

CAN YOU EVER REALLY
KNOW SOMEONE?

The image features two women's profiles in silhouette, facing each other. The background is split vertically: the left side is a light purple/pink, and the right side is a light green. The women's hair is visible, and the overall mood is mysterious and contemplative.

OUR TRUE CRIME

BY
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Each [wo]man kills the thing [s]he loves...
The coward does it with a kiss
The brave [wo]man with a sword."

—*Oscar Wilde*

1

I survey the line of passengers waiting to board the cruise ship. It's a massive vessel, even bigger in person than I'd expected. The ramp between the dock and the ship feels rickety under our feet, and the murky water laps threateningly at the dock.

I shiver, eyes fixed on the dark water.

I've never gone on a cruise before. I know way too much about how easy it is to get away with killing someone on a cruise ship.

Which is why I'm here.

As we inch up the ramp behind an elderly tourist group wearing matching pink t-shirts, Adrienne turns to me, her face lit up with a grin. She's wearing her horrible aviator sunglasses, and I wish she'd get her teeth whitened. "You excited, babe?"

I force a smile. "Yes. Very."

She snorts, a disgusting sound, and puts an arm around my waist. I want to flinch away from her touch, but I hold still. We're here to rekindle our romance, after all, and I need to play the part of a happy wife.

The line moves slowly, taking us into a sort of holding room where they scan our cards. The cruise

ship employee is a cheerful redhead in a white polo shirt with the name of the cruise line scrawled across the left breast. As she scans my card, glances at the screen beside her, where I, a pinched-looking blonde, am delivering a pained smile to the camera. "Jennifer?" she asks.

I nod.

"Smile! You're here to have fun!" She beams at me, and I want to slap her.

Adrienne hands over her card and ruffles my hair. "Ignore her. She's my little grumpy cat. She's a true crime podcast host and spends all her time locked up in the dark with cold case files."

"Spooky!" the woman cries, feigning a shudder, scanning Adrienne's card. Adrienne's face pops up on the screen, her smile broad, face clean of makeup, short brown hair spiked into a faux hawk that I loathe to the core of my being. It is not 2004, for the love of God. No one, literally no one, still has a faux hawk.

"Have fun, lovebirds!" the woman tells us, and Adrienne says, "Yeah, Jen, have fun!"

I already have the ship's map out. I like to know where I am and what I'm doing. I like to be in control.

As I lead the way through a maze of crowded, claustrophobic hallways, I think about the latest cruise ship murder I covered on the podcast. In the case, a newlywed couple, Mandy and Andy (no, I'm not kidding) went on a Caribbean cruise. The happy couple embarked in Miami, but only Andy returned to their house in Tampa. Andy, an accountant with dead blue eyes, told his friends

and family he'd caught Mandy IMing an ex-boyfriend while they were on the cruise ship. According to him, he'd read the messages and learned she'd been having an affair, so he came home early—devastated, heartsick—while she opted to carry on with their vacation. What a bitch, right?

It all seemed legit; after Andy left, she Instagrammed photos of herself on the beach and in nightclubs, which supported Andy's claims. But when her body washed up on a different island entirely, shit hit the fan and his whole plot was uncovered. He'd been counting on that body staying submerged in a duffel bag filled with rocks, but I could have told him—that never works. Fabric comes apart underwater; zippers break.

Honestly, men. Get your shit together. The devil is in the details.

Andy's plan was smart, actually. He'd opened up a new Facebook account in her name and started IMing the ex-boyfriend on her behalf months prior to their wedding. He'd sent sexy selfies he'd stolen from her, all using her own laptop. How many months, or years, of planning did he put into this? He was smart, except for that one stupid detail--the zipper on the duffel bag.

I'd never mess up a detail like that.

Correction: I *won't* mess up a detail like that.

"Here!" Adrienne crows, galloping to a door marked 1412 and dropping her icky, ancient duffel bag onto the hallway floor. She fumbles the room key out of the pocket of her cargo shorts (for God's sake, cargo shorts) and beeps the room open. I

follow her in.

The cabin is absolutely tiny. It's ugly, too, like a trailer version of a Best Western. Outside, the skeletal oil rigs that decorate the shoreline of San Pedro creep across the baby blue horizon like spiders. The salty breeze that wafts in is pleasant, though, much cooler than the air in our condo in Silverlake.

"Cozy," Adrienne says, tossing her duffel bag onto the bed. "It's like being in prison."

"You're getting germs all over the bed." I roll my suitcase to rest against the wall.

"Do you have any idea what's probably already on that comforter? Get a blacklight and we can find out."

"Then why add more?" I grab her duffel bag and drop it onto the floor heavily. She rolls her eyes.

I sink down onto the bed. My heart is pounding. This is happening. Now that I'm here, it all feels so surreal. So much planning has gone into this, but somehow, I feel so unprepared. My chest fills tight. I don't think I can do this. I need a Xanax.

Adrienne plops down beside me, and I wince as the springs squeak in protest. She nuzzles my neck with her face and says, "Hi."

I want to cringe away, but I force myself to lean in. I let her pull my shirt off and try to play a movie in my head, a mental highlights reel of all the good sex we used to have. In my mind, Adrienne and I are in the backseat of her old Jetta. We used to pull over sometimes, late at night when we were too hot for each other to make it home. In my memory, she's got her hands all over me, and all I can think

about is pulling her closer. In real life, it takes every ounce of self-control not to push her away.

A few hours later, we're underway, headed south toward Cabo San Lucas, and the ocean is a darkly sparkling blanket, nauseating in the smooth, silent swells beneath the ship. Hand in hand, we navigate the maze of narrow hallways until we find the third-floor dining room.

"Wow," Adrienne breathes as I follow her in. I feel embarrassed by her awe. It's pathetic to be this impressed by what is essentially an event hall, like the kind in which you host a low-budget wedding reception. It's a large room, with jazz music blasting from ceiling speakers and crowds of people seated around large round tables.

My eyes land on two long, white-clothed lines of tables covered in chafing dishes. A pair of chefs stand behind a counter, sautéing something in woks, surrounded by onlookers.

I've stopped following her. Adrienne turns. "What's wrong?"

I'm so frustrated, I can't make nice. "I hate buffets. You *know* that. Why did you pick this dining room? There were like ten kinds of restaurants to choose from."

