

Force of Impact

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Chapter 1

Lisa Yee was flooring her Audi trying to get to work on time. She wished the slower traffic would make way for her. It was like the other cars were in another time zone, moving in slow motion.

Eyes intent, she thrummed her hands on her steering wheel, trying to push eighty miles an hour on the Santa Monica Freeway but thwarted on account of the traffic ahead of her.

She was a paralegal at a downtown Los Angeles law firm, and she dreaded being late. Everything counted against you when you were new on the job. She was twenty-eight years old and somehow had managed to wangle this plum job at a major law firm. She didn't want to lose it thanks to tardiness.

She was on her way to becoming a top-flight attorney. Nothing could stop her now. She had everything to live for.

Exhilarated by the speed of her vehicle, she wanted to go even faster.

As fast as she was going she had no idea she had only three and a half minutes left to live.

She loved her white Audi. She had just leased it and couldn't get enough of it.

She saw an opening in the traffic, hammered the gas pedal, and made to change lanes. She had to make it before the gap closed, and she knew she *could* make it with her high-performance car, its engine throbbing under the hood.

As she reached an overpass, something dropped off the bridge and slammed through her windshield, shattering it and crashing into the dashboard, causing Lisa to lose control of her car, sending it caroming off the SUV's tailgate in front of her and colliding full-tilt with the concrete median divider.

Before she breathed her last gasp, her skull impaled on a contorted length of rebar jutting from the divider, Lisa realized it was a woman's body that had crashed through her windshield and was now sitting in her lap grinning at her with the glassy-eyed face of death between her and the airbag that had inflated from her impact with the reinforced concrete.

Chapter 2

Pink slavering tongue dangling out of its mouth, the black and tan Alsatian was loping down the beach along the shoreline as the waves pounded the sand under a lowering gunmetal sky. Ominous thunderclouds were scudding in from the west over the Will Rogers Beach in Santa Monica, heralding the imminent threat of rain.

The dog had no idea if it was going to rain. He didn't care. He liked the briny reek of the seawater borne on the wind gusting onshore. Head held high, he sniffed the air greedily. He smelled a rancid fish aroma wafting from the sea. Then, after an abrupt shift in the direction of the wind, he caught a whiff of another scent. A different type of scent. A scent that caused him to slow his gait. A scent that caused his body to become tense. A scent that caused his hackles to rise. A scent that wielded powerful influence over his limbic brain.

This new scent overpowered that of the rank fishy stench in the ocean breeze.

The dog spotted a dark object crumpled on the sand up ahead. He decided the reek was emanating from the object.

A fine drizzle began to fall. Hardly even drizzle, more like heavy mist so thick you could feel it. The Alsatian could feel it on his nose, but it didn't interest him. The smell up ahead was all that interested him. The smell coming from that dark object lying in the sand under the blackening sky.

He had to find out what that object was. It wasn't moving.

He sniffed the sand as he came closer to the object, the muscles in his back and legs tense.

Unsure of whether to continue, he halted in his tracks. An apprehensive whimper emerged from his throat, as he bowed his head and nostrils close to the sand, sniffing.

On his left the remnants of a crashing wave crept up the beach fanning outward toward him and thinning out, sinking into the sand, before it could reach his paws.

The dog didn't care. The crashing waves held no interest for him. The odor no less than two feet away from him consumed him, blinding him to everything else around him.

He wanted to move closer to the object, but not too close. There was something forbidding about the scent, something that warned him to stay away. And yet he wanted to get a good sniff of it. It fascinated him. It wasn't the scent of the skein of kelp wound around portions of the object that fascinated him. It was the object itself. There was so much seaweed draped around the object it was hard to see what it was.

The scent of the object was almost as powerful as that of food, certainly stronger than that of the seaweed swathing it.

It was the scent of death.

He had found the bedraggled corpse of a person of indeterminate age with a bullet hole in the temple washed up on the beach, part of the head missing.

The dog's name was Rudy, and his twenty-five-year-old master was walking along the beach some fifty feet behind him, dressed in a black neoprene wetsuit and carrying under his arm a white fiberglass surfboard that had a carmine plastic skeg.

