

KEEP NO SECRETS

BY JULIE COMPTON

Coming on March 12, 2013!

When St. Louis DA Jack Hilliard is accused of sexually assaulting his son's girlfriend, can he trust his freedom to the legal system on which he built his career? Or will the ghost of a one-night stand four years before come back to haunt him, causing him to be convicted on the mistakes of his past?

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CHAPTER ONE

JACK WAKES TO the slam of the front door. It's Michael, home from a party down the street. For a moment, he's perturbed at his older son for the noise, for not considering anyone else in the house. It's the type of thing Claire shrugs off as typical teenage behavior, but still, it irks Jack.

He glances at the digital clock on the nightstand. It's Saturday night for one more minute; at least Michael got Celeste home and made his curfew. He must have realized the noise he made, because afterwards, the dark house falls silent once again. Jack rolls closer to a sleeping Claire and drifts back to sleep.

The second time, he doesn't look at the clock right away because he's so focused on listening for what woke him again. Voices. Not one, but two distinct voices. Michael's, and Celeste's—Celeste, who shouldn't be there. It's the whispers and giggles that did it. Had they carried on at a normal volume, Jack probably would have slept right through it. But somehow, the fact that they're trying *not* to be heard has guaranteed that they will be.

He grabs his robe and at the top of the stairs, stops to listen. They're in the family room, that much is clear. It's also clear from the sway in their speech that they're drunk. Even as he starts to fume about that, he's grateful that at least Michael had the common sense not to drive Celeste home. And even as he prepares to interrupt them and read them the riot act, he's already thinking about the logistics of the rest of the night—whether to wake Claire or do this alone, whether to call Celeste's dad now and have him pick her up, or whether to drive her home himself and talk to her dad once he gets there.

He starts down, but stops when he hears Celeste, "Shh, shh, I think I hear someone." Michael doesn't respond, at least not loud enough to hear. "Mike, stop!" she says, and giggles. "I mean it. I think someone's coming."

"I hope so," his sixteen year old son mumbles, and Jack's about to freak. Suddenly the drinking seems like the least of his concerns. His next footstep is purposely a loud one, and now they're scrambling, repositioning themselves and grasping for discarded clothes. It's all Jack can do not to go down right away. But he has no idea what state of undress they're in, and though he'd love to

embarrass Michael—he deserves it and so much more right now—he doesn't want to do that to Celeste.

All he can think is, *what the hell are you thinking, Michael?* He thought his son was smarter than this. He really believed Michael would make it to adulthood without doing something too stupid. Now he realizes how naïve he was, how easily anything could happen on his watch. He's ready to lock Michael in the house until he's eighteen. Or twenty-one would be even better. Yet even as he has these thoughts, he can hear Claire: "This is the age *most* people do the stupid stuff." She'd leave the rest unsaid.

"Are you decent?" he calls down, voice level. Michael responds with a cold, "Yeah."

In the family room, Jack flips on a light and takes in the scene. Celeste's long hair looks as if she just stepped out of bed and her blouse is buttoned wrong. Michael's T-shirt covers the waist of his jeans but Jack is pretty sure they're unzipped. Celeste's dark eyes are wide with fear. As much trouble as Michael's in at this moment, her Catholic dad is ten times stricter than Jack and Claire. She's not so worried about what Jack will say or do; she's already thinking about what will happen when she gets home.

Jack glares at Michael, and Michael glares back, making Jack even angrier.

He turns to Celeste. "Go in the bathroom and put yourself together, and then I'm taking you home." She nods apologetically and jumps up. When she does, an earring falls to the floor. She sheepishly bends down for it and then takes off, staggering, for the half-bath in the front hall. To Michael, Jack says, "Don't you move. I'll be back in a minute and then we're having a little talk. You got it?"

Michael regards him without answering, still defiant.

"Did you hear me?" Louder this time.

Slowly, Michael nods, and Jack leaves the room to put on some real clothes and find his keys.