"Babe. Try to chill out." She's dressed in a white button-down shirt and black slacks; it's the same uniform the servers are wearing as they slip through the crowd with pitchers of water and cocktails.

I take a deep breath for patience. "Fine. Let's just

eat.”

“Do you want me to pick the table? Will you get pissed off if I pick the wrong one?”

“Oh my God,” I snap. “Pick any table you want.”

She leads me to a round table that’s mostly empty except for an Asian couple our age and a couple of older women. “These seats taken?” she asks, indicating a pair of clearly empty seats.

“Not at all!” The Asian woman smiles brightly. She’s in her early thirties and is pretty, with red lips and blunt bangs. “I’m Lily and this is Matt.” Matt is clearly the more introverted of the two, a slim man with a hipster undercut and black-framed glasses.

Adrienne reaches out to shake her hand. “I’m Adrienne. This is Jen. We’re from LA; how ‘bout you guys?” She pulls my chair out and I sink into it reluctantly. She’s always making new friends everywhere she goes. She has no sense of boundaries.

“Sorry,” I mouth to Matt. He waves it off. He’s obviously used to this, too.

“We’re from Palo Alto,” Lily says.

“Like Bill Gates?” Adrienne grins, and I want to crawl under the table. Matt and I exchange another look. We’re going to get along, I can feel it.

Adrienne says, “Hey, Jen, do you and Matt know each other?”

I’m confused. “We just met.”

“Oh! Sorry. Just seemed like you were friends for a second.”

Lily says, “I thought so too! How funny!”

He and I exchange a bewildered look and shake

our heads in unison. Our wives laugh at our confusion. "Sorry to make it weird," Lily says.

"Me too," Adrienne replies, not looking sorry. I want to throw a glass of water in her face, but instead I push my chair out and say, "I'm going to try and find something reasonable to eat."

Lily gives me a puzzled look and glances down at the tower of lobster on her plate.

"Ignore her," Adrienne says, getting up. "We'll be right back."

As we weave through tables, she puts a hand on the small of my back and hisses in my ear, "Could you try not to be such a bitch to everyone we meet? Just for this one trip?"

"Could you try not to embarrass me so much?" I shoot back. "What was that? I obviously don't know this random dude on the cruise ship."

"You looked at each other like you knew each other! It's not a big deal to just be like, *Oh no, we've never met*. Why do you get so bent out of shape about every little fucking thing?" Her voice has risen, and we're face-to-face at the end of the buffet line. A man turns, gives us a frown, and shakes his head microscopically before turning back around.

We both sigh and look down.

"We're supposed to be having fun," she says softly.

I nod. She's right. We are.

"Truce," I say.

She kisses me on the cheek. "Truce. I'm gonna find some of that lobster Lily had."

"I'm going to search for some vegetables."

"Boring!" She bounces off before I can come back

with another quip.

It's fine. It's all fine. I'm feeling better about this cruise, actually. This is all good. It's confirmation.

When I slide back into my seat, Adrienne is already at the table, a mountain of lobster and pasta on her plate. Fork wielded like a goddamned shovel, she's chattering animatedly with Lily while Matt picks at his salad with a glazed, bored expression on his face. I truly, deeply understand how he feels.

He catches me looking at him and smiles sheepishly. "Sorry. Not that talkative."

I pick up my fork delicately, wishing I could set an example for Adrienne. "Me neither. No judgment."

"I'm a software developer. I work from home. I spend all my time hiding from people because I don't like social stuff, and Lily finds us the most peopley vacation imaginable." He gestures to the packed dining room.

I pick at my vegetables, back stick straight, belly tucked in. I notice a full glass of red wine at my elbow. Adrienne must have ordered it for me. That was nice of her. I field a moment of confused affection.

"Hey." I nudge Adrienne, pulling her out of a loud, joking conversation about hipsters that has Lily falling out of her chair laughing.

"What's up, babe?"

"I have a surprise for you."

"Really?" She looks surprised and pleased.

"Remember how we went snorkeling on our honeymoon?"

"Of course." Her eyes glow. She's clearly remembering that trip to Maui that was the happiest week of both our lives.

"I scheduled us a snorkeling trip in Cabo."

She examines me for a minute, eyes flicking over my features. A sad smile touches her eyes, then her mouth. "That's really sweet of you." She shovels a bite of pasta into her mouth and chews it with her mouth open. Her bad table manners feel aggressive, like she's doing them *at* me.

"What?" she asks, mouth full. *Chew with your mouth closed*, I want to scream at her. I can hear her slathering-crunching over the background noise of the dining room.

"Nothing," I say.

"Eat." She gestures to my full plate with her fork. "You're making me nervous. Stop looking at me!"

I can see the food inside her mouth, between her teeth. I return my eyes to my plate.

I picture our condo. When I return to it, I'm going to clean out all of her stuff, all the boxes filled with Star Wars paraphernalia, the endless shelves of comic books, the stupid lunch box collection. I think I'll paint every wall clean white. I'll get a new mattress, and I'll put a white bedspread on it. Without Adrienne's sloppy, sloshing presence, and with the money I'll get from her trust fund, I can redecorate the condo exactly how I want it.

2

From the top of the ladder, I watch Adrienne tumble face-first into the sparkling blue water. She dives clumsily, clowning as always, trying to make her new friends on the snorkeling boat laugh. She succeeds; the owner, a woman from Australia who's lifeguarding, guffaws in response.

All of that fades away from me, because, at long last, we're here. It's the beginning of the rest of my life. And what a beautiful place to pass from old into new.

We're in a gorgeous, rocky cove tucked away into the coastline just south of Cabo San Lucas. Other tourists jump off the boat into the water, snorkeling gear attached. I fasten my mask on, instantly claustrophobic. The view goes blurry.

"Come on!" Adrienne yells, grinning under her mask.

I check my vest for the tenth time. It's secured; you can't see anything amiss unless I unzip it. All is well. Regardless, my heart is pounding out of my chest.

I clamber down the steps in my fins and hop into the water. It's warm and clean, and Adrienne

swims away from the boat toward the rest of the snorkelers. I swim lazily after her, my heart pounding. My vest isn't inflated; neither is Adrienne's. We like to swim down and explore the reefs.

Adrienne is one of many snorkelers, her fins a blur of bubbles. I follow her around the surface. She points to the coral below, where colorful fish swim between forests of seaweed. I give her a thumbs up, ears full of water. She beckons again and points down. She wants to dive.

