

**Tell Me When  
It Hurts**

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## CHAPTER

# 1

The assignment was easy enough—the target was the proverbial creature of habit. She watched him get to his New York City parking garage stairwell, mochaccino in hand, *New York Times* tucked under his arm, keys to his fancy BMW Z4 dangling.

What wasn't fancy about him was his lust for little girls. A year ago, he'd beaten a first-degree murder charge when the eyewitness and the forensic evidence proved unreliable. Luck and the devil had been on his side—then. On the eve of trial, the sister of the dead girl had been slated to give the jury a guided tour of her sister's last minutes. After scores of interviews, however, the kid had started to waver. During a pretrial prep session, as the prosecutor played devil's advocate, the eight-year-old began shaking so badly that her mother declared she'd had enough. She wasn't going to lose two daughters in this tragedy.

When the chain of custody of DNA samples—samples that had nailed the man dead to rights—were bungled, the charges had folded. No eyewitness, no DNA, no case. To make matters worse, the accused, buoyed by the botched police work, was threatening a lawsuit for false arrest.

Archer Loh watched him skip down the garage steps, head up, briefcase swinging. Her grip tightened on the rifle. *Go ahead. Enjoy your last moment, pal. This is for Marcie...* Snugging her finger against the trigger of her modified HK G36, she breathed in and let it out slowly. And gently squeezed.



Archer stepped up onto the low wooden porch of her log cabin in the Berkshires, swung the door open, and braced herself for the onslaught. The next instant, a hundred pounds of chocolate lab came bounding into her arms. She stooped, dark auburn hair falling over one eye, and hugged the dog. She stood up. After stowing the rifle case in the front hall closet, she dropped the duffel in the kitchen corner, read the note on the counter from the dog sitter, and opened the refrigerator—empty except for an apple, a dozen eggs, and a stick of butter. She'd been gone for two days, and the sight was uninspiring.

“Hadley, old girl, looks like it’s omelets tonight,” she said, closing the fridge. The lab wagged at the mention of her name.

Archer glanced around the two-room cabin. The late afternoon sun lit up the floral patterns on the red Heriz rug and fired the distant hills in gold. The cabin consisted of a living area with a kitchen at one end, a bedroom, and a bathroom—simple, uncluttered, all a girl could ever want for living in self-imposed exile.

She flopped down on the sofa and leafed through three days of mail. She got few letters and fewer social invitations. Her family had stopped inviting her to parties years ago. She'd always hated disappointing them by not showing up, but she hated going even more. It was always the same. *Life is for the living*, they'd say. *Annie would have wanted you to go on with your life*, some other well-meaning dolt would always add. Truth was, Archer had no desire to go on with her life. She *had* no life—or rather, what life she did have was a cliché, right in there with the cheesiest movie of the week: *An Eye for an Eye* meets *La Femme Nikita*.

Archer flipped through the letters. She saw the usual generous monthly check from her father's lawyer in New York. Thank God for Daddy's planning and good financial sense. If it had been up to her mother, things would be, well...*different*. But then, her mother had passed on her fluency in Hungarian, for whatever that was worth.

Amid the envelopes addressed to "Resident," she spotted the letter from Connecticut. She didn't want correspondence from them, just the monthly bill, thank you. Archer frowned at the letter for a moment, then slid open the flap and shook out a typed page. She unfolded it and began to read:

*Dear Archer:*

*As you know, we've been boarding Allegra for six years now. Since you have refused to let us lease her out, she is unfit and, frankly, unhappy. You have been a good client, and we appreciate your patronage. However, we again request your permission to either sell Allegra to a child or teen who would love and enjoy her, or at least reconsider leasing her out. Horses need to be used, and Allegra needs to be needed. She is truly wasting away here, and it distresses us, as horsewomen.*

*Please reply with your monthly payment. We hope you understand that our thoughts are expressed out of concern for Allegra. We know that Annie would want her to be loved.*

*Sincerely,  
Jane Russo  
Owner, Mad River Farm*

Archer sat back, deep in thought, and scratched behind Hadley's ear. Allegra. One of the most beautiful horses she'd ever seen, with that perfect white heart on her forehead—an Arab/Thoroughbred cross

with the temperament of Bambi. The horse to give Annie her own moment, her own passion. Archer slumped inward at the memory. The little mare had delivered in spades. Allegra had been the knock-down, take-your-breath-away love of Annie's life.