"I'm sorry, Mr. H," Celeste says as soon as she stumbles into the car. Jack picks up the smoky scent of burning oak, smells liquor on her breath. Whiskey, he thinks, and this floors him even more because he assumed they would have drunk only beer.

He doesn't answer her, for fear of what he'll say. Even though she's come to feel like family, he's not sure it's his place to scold her. He's not sure what's safe to say and what might cross a line that only her dad is entitled to cross.

So for now, as he waits for the heater to warm the car, he simply asks, "Do you have everything?"

All your stuff?"

She nods.

He puts the car into reverse.

Jack glances over at Celeste as he pulls out of the neighborhood. He remembers the day Michael first brought her home, how he and Claire were left speechless when the two of them came into the house from the door to the garage, dumping their backpacks on top of the clothes dryer. Only a few weeks into the current school year, it was Claire's fortieth birthday. Jack had left the DA's office early to get home in time to make dinner and help his younger son bake the cake—just one of many things he did differently since Claire had allowed him back into their home.

When Michael and Celeste stepped into the kitchen, Jack almost dropped the cake that Jamie had just finished decorating.

The resemblance to Jenny Dodson was remarkable. The long, straight black hair. The dark, smoky eyes. The copper skin. The perfectly contoured face. Much younger, of course. But still, Michael had to have known. And as much as Jack understood Michael's desire to stick it to his father, he simply couldn't believe he'd do this to his mother—on her birthday, no less.

Claire recovered first. She greeted Celeste warmly, and even invited her to stay for dinner. To Jack's relief and, he suspected, Claire's too, she politely declined.

But in the weeks that followed, Celeste quickly ingratiated herself into the Hilliard household. Jack could do nothing about it, and Michael knew it. On the days he didn't have basketball practice and she had neither volleyball nor ballet, they came to the house right after school to do homework together. Michael insisted that they needed his computer, which was in his bedroom. Claire made them keep the door open and though Michael complained, she held her ground.

On Friday nights, Celeste sat with Jack, Claire and Jamie at Michael's games. Then, without fail, she'd come back to the house afterwards for pizza. At first Jack was uncomfortable at how she clung to his family as if it was her own. And he'd be lying, too, if he didn't admit his fear that other parents at the school might also see the resemblance and wonder. No one ever brought up what had happened four years ago, how he'd betrayed Claire and his family, how he'd betrayed St. Louis, even, the city that had only just elected him, but he knew it was a shadow that followed him wherever he went.

But Celeste proved easy to have around. She adored eight-year-old Jamie. If he became restless during the games, she'd take him from the stands and play with him in the hallway outside the gym.

Michael rolled his eyes the first time she offered to babysit for real, but he eventually gave in. Now Jack understands why. Michael obviously realized the benefits before Jack and Claire realized the risks: after putting Jamie to bed, he and Celeste would effectively be alone in the house. It never occurred to Jack or Claire not to trust him. They'd come home from a restaurant or the movies to find Jamie sleeping soundly, the toys put away and the dishes washed and drying in a rack next to the sink. He wonders now how long they've been carrying on.

"Mr. H?" At a stop sign closer to her home than Jack's, Celeste's soft voice breaks his thoughts. "I'm really, really sorry. We haven't done anything like that before, I swear." She tries to keep her voice even, tries to sound sober. She's only partly successful.

Until this moment Jack has directed most of his anger at Michael, but in the face of this bold lie he starts to see her as a temptress who's seducing his vulnerable son. Does she think Jack's an idiot? He didn't hear much at the top of the stairs, but what he did hear certainly wasn't the conversation of two teenagers experimenting with sex for the first time.

"Celeste," he begins, trying to pay attention to the curves in the road as he crafts a response that won't accuse her of lying but won't let her off the hook, either. It's dark here, on the way to her house. When they moved from Florida to St. Louis over the summer, her dad rejected the typical suburban choices and instead chose a home on several wooded acres far west of the city near Rockwoods Reservation. "I heard enough to know better. If you're going to engage in adult behavior, then—"

"Can we pull over?" she asks suddenly.