I give her another thumbs up and follow, kicking slowly, falling behind on purpose as we explore ten feet below the surface, weaving between fish.

We head back up for some air. We hit the surface twenty feet apart, panting. The boat bobs to our left, smaller now that we've swum away from us. "Did you see that blue fish?" she yells, happy like a Labrador in the water.

I reach under my vest and tug at a bundle of twine-like strands. "It was so pretty!" I cry. "Did you see the orange one?"

"No! Was it big?"

"It was huge!"

While we're talking, I pull the strands out from under my vest. It's a battered net twelve feet in diameter, of a brand used by fishermen all over the world, purchased using cash in a fish market in Chinatown. I clutch it tight, the weight of it pulling it down toward the bottom. I lace my fingers through it and swim toward her, pushing against its resistance. "Want to go down again?" I call.

"Yeah!" She takes a breath and dives. I take a

deep breath and follow her.

She swims away from me slowly, clumsily. For all her love of the ocean, she's not a very good swimmer, not very fast.

I am. I've been practicing. I've been swimming laps at the gym. A lot.

I swim toward her, closing in on her fast, the net trailing out behind me. It won't be hard to wrap it around her neck and drag her down, tangle it in some coral. It will be fine if people see me. I can say I was trying to get her out. I'll almost die in my attempts to rescue her.

I wonder if she'll even realize it's me killing her.

She points left, right, looking at fish. I close in. I'm right behind her now.

We're fifteen feet down. This is the time, right when she's already straining to hold her breath.

It's one motion, one wide sweep of my arms that's needed to pull it over her head. I kick my fins, holding my position, and pull the net up and around.

She spins and drops out of reach of the net. Like she was expecting this, she whirls around and swims sideways, faster than I've ever seen her swim. She grabs the net and yanks it out of my hands, bubbles flying from her mask. I'm so shocked—she couldn't have seen what I was doing. How did she know? The net comes loose and floats off, down into the depths.

She grabs my hair and yanks, pulling me toward the surface. I let out a scream, suck in a mouthful of water, kick.

We break through the surface. She's right in my

face, a hand clutching my throat, breath coming in saltwater gasps and coughs. “You bitch! How fucking dare you?”

I’m coughing too hard to respond. I yank the snorkel mask off and try to breathe, my lungs choked with the thick, salty water. She throws off her own mask and reaches for me again, like she would slap me if the water weren’t holding her back. Instead, she grabs my vest, shakes it like she’s shaking me by the collar. Through my own coughing I hear her say, “I didn’t think you really could do it. Ten years. Ten fucking years, Jen! And this is how you do me?”

“Ladies, you all right?” The boat’s Australian owner is coming toward us in a smooth crawl, such a strong swimmer she looks like a machine. I’m still coughing, so she grabs the tube on my vest and starts blowing into it. “Let’s get you floating and give you a minute to catch your breath.”

Adrienne looks at me with an expression I’ve never seen. It’s dark and furious, with narrowed eyes and gleaming, furrowed brow. She turns and swims away from me, back to the boat, and only as I catch my breath, I’m stunned by the realization—

She knew what I was planning. She totally knew. How? I was so careful.

I have another coughing fit, and the Australian woman pats me on the back. I watch Adrienne climb up onto the boat, suddenly afraid.

I have no idea how she figured it out.

I remember scoffing about Mandy and Andy, thinking I’d never make a mistake like he did. I shiver, the water suddenly cold and clammy and

intrusively saline.

I don't know what my mistake was, but I definitely made one.

Adrienne stays at the rear of the small snorkeling boat during the ride back to shore. The other passengers are merry, scarfing sandwiches and drinking cheap white wine. I accept a glass of the wine and tuck myself behind a group of women at the front of the boat.

I watch Adrienne as the boat lurches nauseatingly over waves.

She sits, eyes on the horizon.

My stomach is a heavy rock, and my heart pounds ferociously. I gulp over-sweet wine and try to adjust to this new reality.

How long has she known? She's been pretending to be her usual bouncy, irritatingly peppy self. I wouldn't have thought her capable of the deception. I'm the brooding, intellectual one. She's the simplistic, child-minded one. It's what made me fall in love with her in the first place, this sweet worldview, this willingness to see the good in people and try to make the best of everything.

A twinge of guilt, and my stomach turns over.

I turn away to look ahead at the shore as it gets closer and closer. I feel nauseous, but it's not from the boat ride.

This is it. It's over. We're going to split up now, and...and what? Of course, she'll insist I be the one to move out of the condo. I was the one who tried to kill her, after all. Besides, how would I afford the condo without her?

It hits me. Dammit. It's all messed up. The whole point of killing her instead of divorcing her was to get her trust fund. Now what? She's the breadwinner. I run a podcast. Will I have to get some stupid job again, something I hate? I was never meant for that.

"Hey." Her voice shocks me. I jump, sloshing some of my wine out of the plastic cup.

I step back, but a crate filled with equipment is behind me. She leans her elbows against the railing so that the rocky shore and coastline of Cabo is picturesque behind her, like a vacation photograph. Her baseball cap casts shadow on her face. It's the gray cap I hate, the one she's had the entire decade we've been together, with the faded PacSun logo. The wind off the water blows a sudden gust at us, ruffling the short sides of her hair and sending mine blowing into my face.

I search for just the right words, but what comes out is, "You knew."

She nods. Her face is unreadable.

"How?"

The corner of her mouth tweaks, a little smirk I used to love. "Don't you wish I'd tell you."

I suddenly have so much more respect for her. I can't believe she caught me.

At last, I say, "I'm sorry. I really am."

She snorts.

Fair.

The boat whirs beneath us. Normally, she'd be seasick riding backwards like this. She must have taken Dramamine.

Tentative, I ask, "Do you...want me to leave? Get

my things from the cruise ship and fly home from Cabo?"

She sighs and looks down at her feet, at her ugly velcro sandals. "Tell me why you did it. I need to know why."

Interesting. I see what she means. She's somehow figured out what I was planning, but she must be going crazy trying to understand the reasoning behind it. I wonder if I can use this. I wonder if it's too late to pivot and switch to another plan. Could I still kill her? Is there time on this trip to come up with another strategy? I have the rest of today, tonight, and the trip back to Los Angeles—just under twenty-four hours.