In his hand was a cell phone, and he was punching out 9-1-1 as he broke into a jog toward his dog, which was rapt in sniffing the cadaver and unsure what to do.

Fat, cold raindrops commenced to fall, stippling the battleship grey ocean and cloaking the stench of death that hovered over the corpse clinging to it like a shadow.

Chapter 3

When the forty-year-old novelist Bart Dillinger woke up that morning he knew it was going to be a bad day when he went out into the hallway to get the paper and saw two human eyeballs nailed to his Los Angeles condo's front door.

Clutching his paper he reeled back into his apartment, stifling an urge to retch.

And it went downhill from there.

He called out to his girlfriend Jackie, a green-eyed actress in her thirties, the actual owner of the condo.

No answer.

He entered her bedroom and saw that her bed hadn't been slept in. She had never returned home last night.

The sole occupants of the room were the stuffed animals spread helter-skelter everywhere. They stared back at him with blank faces.

Jackie loved her stuffed animals. They were family to her. Rabbits, teddy bears, dogs, cats, Eeyore, Pooh, Tigger, Piglet, Mickey Mouse, the whole lot of them were like siblings to her. She had collected them since childhood and never threw any of them away.

Sometimes they gave Dillinger the creeps with their dead eyes staring back at him. Right now their eyes seemed to be accusing him of her absence. He turned away from them.

Where was she? he wondered.

There was something going on.

Dillinger didn't know what, but it wasn't like his roommate Jackie to disappear without telling him where she was going.

He didn't know what to do. He didn't want to overreact and file a missing person's report with the police that turned out to be unnecessary. On the other hand, was he overreacting by being upset about her disappearance? He didn't think he was. Jackie just didn't do stuff like this. She always let him know her whereabouts.

And what about those eyeballs on the front door? Were they hers? He dreaded to look too close at them to make sure.

What kind of sick maniac would nail human eyeballs to a door?

What was going on?

Were those eyes connected to her disappearance somehow? Outlandish thoughts tumbled through his mind.

He told himself to calm down.

Maybe Jackie just had car trouble and was dealing with it. An issue like that would take precedence over everything else.

Still, she could have phoned to tell him about it. And usually she did call him when she had car trouble. She called him once when she had a flat on the 405 and was worried about getting run over by all the traffic speeding by her. He had told her to stay in her car and wait till the tow truck arrived.

So, if she had a flat, why didn't she call him this time?

It wasn't like her.

He paced around their apartment.

Was he or wasn't he overreacting? he wondered.

As a horror novelist, he had an overactive imagination, which he needed to pursue his craft. But an overactive imagination could get in the way of everyday life by compromising his ability to make decisions. Instead of fretting about this, maybe he should take advantage of it and use it as an idea for a new novel.

Except—if he waited too long to notify the police, Jackie might be dead by the time they found her.

And what about nailing human eyes to a door? That had to be a crime. Shouldn't he report it?

The question was, was it illegal to file a phony missing person's report with the cops?

He wrote mysteries, as well as horror novels. He ought to know the law. Maybe if you filed the report knowing it was phony, it would be illegal. But how could it be illegal if you did it believing that the person was missing and in jeopardy? Let the police decide if his concern had merit.

He had to do something.

This doing nothing was driving him up the wall.

He decided he better check on those eyes nailed to the door. After all, they might be Jackie's. Apprehensively, he cracked the front door and nudged it open, dreading the sight that would greet him.

Nonplussed, he stood there, gaping. He couldn't believe it.

The eyes weren't there.

What!

He was sure he had seen them when he had got today's paper.

Face hectic, he shut the door, leaning back against the door, eyes glowing.

Was he imagining Jackie's disappearance, too?

No, he wasn't. He was sure of it.

He resumed pacing around his living room.

Maybe one of Jackie's friends might know where she was. The trouble was, he barely knew any of her friends. Locked in his room writing all day, he didn't socialize. He had, however, met her friend Alexandra once. She was a lawyer, if he remembered correctly.

The twentysomething guy next door was stomping around his room like a rogue elephant. The thumping on the hardwood floor was echoing throughout Dillinger's apartment.

Dillinger shook it off. He had to do something.

