

PROLOGUE

PRISON AREA DO NOT PICK UP HITCHHIKERS

The yellow and black sign told Jillian he was nearing Centennial Correctional Facility. He drove another 300 yards until he came to a private road that was connected to the compound and the parking lot outside of the main entrance.

Getting out of his rented car, he was aware of the summer heat and humidity that permeated everything: the ground, trees, the car, his clothes. He guessed it must have been 103 degrees. He straightened his suit and oriented himself. At the center of the compound were several colonial-style buildings. Farther away, in both directions, sat Quonset-hut type buildings constructed of metal. A farm on the other side of the road stretched into the distance. Farm land, receding to the horizon, was also visible on both sides of the compound. Behind the prison, a plain of flat land ended at a wall of trees.

Jillian headed toward the main entrance of the prison, a small building made of wood that housed two officers, a metal detector, a counter area, and a bathroom. He felt the welcome coolness of air conditioning as soon as he opened the front door. Approaching the counter, he introduced himself to a guard named Bracken, saying that he had a two o'clock appointment for a job interview. Bracken wore a gray uniform, with a "Dept. of Prisons" insignia on his sleeve and a picture-identification badge hanging from his shirt pocket. His hair was cut short; he was clean shaven

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and slim, but muscular, and spoke in sharp, clipped phrases.

“Jillian? Don’t see your name nowhere here.”

“I’ve been scheduled for an interview. I spoke to Ms. Richards in Personnel. Here’s the confirmation letter she sent me.” Jillian pulled a letter from his inside jacket pocket and handed it to Bracken. Bracken snatched the letter and read it, mouthing the words.

“I’ll have to talk to Richards. Why don’t you have a seat over there?”

Jillian was going to make a comment to Bracken, asking why a phone call was necessary when he could plainly see from the letter that an appointment had been scheduled. Instead, he sat down next to several shabbily dressed men and women, some of them carrying infants and chanting to them in low voices. Jillian kept his eyes on the signs on the wall in front of him, with their warnings about not bringing in guns or drugs to prisoners, occasionally glancing in Bracken’s direction to see what was happening.

After about fifteen minutes, Bracken shouted, although he was no more than six feet away, “Jillian. You can go in. Show some ID and sign in here.”

Jillian handed Bracken his driver’s license and signed the log book. In exchange, he was given a clip-on badge that bore the designation, “Temporary,” and was told by Bracken, “Now take off everything metal and walk through here.”

Jillian unfastened his watch and deposited his pen and change in a plastic container. When he passed through the metal detector, an alarm sounded. Bracken ordered him to take off his belt and glasses. Once more the alarm sounded. This time, Bracken said, in a disgusted tone, “Whaddya got there, fella?”

Jillian gave him a perplexed look and said, as pleasantly as he could, “I don’t know why it keeps going off, do you?”

“Maybe it’s the shoes,” Bracken suggested, a deriding tone present in his voice. “Take them off. And your jacket, too.”

Jillian did as he was told, went through the detector again, and this time heard no alarm. He felt himself relax slightly as he

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reclaimed his possessions. He said “Thank you” to Bracken and asked where to go for the interview. Bracken directed him to the exit door and a fenced gate about ten feet away, topped with razor wire and barbed wire that could shred skin on contact. A guard in a tower next to the fence would buzz him in.

When the gate buzzed, Jillian pushed it open and found himself on the path to the main Administration building, about 100 yards ahead. On each side of the path were jagged rocks which filled the areas between the outer fence and a similar fence ten feet inside the compound. Continuing along the path, Jillian admired the fully-blossomed orange, red, and yellow flowers planted in sections of unearthed grass, a fenced-in area brimming with prisoners and their visitors, and another fence that separated him from a large dirt field that hosted a track and a baseball diamond. Figures in blue were running on the field, in spite of the heat.

The Administration building had Ionic columns and air conditioners protruding from different windows, each emitting drops of water that fell at regular intervals and left small puddles on the ground. Jillian was questioned by a guard at the entrance as to his reason for being there. He had to show his temporary badge, but didn’t have to go through another metal detector. The guard pointed to a backless wooden bench and said that he would have to call Mrs. Richards. She would come and get him.