I step toward her carefully, slowly reaching out, giving her a chance to stop me. She just grips the railing, like I'm going to try to throw her overboard.

I would never do it that way, I want to tell her. First of all, she's heavier than me, and I'm not sure I'd be strong enough. Second of all, she wouldn't die, and I'd get in trouble and all my plans would be ruined.

I put my hands on her waist and murmur, "I'm so sorry."

She looks over my shoulder, jaw clenched like it does when she's about to cry.

"I've gotten so caught up in all this true crime stuff, and I just..." I swallow, feigning deep emotion. I tighten my hands on her waist. "I love you. You didn't see, but I was already dropping the net when you turned around. I couldn't do it. I realized how stupid this was. I realized that I'm always trying to find a way to avoid dealing with

problems. I need to deal with the stuff going on between us, not take a shortcut way out."

"By killing me," she snaps, making eye contact with burning-pain brown eyes. "You were planning my *murder*. You planned to turn me into a dead body like the ones you spend all that time looking at on the internet. What is wrong with you?"

I blink hard, willing tears into my eyes. "I haven't told you this, but..."

"What?"

"I've been seeing a doctor."

She makes a surprised face. "Why wouldn't you tell me you saw a—"

"He diagnosed me with..." Dammit, what should I have? What would excuse this? Not bipolar disorder. Maybe... "With manic depression," I finish. "He wanted me to start taking meds. I said no." I look over her shoulder into the middle distance between us and the shoreline. "I thought I didn't need the meds," I murmur dramatically. Is it too much? Am I overacting?

"Fuck, Jen." Adrienne's face goes soft. "You should have told me."

I sniff and rub at my eyes. "I thought I was fine."

"You're clearly *not* fine."

"I know." Carefully, I crumple forward, rest my face on her shoulder, and wind my arms around her waist. It actually feels rather nice, the closeness.

At first, she's rigid against me. I hold my breath. After a few heartbeats, her arms wind around my back and squeeze me tight.

Triumph.

Game on.

I turn my face to kiss her cheek. Into her ear, I murmur, "Can we just have this cruise together? I know everything is all messed up now, and I know you probably have to kick me out when we get home. But it's only four more days. Can we just have those days, before we have to deal with everything?"

She puts her hands to the sides of my neck and turns my face to hers, and she kisses me.

Her hat falls off, and like kismet, it goes tumbling off the boat into the water.

See? I think, forcing myself to kiss her like I mean it. The universe wants me to be happy.

3

Apparently I'm wrong about the universe, because when we get off the boat and set foot on the solid ground of the marina, Lily and Matt are waiting on a bench on a walkway in the crowded marina, and I suddenly, horribly, remember that Adrienne made lunch plans with them.

"Over here!" Lily shouts, causing everyone around us to turn to look at her. My cheeks flush hot with embarrassment. She's wearing a wide straw hat, a lei (???), a bright yellow sundress, and bejeweled flip flops. She and I are a similar height and build, but I feel like she's twice my size. Matt is like a shadow beside her on the bench, arms tight across his slim chest. He's always so neat and tidy—like me, actually, slim and dressed unobtrusively in shorts and a plain black t-shirt, hair parted on the side with precision.

"Hey!" Adrienne waves back, seeming to lighten. She takes my hand and pulls me toward them. "Let's just eat lunch," she murmurs to me. "We'll go back to the cruise ship afterward and figure everything out."

"Okay." I return the squeeze to her hand, in

character as the grateful, humbled, manic depressive-and-formerly-homicidal-but-repentant wife.

"How was it?" Lily asks as we approach. "See any cool fish?"

I want to freeze her out, but I force a thin smile. "Yes."

"These big fat blue ones." Adrienne holds her hand a foot apart. To passersby, it must look like she's measuring the size of a penis. In character, I keep my mouth shut and smile serenely.

"I found us a restaurant just up the way," Lily says, pointing up a narrow street. "It's supposed to have great ceviche, and people on Trip Advisor say no one ever gets sick after eating there."

"Sold!" Adrienne hollers, and she and Lily fall into step beside each other. Matt and I lag a few steps behind, walking side-by-side in companionable silence. Without their constant yammering, I'm able to actually look around me at the ocean, the boats in the marina, the tourists from all over with their funny outfits and weird hats.

"Look," Matt says, pointing out a man playing flamenco guitar while tourists drop bills and coins into a tip box.

"Cool," I reply. It's the best conversation I've had today.

The restaurant is crowded, and we have to wait awhile. At last, we're at a rickety, mosaic-topped table waiting for our order in the middle of the loud room. Overhead fans move the hot air around, and I feel the backs of my legs starting to stick to the chair, which makes me aware of all the dried sweat

that must already be on this chair and the bacteria which is now being absorbed through my pores. In character, I do not mention the bacteria.

Adrienne and Lily are in high spirits, excited about the margaritas they ordered at the counter. I'd kept it safe—vegetarian tacos—but of course they went all in on the local ceviche. If Adrienne is up all night puking, do I have to help her? Is that part of playing the dutifully penitent wife? Goddammit.

Matt plays with his napkin, folding it and refolding it, while Lily and Adrienne drone on and on.

I think about the many ways I've seen murder go wrong and the murderer get caught. When killing a spouse, especially when there's financial motivation, it's almost impossible to get away with it. Really, you have to make it look like an accident. My fishing net plan was ideal. Now I'm not sure how to proceed.

Could she fall overboard?

I consider this carefully. People die this way all the time. But spouses are immediately suspected.

I wish I knew where the cruise ship had cameras.

I wonder how I can find out.

The food comes, ferried by a sweaty-looking teenage boy. Lily and Adrienne crowd over their ceviche, which comes in giant margarita glasses much like the margaritas they ordered. Matt's and my food is laughably similar: small, conservative portions, accompanied by diet soda in cans. In unison, we use our paper napkins to clean the cans before opening them.

I don't watch Adrienne eat. I can't. The chewing will send me over the edge. I allow myself to be comforted by Matt's presence. He eats fastidiously. His entire being makes me feel calm, and it makes me want to stay close to him, tucked into the shadow of a shadow.

"So, tell us the truth," Lily says, interrupting my thoughts.

Matt and I look at her in unison, poised forks held in fingertips.

"Yeah, just tell us," Adrienne says.