He strode into the kitchen and rummaged around till he found Jackie's address book on the Formica counter near the wall-mounted phone. He was surprised she even had a paper address book now that cell phones included digital ones.

He found Alexandra's phone number and decided to call her. He flicked on the portable TV set on the counter and tuned in the local news channel then punched out Alexandra's number on the landline wall phone.

Jackie had probably been in a car accident, decided Dillinger, peering out the kitchen window at the gloomy, rain-swept street outside. It had been raining on and off all night.

His eyes cut to the TV screen when he saw a blanket-covered corpse on the beach with cops in ponchos huddled around it in the driving rain.

Was it Jackie? he wondered, his overactive imagination racing out of control. What were the chances he would turn on the TV set and see an image of Jackie's corpse on the screen? Slim and none. It was ridiculous of him to think it was her.

The newscaster was saying it was an unidentified corpse that had washed up on the beach during the storm.

Alexandra came on the line. "Hello?"

"Hi. This is Bart Dillinger, Jackie's friend. Have you seen Jackie today?"

"No. Is there a problem?"

"I don't know. She's missing, and I haven't heard from her. I have no idea where she is. Do you?"

"Uh, no. We're not that close. She doesn't tell me everywhere she goes."

"Do you know where she might be?"

"I can't say that I do."

"Something's not right."

"Is there something I can do?"

"Jackie says you're a lawyer. Could I ask you for advice?"

"Sure."

"Do you think I should notify the cops that she's missing?"

"She may've been in an accident on account of the weather."

"That's what I was thinking."

"It might be a good idea to call the police if you're that concerned about her."

"I don't want to jump the gun on this."

"Have you tried phoning her?"

"Yeah. No answer on her cell."

"There could be a simple explanation for this."

"Like what?"

There was a pause on the line. “Maybe her cell phone battery’s dead.”

“I suppose. I don’t want to overreact.”

“If you’re really concerned, I don’t think it would be overreacting to call the police.”

“Right. I’m trying to figure my options. Is it illegal to file a phony missing person’s report?”

“It’s not phony, if you honestly don’t know where she is.”

“I mean, if it turns out she’s OK.”

In the apartment on his other side, a loud crash sounded. Somebody moving furniture maybe, decided Dillinger. The eighty-four-year-old retired bookstore owner next door had fallen on his head on the sidewalk last week, and an ambulance had taken him away strapped to a gurney. Now somebody was going through the guy’s apartment. Maybe friends of his, decided Dillinger.

“It’s not a bogus report unless you know where she is and you’re lying that you don’t know,” said Alexandra.

“Well, I *don’t* know.”

“Then file the report. If nothing else, it might give you peace of mind.”

Dillinger kept imagining dire events happening to Jackie. He attributed it to his hyperactive imagination, which he mined as a writer.

Why would anybody want to be a writer? Millions of people lusted to be writers. Dillinger could never figure out why. Sitting alone in a room spewing out words. Why did such a life turn on millions of people?

Maybe if he was a financially successful writer, he could understand why somebody would want to be a writer. On the other hand, Hemingway was financially successful, had all the glory and the fame, and yet he blew his brains out with a shotgun.

It wasn’t that Dillinger wanted to be a writer. It was just that he had no interest in doing anything else. A lot of the time he didn’t even have interest in being a writer. In the end, he had more interest in it than in anything else.

The idea of sitting alone in a room and vomiting words on a computer for the rest of your life never really turned him on. Still, if you acquired fame, glory, and wealth out of it, it might be worthwhile. But the trappings of success had eluded him. What he had was a bunch of novels he had written that few people bought.

“Hello? Are you there?” said Alexandra.

“Yeah,” he said.

“If you need my services, I would be glad to help. Good-bye.”

Dillinger cradled the handset in the wall mount.

Here he was thinking about himself when he should be thinking about Jackie, whose life might be in jeopardy.

Was any of this really happening, or was he imagining it? What about those eyeballs nailed to his door? Here one minute, gone the next.

The pounding and smashing in the room next door increased, rousing him from his thoughts. It sounded like the neighbors were tearing their room apart and hurling furniture inside it. Maybe they thought gold was stashed under the floorboards.

Gold was the least of his worries now. A human life was at stake. What had happened to Jackie?

