by a single metal door and you can get to either one from its respective locker room. I pad through the Women's locker room into the Wet Room area in my terry cloth bathrobe, thinking only of when I'll get home and what I'll eat for dinner.

At first the trickle from under the door connecting the wet rooms looks like spilled body gel – one of those scented kinds the spa is always testing out, you know, Currant Raspberry Mint, Pomegranate Orange Vanilla or something equally overwrought. But as I get closer, I realize it isn't gel at all. It's blood. A little shiver runs up my spine. Even though it could be from anything, somewhere in the back of my mind – call it an investigator's instinct – I know right then.

I hesitate at the door, listening, because you can't just barge in on someone's treatment – that's Rule 1 at the spa: make them comfortable. Never leave the client alone in the room during a treatment; never startle them with loud noises or coughing or strange movements. And nothing makes people less comfortable than being naked in front of a stranger, let alone another stranger busting through the door in a panic. But I don't hear a sound through the door, not water blasting from any of the nine showerheads, not voices, nothing. I press my ear against the door and finally hear the soothing Tibetan chanting CD we always play. Someone's in there.

I rap lightly on the door, "Joe?"

No answer.

"Joe?" I whisper hoarsely, then say it again louder, more urgently. Finally, I crack the door an inch and peak inside. The heat lamps cast a red glow through the opening and warm my face.

"Oh God!" I choke, my voice cracking as an acrid smell – something metallic mixed with mint – lodges into the back of my nose and throat.

There, on the Wet Room table, lay Joe, naked and stripped of his wet room overalls, face up, his gray eyes rolled back into his bald head. Hands hang at his sides, immobile; his pale face, waxy. On his chest lay a smooth, black stone, dead center, the kind we use for a hot stone massage. On the floor, a puddle of water mixed with blood pools in the center of the tiled floor, creating small, crimson bubbles. Joe's not moving, not breathing.

Frantically, I flip the red switches off, which allow the white incandescent light to shine. It bounces off the carefully organized bottles of colored oils and gels, lined up on their tray like embalming fluids on a mortician's cart; their shiny silver matching tops and eager-to-please "Relax Now!" white labels seem to mock Joe as he lay before them.

If it were anyone else I wouldn't hesitate for a second. I would start resuscitation techniques, however futile, working carefully so as to disturb the crime scene as little as possible. Fifteen compressions to the chest, followed by two breaths, repeat until the medics arrive. But it isn't someone else – it's Joe. So I take one half a nanosecond to feel my abject horror and grief, then stash it away like a dirty sock in the corner of the room.

I wade across the puddle, my feet slipping on the wet tiled floor. In the bright light I see Joe's face more clearly, tinged with blue, a thin streak of foam leaking from his mouth. I put my hand under his nose and when I find no breath I slap his face lightly. "Joe!" I scream, as if a loud noise might wake him from death. A cursory check of his body reveals no major cuts or stab wounds. I lift his shoulders; there are no punctures on his back either. Where is the blood coming from? His body feels warm in my arms. Tears spring to my eyes but I stop myself.

"Do something!" I yell, though I'm not sure if it's directed at Joe or myself.

I feel for a pulse and finding none, tip his head back slightly, pinch his nose shut with my fingers and attempt to blow life back into him. Even in my distracted state, I can't help but notice he tastes strongly of mint, like he downed a case of Altoids. Why don't I have my cell phone with me, dammit?! I continue: quick breaths, chest compressions, breath, compress. The black stone falls to the floor. With each push on Joe's chest, more foam spills from his mouth. I slap his face again, "JOE!"

* * *

“Holy shit,” Antonio says quietly, almost under his breath, more amazed than surprised or disturbed.

“Antonio! Call 9-1-1!” I yell, but he remains small and immobile in the doorway to the Men’s Locker Room.

“DO IT!” I scream again, and jolt him out of his haze. I become aware that my robe is slightly undone at this point and my nakedness might be contributing to Antonio’s reaction: too much information to take in at once. But I feel an urgency to call the cops immediately, even though Joe is obviously dead and no amount of alacrity will bring him back. When you’re in a situation like this though, it just feels like moving quickly is the right thing to do.

“He’s dead?” Antonio asks incredulously. “Did someone knife him?”

I start to shake my head, but stop. “I don’t know, but we need an ambulance! Call 911!”

“No way I’m going out there!” Antonio finally speaks, “the killer...” he trails off and oddly for the first time it dawns on me that if there is a killer, he/she may still be here, in the spa, right now.