They're both looking at us, and their tone is confrontational. Lily looks furious. Are she and Matt in a fight I didn't pick up on? I exchange a confused glance with him. If they are in a fight, he doesn't seem to know about it.

"Stop staring at each other and just tell us!" Lily yells, her voice loud enough for a couple at the next table to hear. The woman gives us a lingering, curious look.

I say, "Tell you what, exactly?"

"Stop bullshitting," Adrienne cuts in, her voice loud like Lily's. "Something's clearly going on between you two."

"Between what two?" I repeat dumbly.

Lily reaches across the table, snatches Matt's phone out of his hand, and starts flicking through it. "I figured out your password, asshole," she tells him.

"O-kay," he replies slowly, like this is not clarifying anything.

She finds what she's looking for and turns the phone around so we can both see it. "So, tell us

what the fuck is going on.”

Adrienne sits back in her seat and crosses her arms over her chest, her face dark with anger.

On Matt’s phone is a string of Facebook messages. My eyes run down the messages on the screen:

I love you, says Matt.

Soon babe. Be patient, says...the person’s name is Jen.

Wait. Jen?

I lean in and frown at the tiny icon by the name. It’s my picture, the same one I use for my podcast profile on Instagram and Twitter.

Wait, what?

“What the fuck?” Matt says, eyes scanning the screen. “I love you and I miss you every day?” What the fuck is this?”

“That’s my question exactly.” Lily throws the phone down on the table.

“I didn’t write those,” Matt says.

“I’ve never seen those before in my life,” I add at the same time.

Adrienne stands up. She’s shaking with rage. “Stop fucking lying to me, Jen. After today? And after everything else? Just try telling the truth for once.” She’s shouting. The restaurant goes silent. Everyone is looking at us.

“Honestly, Adrienne. I don’t even use Facebook. You know that.”

“You’re a fucking *liar*.” That last word comes out as a roar, and I cringe. Every single person is watching me.

Lily stands. She grabs her purse. “Fuck you,” she

says to me. She turns to Matt, opens her mouth like she's about to talk, but then tears spill down her cheeks and she turns away.

Adrienne wraps an arm around her shoulders. "Come on."

Matt and I watch them go.

"What the hell was that?" he breathes. The restaurant sounds swell around us as people no doubt discuss the drama that just unfolded at our table.

I turn on him, accusatory. "I don't know who you've been messaging with, but it's not me."

"It's not me! I don't even use Facebook! I don't want my data mined like that."

"It's not me either."

We stare at each other.

He picks up his phone and pulls the message thread back up. "I don't even have the Facebook App downloaded. She got to this through Safari." He thumb-scrolls upward. "Holy shit. These go back months. Wait." He's reached the top of the thread. He puts the phone between us so I can read, too.

The first message is from the other Jen. *Hey Matt, it was a really good weekend. [winky face] I enjoyed my conference. I'm so glad we met.*

"Conference?" I asked. I examined the date. "This was a year ago. Last summer. I went to a small conference for true crime podcasters in San Francisco. But I never messaged you that."

"Wait. Where was that conference?"

"At some hotel in South San Francisco."

He blinks at me for a minute, then pulls up some

search engine I've never heard of. A minute later, he turns his phone toward me. "Was it here?"

I lean in and instantly recognize the hotel. "Yeah. Why?"

"I was at a conference in the same hotel, for this startup I was working at. I brought Lily."

"I brought Adrienne."

We look at each other, eyes narrowed.

He says, "Just to clarify, I don't remember ever meeting you before this cruise."

"Same."

We look at Lily and Adrienne's newly abandoned seats, like the empty chairs will explain this to us.

"Could *they* have met at that conference?" he asks at the same time I say, "But why..."

He stands. "Let's go back to the cruise ship. We need to find out what the hell is happening."

"Agreed."

I follow him out of the restaurant under the watchful eyes of the other patrons. So many witnesses.

A horrible thought hits me hard, makes me stop in my tracks on the terra cotta tile.

If I had killed Adrienne, the police would have discovered all those Facebook messages between the fake Matt and the fake Jen. I would have looked so guilty.

Was that the plan? To make sure I got convicted of her murder if I did follow through on it?

But I didn't follow through on it, so why go through all this? And what did Lily have to do with any of it? Why didn't Adrienne just refuse to go on this cruise with me? Why not just divorce me?

Wendy Heard

A little voice in my head says, Well, you could have just divorced her too, couldn't you?

4

When we get back to the cruise ship, I'm sweaty and sunburned. We let them scan our cards and verify our identities, and then we hesitate in the nearest elevator lobby.

"Do you want to split up?" he asks.

"I don't know."

"Let's stay together. We can go to your room first."

I nod, feeling shaky. I don't like being unbalanced like this. I don't like not being in control.

We get in the elevator with an older couple. They smile at us as Matt pushes the button for level four.

"On your honeymoon?" the man asks. He's wearing a Hawaiian shirt and his wife is wearing some of the horrible Velcro sandals Adrienne likes.

Numb, I stare at the man. At last, Matt says, "Uh, yeah. I guess. Sure."

The man frowns at this, and we avoid their eyes until we get to level four.

I lead Matt through the now-familiar corridors until we get to 1412. I pull my card out of my purse and say, "Here we go." I beep open the door, and he follows me into the tiny cabin.

“Adrienne?” I call, even though I can see it’s empty. I search behind the bed and inside the bathroom. She’s not here.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and try calling her. It goes straight to voicemail. “Hey what’s up, this is Adrienne, leave a message and I’ll holler atcha!” Her voice is annoying, peppy, and I’ve told her a thousand times how unprofessional this outgoing message is. She’s a high-paid video editor. How can you make two hundred and forty thousand dollars a year and have an outgoing message with the words “holler atcha?” Honestly.

Matt’s dialing Lily, with the same results. Neither of us leaves a message. He sinks down onto the unmade bed and looks up at me, his eyes wide. “What the hell? Why would they do this? Frame us for having an affair?”

“*They* could be having an affair.”

“Lily’s not *gay*.”

That’s the last thing I need to start unpacking right now. Ignoring this, I say, “Even if they were having an affair themselves, why frame us for—” I stop. I know why Adrienne would want to frame me—in case I murdered her. The question is, why would Lily do this to Matt? “Have you done anything to Lily? Is there any reason she would be this mad at you?”

He looks down at his hands, clasped in his lap. “I did have an affair,” he confesses. “With someone at work. Last year.”

