

THE LAST EXIT

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**THE
LAST
EXIT**

A JEN LU MYSTERY

Michael Kaufman

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LANE**



NEW YORK

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To Betty

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Tuesday, July 3—08:00:05

It was only eight in the morning, but I could already feel sweat collecting under our breasts. Jen had been kicked in the butt for switching me off for five minutes while on duty last week, so for the third day in a row, we were back in regulation blues, trudging along the two-mile path circling the Tidal Basin.

It was boring work. Retrieve phones dropped in the water. Search for kids who eluded their parents' jail-guard gaze for two seconds. Tolerate the private US Park Police. Help the dumber tourists figure out which one was the Jefferson Monument. Keep an eye out for the saltwater crocs. This task seemed a particular waste of time since only one had been spotted so far this summer. But then again, it had eaten a jogger. When the croc was shot and sliced open, the running shoes still looked new.

I was young, two years and three months. Detective Jen Lu was thirty-eight and change. I'll be dead in three more years. She'll live to a hundred after her mother does her duty and exits, and Jen can snag the treatment. Good for her.

08:03:52. The sun was smudged by haze that hung around like a fart under a blanket. We heard a shout by the FDR Memorial. Then a scream. I tagged the time and our position. We ran.

A Caucasian man who looked like he'd been stewed in scarlet food coloring was screaming at a Black woman in yellow running gear. She was lying on her side, clutching her shoulder. I scanned the man and found a match.

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“Watch out,” I cautioned Jen. We ran harder.

The man saw us and shot off like he had a Roman candle up his butt. We reached the prone woman, yelled, “You alright?” We got a nod and took off after the man.

He was good. We were better. We tackled him at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial. Nonviolence has its place, but I whacked him across the face.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Jen said.

“Sure I did, and you know it.”

James O’Neil. Twenty-seven. Follows the Klan and two neo-Nazi sites. Arrested once for battery. Dad is a Timeless, so James got off.

We cuffed him and I called it in. We waited for the car, handed him over, me sharing the data and time stamp with the officer’s synth. We went back and called an ambulance for the jogger, although she said she was fine.

Any hope we’d be rewarded with a better gig for the day crashed when I received the order to get back on patrol.

Tuesday, July 3. 08:42:11. Washington, DC. Good times.

* * *

“Chandler,” she said to me, in the didactic tone of a really bored teacher, “having the Fourth of July fall on a Wednesday is the biggest bitch there is.”

There are things I am still learning.

“Why?” I said.

“Think about it for a second,” she said. Too bored to tell me.

Jen pulled her N95 back on, masking her up like half the people we passed. Two months into the Great Shenandoah Blaze, and DC was at the mercy of the wind. We were on our twelfth circuit. Two lost kids. Forty-five Shadows—nineteen females and twenty-six males with ten children in tow—who we ordered to keep walking or get out. Thirteen sets of directions given to monuments, museums, or the Metro. One bad tumble and a call to paramedics. Four men stopped and IDed. One photo for a group of tourists who acted like they owned the show.

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Winds shifted, mask came off. More days now with no smoke—the fire was finally running out of fuel.

I said, “People only get one day off instead of a three-day weekend. Ditto with Tuesday or Thursday.”

“Chandler, you’re not so dumb after all.”

I let that pass. I know she likes me, sort of.

“Then again,” she said, “half the people don’t have real work, so what the hell.”

“What the hell,” I agreed.

A good-looking young man and woman stared at Jen as we passed. Even in uniform, Jen turns heads. Tall. Ebony hair gathered into a ponytail that tumbles down her back. Chinese American. High cheekbones and startling blue eyes with heavy lashes, apparently inherited from a father she couldn’t remember and about whom her mother refused to tell her anything. They shouted at passersby to stare.

I said we should grab lunch.

“You hungry?” she said.

“Yuk, yuk.” I’m a synth implant, tucked into a fold of Jennifer’s neo-cortex. Ergo, I don’t get hungry, but I’m whacked the millisecond her energy starts to flag.

Lunch was a hummus roll with kimchi.

“Shouldn’t we be having a hot dog?”

“Mañana.”

Speaking of mañana, word came through at 12:41:39 that Les had gone home sick and we’d have to work the next night, the Fourth of July.

“Call in,” she said.

The 1940s ringtone sounded in her rostromedial prefrontal cortex.

“Chandler,” she said, “let’s go with something less jarring for a while.”

“Headache?”

“My life’s a headache.”

Even I knew this wasn’t completely true, but I complied.

Captain Brooks answered. Jen explained she was supposed to go to a fireworks party at her boyfriend’s family home. Earlier, I had asked if she

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could turn me on for part of it and at first she had said, “Fat chance,” but later softened that to, “We’ll see.”

Captain Brooks didn’t even bother to say he was sorry.

“I love you too,” she said after he snapped off the connection. Jennifer once told me that the hardest thing she had ever learned as a cop was how to talk over a phone that existed only in her imagination. But she was kidding, since that wasn’t her hardest thing by a long shot.

Then she brightened. “At least it means I’m out of this damn uniform and back to the unit.”

Regular duty, but another twenty-five days on probation.

Tuesday, July 3. 12:46:09.

* * *

“Why *did* you turn me off last week?” I asked.

She ignored me.

We lumbered across the Mall on our way back to the station. It was in the low hundreds again, and the soupy air stunk of sweat, dried piss, crumbling asphalt, dead grass, and distant charred trees.

I waited a respectful time before disrespectfully asking again.

“Chandler,” she said, “it’s nothing.”

Translation: “It’s everything.” Jennifer did her job and normally followed the rules. She never defied authority. Turning me off didn’t make sense. She’d been docked a week’s pay and was now pounding the pavement. I wondered if it had to do with her current obsession: “Eden,” a massive bee on her brain. “Eden.” Buzzing in fat quotation marks, because it was a prize collection of silly rumors glued together with spit and gossip. Humans have this unbending fascination with things they don’t know. The very quality of not knowing invests the thing with hypercharged reality. And when something can’t possibly exist, then it positively glows in their imaginations. “Eden” burned in Jennifer’s brain.

I asked her.

“What?”

“Eden,” I repeated.

“You’re kidding. I would never turn you off for any work thing. It was . . . Drop it, will you? I made a stupid mistake.”

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I dropped it right into my human puzzle box. Jennifer always plays it straight, so why had she turned me off?

In front of the National Gallery, a recruitment mini-fair was in full swing. “65 and out!” a banner proclaimed. “Exit now!”

Jen’s feet were sore and her legs were slabs of dead meat, so I gave her a nibble of adrenalin. We were on the new six-to-two shift they were giving foot patrols. Three officers had plopped over dead from heat exhaustion in April, so the new hours divvied up the afternoon death zone more evenly between the day and evening shifts.

Chatty guy that I am, I asked Jen what she was doing that night. I knew, of course, but we like to preserve the fiction of mental independence.

“Meeting Zach for a drink.”

“Boot me up for a bit?”

She had allowed me to be drunk twice and stoned once.

“Chandler, grow up.”

Back at the station, she signed out and switched me off.

Tuesday, July 3. 14:02:09. Washington, DC.