Archer stared out the window for a few seconds, not seeing. She then fingered the letter, rereading its polite rebuke, silently accepting its truth, though unable to change it.

She shook her head. How silly and naive her little dream of mother-daughter gallops along Irish pebbled beaches and across English moors had been. Now the dream just mocked her.

Booting up the computer, she wrote:

*Dear Jane:*

*Thank you for your concern about Allegra, but I do not want her leased out or sold. Enclosed please find a check for her monthly board.*

*Sincerely,  
Archer*

She reread what she'd written. It seemed cold, but it was all she had to say. She folded the crisp white paper in thirds and tucked it in an envelope, to be mailed tomorrow with a check.

Archer walked over to the liquor cabinet, the omelet forgotten, and pulled out the Maker's Mark and filled a tumbler, no ice. She dragged a ladder-back chair over the plank floor to the front hall closet. Standing on it, she reached back to a big, pastel pink box on the top shelf, pulled it out, and brought it carefully down. She lit some candles, then the fire, and then, as if savoring the prospect of opening a special present, sat on the big braided rug, opened the box, and spread out its contents. Hadley came over and plopped down on the corner of a birthday card; Archer slid it from under her and put it with the other treasures.

There was the handprint from kindergarten, a photo from Disney World at age seven, a snapshot from Halloween—their special holiday—at age nine (Annie Oakley), a red show ribbon for equitation from when she was eleven, and a blue ribbon, won on Allegra when she was twelve. Archer opened the report card from second grade—*Annie is a pleasure to have in class, is always prepared, and is a friend to everyone*—and caressed a childish finger painting of their old house with Hadley, as large as the house, standing in front—a big brown oval with a tail. She picked up a pink plastic barrette, clicked it open, snapped it closed, and put it down. Ribbons, a beaded necklace, and a stick of gum. Scores of baby pictures, several school pictures, and a lock of hair, light brown and wavy.

Archer sipped the whiskey slowly, sifted through the contents, and pretended it had all turned out differently. As the country song said, she was having a “night to remember,” and it was like ripe melon that, once in your mouth, turns sour.



Jane Russo opened the barn door, rolling it easily to the right, watching the sun creep around the door’s edge and blaze up the aisle. She walked into the hay room, leafed apart an open bale, and began tossing hay into each stall. She kept moving, a full day of chores ahead of her. She hesitated in front of the bay mare’s stall. The horse nuzzled in between the bars, and Jane stroked the warm, velvety nose. Allegra nickered.

Jane wondered if she would hear from Archer. She’d been one of the few mothers she enjoyed having around the barn. Given Archer’s status in her day as first alternate on the U.S. Olympic equestrian team, Jane had braced for a prima donna, but Archer had proved self-effacing and funny.

It must have been awful for her: Annie’s murder and all, and then to have her husband—Adam? Andrew?—leave her, remarry, and have two little kids of his own...ugh! Barn gossip had it that Archer had left her big job as a lawyer downtown, that she’d had a breakdown of

some sort. Now she lived somewhere out in the Berkshires and, as far as Jane knew, stayed in touch with no one. Since Annie's death, Archer had never returned to the barn or seen Allegra again. She paid her bill but stayed away.

Jane sighed and hoisted two flakes of hay into the stall. The horse needed someone to love—needed a purpose. On the occasions when Jane took pity on the animal and put her in the cross-ties to groom her for a ride, Allegra would shift her weight restlessly, paw the concrete aisle a few times, and then stare steadily at the door, as if wondering what happened to the little girl with the big grin.