I raise my eyebrows.

He takes a breath and looks out the window at the patch of darkening sky. “I was just tired of her shit.

You know? I was sick of never getting a word in edgewise. I was friends with this girl, this web designer..." He trails off. His hands must be the most interesting thing in the world, from the way he's staring at them. "I thought this girl was nice, but she was just playing with me. She told Lily about the affair, it was drama, and I ended up losing my job—not long after that conference, actually. I went into this, like, depression. Lily had to pay all the bills for awhile. It was shitty. I was sure she would leave me, but she didn't. She was actually really, really cool about it. She's usually psycho jealous, but when I actually cheated on her, she just, like, sucked it up. Which I appreciated. It's not like I wanted this to happen; it just happened. It wasn't my—" he stops himself, but I know he was about to say it wasn't his fault.

Suddenly, I do not like him. Hate me if you will, but I take responsibility for every choice I've made.

"She did leave you," I tell him coldly. "She left you in her heart, but she stuck around to make you pay. This is her revenge."

"What is? Creating some phony Facebook account for me and messaging some random woman I've never met? Why?"

I feel like I'm starting to understand what's happening here. And my instincts tell me that the strange symmetry I'm starting to see makes me think the Facebook messages are just the tip of the iceberg of this strange plan they've constructed.

Because Matt's story is very similar to mine.

Last year, Adrienne had an affair. It was someone from work, a woman from Portland named Rain

(no, I'm not kidding) who loved her sense of humor, who made her feel important and cool and attractive and funny again. A woman I've been pretty sure she was still seeing, until now. I realize now it's Lily she's been having an affair with. Or maybe she's fucking both of them. Who knows how many times she's done this?

Which is what brings me here, with murder in my heart, ready to kill her and take everything she's ever owned, including her life.

But she figured out what I was planning. I don't know how, but she played me.

We check Matt and Lily's suite, which is a mirror image duplicate of my own. Lily isn't there. We inventory their belongings; neither of us can find a single thing conspicuously missing. I suppose Adrienne's duffel does look a little less full than it had the day we arrived, but I could be imagining that. Lily has a hard-shell suitcase, so Matt has no idea if any clothes are missing.

The night descends. We end up in the massive, chandeliered dining room, picking at our salads, when the announcement comes over the PA.

"Adrienne Gallagher, Lily Nguyen, please report to the administrative offices, or find any officer. We repeat, Adrienne Gallagher, Lily Nguyen, please report to the..."

Matt and I are frozen, looking at each other with huge eyes.

"They didn't come back," he says.

I nod.

Are they planning to stay in Mexico? Are they

going to torture us by going missing for awhile?

The announcement comes again five minutes later. Five minutes after that, it blasts louder. "Adrienne Gallagher and Lily Nguyen, you have missed your final boarding call. Please return to your cabins. An officer will meet you there."

"Should we go to the cabins?" I ask Matt. "Don't you think they'll think it's weird and suspicious that we didn't notify anyone?"

"Suspicious how?"

I'm not sure. I feel like I'm being herded into a trap.

We don't have to worry about it, because two minutes later, our names are called. "Jennifer Fielding, Matt Nguyen, please return to your cabins immediately," an annoyed-sounding male voice booms out over the loudspeakers. People are looking around at each other, eyebrows raised, wondering what's going on.

"Just tell them the truth," I say as we stand up. "But don't show anyone those Facebook messages."

"Why?" he protests. "I didn't do anything."

"Because they make us look guilty," I snap, leaving him behind. God. Men. Honestly.

I speedwalk through the hallways, to the elevator, through more hallways, until I get to my room, which has two uniformed cruise ship employees waiting outside it. One, a tall man with salt and pepper hair, has a very captainy look to him. The other is a petite woman with anxious dark eyes.

"I'm Jen," I tell them as I approach.

“Is your bunkmate still on shore?” the man asks. “We’re now behind schedule.”

“She’s still in Cabo, yeah. She’s my wife. We had a fight.”

He makes a disgusted face and says, “Does she have her passport with her?”

“That’s a great question, actually. Let’s check the safe.” I beep open the cabin door and beckon them inside.

We walk through the tiny room. I stop by the foot of the bed. Something is off. Something is different.

I inhale deeply. It smells like...bleach? Like lemon? Maybe housekeeping has been in here. I search for a sign that anything has been moved. The bed is still unmade.

“What’s wrong?” asks the captain guy.

“I guess it’s nothing.” I move to the safe, punch in the password, and pull it open. Both passports are sitting there, hers on top. I hand it over.

He glances through it, then hands it to the small woman. “Give this to the port agent,” he instructs her. “She’ll need it to catch a flight home.” Abrupt, he turns and leaves the cabin, the woman behind him.

Wow. I always pictured this a lot differently. I assumed they’d be suspicious when someone didn’t come back to the boat. I wish I’d known. I could have killed her in Cabo and just left her body there for the local authorities to deal with while I cruised back to LA.

The cruise ship pulls away from the port just after sunset. I stand at the tiny window staring out at the night for a long time, trying to figure out what

Adrienne is up to.

I wake up in darkness, confused.

Something's wrong.

What was I dreaming?

It comes back to me in a flash, illuminated on the gray-black ceiling. I was cleaning the bathroom. No matter how many times I cleaned the floor, it was still dirty. I don't know why the dream was so vivid, but I can still smell the cleaning products I was using.

The cleaning products. I smell them. For real, not in my dream.

I sit up and fumble around on the nightstand. I find the switch on the base of the lamp and flick it on.

The room is just like it has been, nothing different. But it does smell like cleaning products, maybe even more than before because I closed the window before going to bed.

I disentangle myself from the covers and get up. I feel disoriented, like I might fall, and then I remember the boat is in motion.

I check my phone. It's two in the morning.

Sleep is hopeless, so I get up and load a Keurig into the cheap little coffeemaker. I unwrap one of the foam cups and take it to the sink to fill. The bleach and lemon smell is stronger in here. I suppose housekeeping could have cleaned the bathroom and forgotten to make the bed.

I fill up the cup, and I'm just turning the water off when something drips from the ceiling and hits the sink. It's a drop of yellowish...yellowish what? I

look up at the ceiling.

A trail of red-brown dots speckles the ceiling above the sink. From my research I can tell it's the same pattern that happens when someone is stabbed, from a hand stabbing down, then arcing up to stab again.