I jolt upright, “Nin!” I say. We both hurry out through the Men’s Locker Room, into the hall and run toward the front desk. From our vantage point down the hall, all we can see are still shadows. The hallway feels longer than it’s ever been. When we finally get to the lobby, it’s deserted. Nin is nowhere to be found.

I pick up the phone to call the police but, frantically pressing the buttons, can’t seem to get an outside line. That’s when Nin saunters back into the spa, talking nonstop on her pink rhinestoned cell phone and holding a Starbucks coffee cup. “Then he said he was gonna see if he could get us

in and we're like, standing there, for like twenty minutes, and he doesn't even come back! And finally, I'm like-

"Nin! Get off the phone!" I yell.

She looks up and noticing our ashen faces says, "Hey, can I call you back? I have a work thing." Nin snaps the phone shut, then turns to us wearily, "I just ran out for a second. No one's like even here. Maybe if they had caffeine in the spa instead of all this fruit water, I wouldn't have to spend like half my salary at Starbucks. Did you ever think of that?" In the low lighting of the spa, her brown skin looks as dark and creamy as her drink, and Nin strikes a pose, which people often do in LA – as if, at any moment, she might be on camera. Which, in LA, I guess they might be.

"Nin," I say, grabbing her shoulders, "Joe's had an accident and you need to call the cops. I would do it myself but I have no idea how to use the fucking switchboard. I mean, do you have to dial 9 to dial 9-1-1?" No sense in freaking her out with all that caffeine in her system. Besides, from what I've seen of her in action at work, she can't even deal with two phones ringing, let alone a possible murder.

Her jet black eyes widen, "The cops?"

"He's dead!" Antonio chimes in, just as I shoot him a dirty look, which he misses entirely. "Someone cut him!" he adds, with dramatic flair. Nin blanches and looks likely to faint.

"Joe?" she confirms. We nod.

"Oh Jesus, look," I say, "Just dial the fucking phone and call the cops – now! Antonio, stay with Nin, I'll go back to Joe. When the cops come, lead them to the Men's Wet Room."

Nin obediently begins dialing and I'm about to turn around when I stop in my tracks and direct a question at Antonio, "Is anyone else still here? Customers? Besides the three – four – of us," I ask. I can't not count Joe at this point, he's still here after all.

Antonio considers this. "I don't think so," he says, "unless, you know, the killer..." He trails off again and I hesitate for an instant. In my old line of work, I'd seen dead bodies in much worse situations than this: bloodier, broken, mangled. But usually they were in a morgue, on a surveillance tape, or in photos. And if I ever was at a crime scene, by the time I got there, the killer was most definitely gone.

"We don't even know if there was a killer," I snap, unconvincingly. I can't deal with their panic right now; I have to get back to Joe. "We don't know what happened. Just call the cops!"

* * *

I walk slowly back to the Wet Room. Though I don't want to disturb the crime scene, I feel the need to be with him one more time, before everything turns into chaos. One minute alone.

Sadness overwhelms me as I look at Joe's face. Was he surprised? It's hard to tell. I lean over his body, looking for signs of something, a struggle, a murder weapon, a clue. At first glance there's nothing obvious. I again look him up and down, my gaze lingering on his flaccid, exposed penis and there, something catches my eye: a small tear-shaped drop of semen dangles from the end like a viscous eye drop trying to escape a Visine bottle. I don't know if it's the adrenaline, my emotions, or the pot, but before I know what I'm doing, before I even think about

the implications, I impulsively use the sleeve of my robe to wipe away the drop. I just don't want Joe found like that; it somehow seems undignified.

I immediately regret tampering with evidence. But there's no taking it back now.

My eyes tread lightly up his lean, muscular body again and think, for a second time, there's no wound. Blood, clearly on the floor, but no cut where it came from. Whose blood is that? How did Joe die? If he wasn't stabbed, was he strangled? This was no accidental death. The way I found him: undressed, the lights, the stone on his chest. It seems deliberate, almost choreographed. My eyes land on his full, plush lips. I have a sudden urge to kiss them but there's foam everywhere.

Instead I pick up his hand, strong, masculine, nails clipped short like any good masseuse. And before I know what I'm doing, I slip his hand inside my robe to cup my breast for one last time. I know hearing this you probably think I'm some sort of fetishistic freak. I'm not. But it's not often you're confronted with the dead body of your sometimes lover.