Jillian sat down and looked around. He noted the wrought-iron affectations on the bannisters and ceiling fixtures, the walls the color of underwatered lawns, and several groups of guards, male and female, clustered in twos and threes, smoking, drinking coffee, and talking to each other in staccato voices. The guards shared similarities in appearance to Bracken: the same gray uniforms, photo-identification badges clipped to their shirt pockets, and short hair. Suspended from each of their belts was a walkie-talkie and a baton that looked like a policeman’s club: black, thick, and about a foot long.

A few minutes later, a woman approached Jillian, her strides firm and balanced. She wore a flowery print skirt with a

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white blouse through which he could see her bra. She had on flats, with no stockings, exposing her tanned ankles and calves. Her hair, cut short, was carefully combed. Silver earrings dangled and a gold wedding band glinted in the light.

After saying hello to the guard at the entrance, Richards smiled at Jillian. “Doctor Jillian? It’s good to see you. I trust that your trip went smoothly, especially in this heat?”

“Yes, very smoothly, thank you,” he said, echoing her smile. “Your directions were excellent.”

“I’m glad,” Richards replied. She abruptly turned, telling Jillian, “Come with me. We’ll go back to the Personnel office. I have some forms for you to fill out. Once that’s done, I’ll tell Doctor Tims and Ms. Hanson that you’re here.”

Jillian trailed Richards to her office on the second floor, a medium-size room with an air conditioner. It had been freshly painted in a cream color and there was a pink ceiling border. When they had both entered the office, she offered Jillian a seat on a small brown vinyl sofa to the side of her desk.

“Thank you.” Jillian awaited her next instruction. Richards gave him a formal Department application to complete. “That’s all we have to do now. If you’re offered the job, of course, there will be some more forms for you to fill out. . . . It’s a great pleasure to be able to meet you. We know how hard it is to get someone like you, with all your training and experience, to work in a prison. . . . I’ll let Doctor Tims and Ms. Hanson know we’re ready.”

In a large unadorned conference room, an air conditioner turned on high, were two women. He was introduced to each by Ms. Richards. Dr. Tims, the State Administrator for Psychological Services, a petite woman with an ebony complexion, rose from her seat and shook Jillian’s hand, smiling excitedly. Her hair was cut close to the scalp. She wore no makeup and had small beads of perspiration dotting her forehead. Her simple brown woven shift dress permitted air to discretely reach her skin. Ms. Hanson, the Deputy Warden for Prisoner Services and, if he were offered the position, his immediate supervisor, gave him a thin-lipped whisper

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of a smile. She was about fifteen years older than Dr. Tims, and her skin a few shades lighter. Her eyes, buried within their sockets, were an indistinguishable brown and commanded his attention. While Ms. Hanson wore a business suit more appropriate to fall than the current season, she betrayed no hint of discomfort.

The formal interview was friendly enough, with informal small talk and reasonable hints, yet long and tiring for Jillian, lasting approximately two hours. Dr. Tims questioned him on matters relating to the training and ethics of a professional psychologist. She and Ms. Hanson briefed him concerning the expectations for the Prison Psychologist, the structure of the administrative staff, and the different programs that were offered to the prisoners at Centennial, each one geared, they said, towards helping the convicted men become more productive and law-abiding citizens.

Jillian used all of his professional skills to laugh, smile, and be serious at the appropriate times and say nothing that could be construed as provocative or adversarial. He answered Dr. Tims in as direct a manner as he could, given that he did not think of himself as a correctional psychologist and that he was not yet familiar with the specific laws governing the practice of psychology in the state. He listened with interest as both she and Ms. Hanson asserted that his years of training and experience could be of great benefit to the prisoners.

Jillian was relieved when the interview was over and Richards escorted him back to her office, where she left him alone while she conferred with the other two interviewers. Aware of how his body was encased with sweat, he hoped his odor would not affect their decision. Within ten minutes, Richards returned and announced, in a pleased tone of voice, that Jillian would be recommended to the Warden for the position of Prison Psychologist.