I step backward, out into the cabin. My cup is forgotten on the sink.

Blood on the ceiling—how?

The bleach and lemon smell—

I return to the bathroom and look around, searching for anything unusual.

I realize the towels are gone.

I try to remember when I last saw them. I took a shower this morning, and then again before dinner. So that's when they disappeared—while I was at dinner.

I grab my phone from the nightstand and find Matt's number, which I'd added earlier. He answers groggily on the second ring. "What's wrong?"

"Go see if there are towels in your bathroom."

"What?" His voice cracks.

"Go see if you have towels. And does your room smell like cleaning solution?"

A pause. "It smells clean, yeah. I think housekeeping came while we were at dinner."

"I don't think so. Go check your bathroom."

"Fine," he says, clearly just humoring me. A second later: "Okay, no towels. Maybe they don't leave towels when you're on your way back home."

"Look at the ceiling."

A long pause, and then he whispers, "What the—"

there's, like, some kind of..."

"Blood splatter," I finish.

"But from what?"

My patience snaps. "It's going to be human blood, obviously. What do you think, someone brought a pig in here to slaughter for dinner?"

We're silent.

"Check the rest of the bathroom," I say, getting onto my hands and knees. I look in every crevice, and by the toilet, I find another smudge of red, like someone had missed a little streak when cleaning. I find a dark, gooey splotch of blood behind the toilet, and another little dot on the wall by the door. "I have more blood," I tell him.

"Got some tiny little bits of it down here too," Matt replies. "Like someone cleaned up but not all the way."

"What is happening?" I whisper. Could Adrienne have killed Lily, or the other way around? But no, it would be in both bathrooms. Did they kill someone else in here, to frame us, or—

No. I'm getting warmer, but that's not what this is.

Matt says, "Do we clean it? We can't, like, get caught in a room with all this blood in it, right?"

"Clean it with what? We have no towels." He whispers out a string of curses.

I try to breathe. I try to calm myself.

"We'll clean it with pillowcases," I decide. "We can use shampoo for soap, then fold the pillowcases and pack them in our luggage tomorrow. We'll get rid of them when we get to shore."

"But whose blood is this?"

"I don't know, and I don't want to find out." I feel like I do know, though, and I feel very, very cold.

I strip down to my bra and underwear to keep blood off my clothes, scrubbing the bathroom with a shampoo-soaked pillowcase. When my hands are raw, I rinse the pillowcase out in the sink.

My phone buzzes on the floor outside the bathroom. I jump, nervous as a cat.

I set the pillowcase down, wipe my hands on the butt of my underwear, and pick up the phone. It's Matt.

"Hello?" I wedge the phone between my ear and shoulder and start squeezing the liquid out of the pillowcase into the sink.

"Jen. It's—Lily is going to—I just—" He's panting, frantic, like he's running.

I drop the pillowcase. "Where are you? What's happening?"

"I'm going to the deck. Lily just called me. She says she's going to jump overboard."

"Jump overboard?" I echo, my voice high with surprise. "No, she's not. Tell me exactly what she said."

"She was crying. Sobbing. Said she couldn't do this anymore, that she was going to jump, that it's all my fault because of this affair." I hear a ding. Is he getting into an elevator?"

"Matt. Calm down. Where the hell are you going?"

"She's in the back of the ship. Fourth floor, or deck, or whatever. Fuck, Jen. What do I do?"

I start digging through my suitcase, searching for clothes to throw on. "Do not go there, Matt. I'm

serious. This could be a trap." I can't find a single goddamn pair of pants.

"It's not a trap! She's fucking suicidal!"

"My ass she is!"

He hangs up.

"Fuck!" I toss the phone aside and dig through my suitcase with both hands. "Aha!" I cry, unearthing the light blue jeans I'd worn yesterday from the bottom. I pull them out.

They're stained with something dark, some splattered liquid that's dried in spotted streaks all across the legs.

I hold them up.

Blood. It's dried blood.

"Oh, shit," I whisper.

My hands are shaking as I squat down and sift through the other clothes, looking for the white t-shirt I'd worn with these jeans. When I find it, I extract it with my fingertips and drop it on the floor on top of the jeans.

Dark splashes of dried blood cover the chest and stomach.

My arms feel cold and tingly.

Instinctively, I roll the jeans and shirt up with the pillowcase, burying them at the bottom of my suitcase. I grab my pajama pants and sleep shirt, throw them on with my Vans, grab my phone and room key, and take off down the hallway. My heart pounds as I head for the elevator. I press the up button over and over again, chest heaving.

My eyes drift up to the small glass sphere in the corner of the hallway—the security camera.

It's been spray painted gray, along with part of

the ceiling around it.

The blood. The clothes. The spray-painted camera.

Someone needed to come and go from my room without being seen. They came while I was at dinner.

I wonder if the cameras in the dining hall have been spray painted.

The elevator door slides open. I step inside and press five. My index finger is shaking.

As I lurch upward, my eyes drift up to the camera in the elevator.

It's been spray painted gray.

The elevator dings and the doors open.

I pocket my phone and run, along the corridors to the back of the ship, which isn't far. I explode onto the deck, where I see Matt ahead of me, close to the railing. I run toward him, toward the windy night behind the railing, anger and fear sending my heart into explosions. "Matt," I murmur as I approach, my words barely audible over the roar of water far below.

He turns his face toward me. His expression is shocked, horrified.

"Did she jump?" I ask.

And then I see.

Along the light gray deck, a pair of bloody track marks lead to the railing, like two bodies were dragged this way from the elevators. Blood is streaked across the railing, and bloody footprints cluster around the drag marks, separating and leading back the way I came.

I look down at my Vans. Shaking, I kick one off

and pick it up.

There's dried blood on the soles. Blood on the white rubber piping around the sides. Blood on the black canvas toes.

He says, "Did they... was there a fight? Between Lily and Adrienne? Did Adrienne hurt her?"

I just stare at him, shoe in hand, my brain trying to catch up, trying to access all my true crime research and figure out what to do.

At last, I say, "You are such a moron."

He starts to cry. For God's sake.

I peer over the railing, down into the black water far below. There's more blood on the exterior of the ship. I can see the narrative: two people were stabbed, one in each of our bathrooms. They were dragged here and pushed over the railing. They hit the side of the ship on the way down.

Matt is still standing there, but now he's got his phone out.

"You're calling her?" I ask.

He nods shakily. A tear rolls down his cheek.

It's all resolving into a clear picture. This is a tableau, set just for me. Somehow, she got Lily to go along with it. She's...she's...

She's a master manipulator? Really? *Adrienne?*

But I recognize every element here from one of the cruise ship murders I've studied. She knew. She *knew*.

The drag marks and blood on the railing: That's from the case with the husband who killed his wife on the Alaskan cruise. The spray-painted cameras are from a case that took place on a Caribbean cruise. The fake Facebook messages is of course

straight from Mandy and Andy. The blood on the clothes is from a case where a husband killed his wife in a Jamaican cruise, and they never did convict him; her body wasn't found, and the bloody clothes and shoes vanished from evidence while they were still in international waters.

We're not in international waters now, though. We're just west of San Diego.

"Hey!" screams a voice. Two men in uniforms, either security officers or cops, are running toward us from the elevator.

It's over.

She's won.

5

I wish I could see Jen dragged off the cruise ship by the cops, but Lily and I sneak out with the first wave of passengers. We're wearing wigs and sunglasses, and we giggle like idiots every time we look at each other.

The old car we bought cash is in the parking lot, exactly where we left it. We get in. I'm driving.

We go south, straight down the 405. We're headed straight through San Diego, all the way to Baja, which is where we're pretending to have washed up. A local fisherman is going to "discover" us clinging to life.

We're quiet, tired from the long night.

I imagine what's happening. I picture Jen in handcuffs, being interrogated, being put into a cell. She'll look terrible in the prison scrubs. Orange is her least favorite color. Soon, they'll discover the life insurance policy I took out a few months ago in her name. They'll find the online international bank account in which "she's" been hiding a bunch of our money. They'll find the plane tickets she and Matt (Lily and I) bought, to the Bahamas, leaving tomorrow.

I'm just sad I didn't get to see it. It was so much careful planning, and all of it is playing out without me.

And I'm sad about those plane tickets! What a waste of money.

"Are you nervous?" Lily asks, breaking the silence. She's removed her wig, and her glorious mane of shiny black hair tumbles down her shoulders, brushing her forearms.

I reach out and run my hand along her arm, lacing my fingers through hers. "About what, sweetie?"

"Stabbing ourselves."

I wince. "Yeah."

We have to injure ourselves as soon as we arrive in Baja, before we can be "found." We're thinking we should also put some ligature marks on our necks, maybe even create some facial contusions, to show they really gave killing us the college try. As much as we've already done, there's a lot ahead of us. What we're doing is not easy, and it's not for the faint of heart.

It's fun, though. It's really, really fun.

I wonder if I should get rid of Lily while I'm at it. Maybe I can accidentally stab her too deep.

Do I still want her, though? I'm not sure. It might be nice to be a free agent...

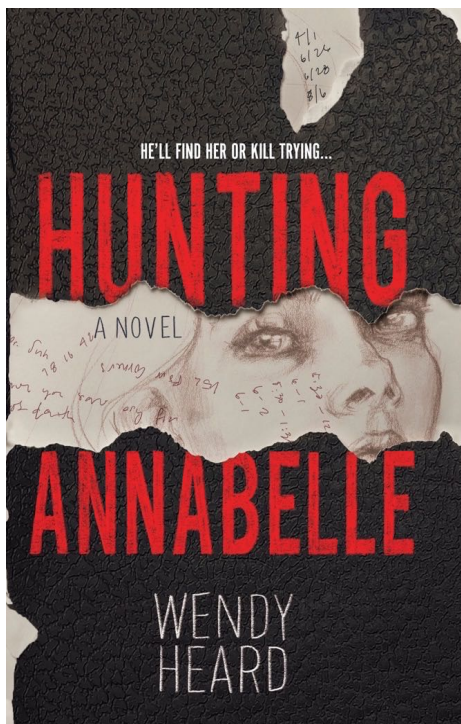
"Freedom isn't free," I muse philosophically as the Pacific rushes by on our right. We're passing through the marshland north of San Diego, a gloriously empty stretch of water and reeds.

"Freedom isn't free," she repeats, and she turns her face to me and smiles.

About the Author



Wendy Heard was born in San Francisco but has spent most of her life in Los Angeles, where she currently resides despite its mostly being on fire. She co-hosts the Unlikeable Female Characters podcast and has been described unforgettably as a “chipper Wednesday Addams.”



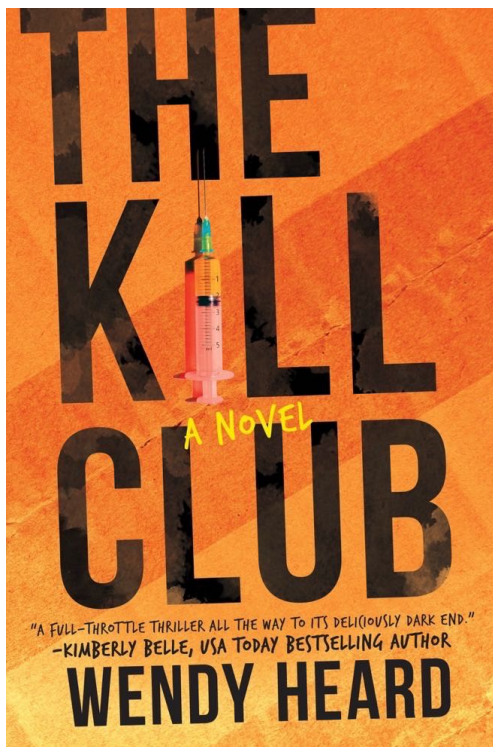
Hunting Annabelle

(MIRA/HarperCollins, Out Now)

A chilling, deeply suspenseful page-turner set in the 1980s, *Hunting Annabelle* is a stunning debut that will leave you breathless.

“A diabolically plotted creep show from a writer to watch.”

—*Kirkus Review of Hunting Annabelle*



The Kill Club

(MIRA/HarperCollins, out December, 2019)

"A chilling, clever plot combined with highly original characters makes Wendy Heard's **THE KILL CLUB** a surefire winner. Relentlessly paced, elegantly written, diabolically twisted, you will not be able to put it down. Heard is a true talent."

-J.T. Ellison, USA Today bestselling author of Lie to Me

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