"Why?"

"Just . . ." In the glow of the dashboard lights he sees she's started to tear up. "Please? I think I'm going to be sick."

He sighs. Against his better judgment, he pulls into one of the small parking lots for the conservation area. The gravel crunches under the tires as he circles the car around to face the road. He puts the car in Park but leaves the headlights on and the engine running. She opens her door and swings her legs out. Leaning over, she spits a bit, but Jack's certain she's not vomiting. She's stalling.

"Are you done?" He tries to check his impatience, but he's supposed to be in bed sleeping right now, not out on some dark road with a sixteen-year-old girl he doesn't entirely trust anymore and who bears too much of a resemblance to another female he doesn't entirely trust anymore either. Whom he doesn't trust at all, really.

She nods and closes herself back in. She sets her hands in her lap and plays with a loose button of her long sweater coat. His eyes are drawn to her left pinky, which ends in a stub just after the last joint. He's never noticed it before, but the nails on her other fingers have been bitten to the quick. "I can't go home yet. He'll know I'm wasted."

Jack knows she means her father, even though she never says "my dad" or even uses his first name. It's always "he" or "him." It's impossible to handle the types of cases he's handled, first as an assistant prosecutor, now as DA, and not suspect a psychological reason for a habit like that. Jack once asked Michael about it. Michael looked at him as if he was crazy, but when Jack finally met the man, he had an inkling. At a minimum—and he hoped there wasn't more—the guy kept an unusually tight rein on his only daughter that guaranteed her close physical proximity but also, Jack thought, ensured rebellion in one form or another.

"He needs to know, Celeste. Even if he doesn't figure it out on his own, I plan to tell him."

"You can't," she pleads. "Please! I knew I'd be in trouble for breaking curfew, so I texted him and told him Mike had car trouble and I'd be late. He's okay with that. But if he finds out I was drinking—"

Jack can't believe she's made the situation worse. "It's not just the drinking I need to tell him about."

"Oh, God!" She starts breathing rapidly as if she's having a panic attack. "Please don't tell him. We really didn't do anything, Mr. H. We were just fooling around. He likes Mike so much. If you tell him, he won't let me see Mike anymore. He won't let me come over to your house." Jack might put the brakes on that, anyway, but he doesn't say this. "The only reason he even let me date Mike in the first place is because of you."

"What are you talking about?"

She shrugs bashfully and keeps tucking her hair nervously behind her ears. She combed it when he sent her to the bathroom, and looking at it now, he still can't get over how it hangs the same way as Jenny's. Heavy and sleek.

"He never let me date before," she says. "He wasn't going to let me until I was eighteen. But he made an exception for Mike. He figured a DA's son has gotta be pretty straight." She shrugs again, and something about her words and her gesture strike Jack as disingenuous.

"Well, I don't know about that, but I'm sure he trusts me to tell him if there are any problems, and that's what I have to do." He turns back to the steering wheel and reaches down to put the car into gear. "We're telling him everything."

Before he even moves the gearshift, she grabs his arm with both hands. One hand is on his coat sleeve, but the other claws at the bare skin of his wrist. She tightens her grip. "Please, Mr. H! I'm begging you! You don't understand what will happen!"

Something in the desperate tone of her last words makes him turn and regard her differently. Where before he felt as if everything she said was orchestrated to manipulate him, he now senses her words were spontaneous and her fear is genuine.

"What do you mean?" he asks gently. She still hasn't released his arm and her close proximity makes him uncomfortable. The car windows are fogging up, and in the warm, enclosed space, he easily detects the lingering scent of her body spray, the type that all the kids use nowadays. Too sweet and slightly fruity, the scent of a girl on the cusp of womanhood. *Please, not Michael's girlfriend. Please let it be something other than what I think it's going to be.* He just wants to be home, sleeping. For an instant, he wonders if Claire has woken up to find the bed next to her empty.

Celeste tucks both lips in, trying not to cry. She reaches up with one hand, still holding his wrist with the other, and wipes under both eyes. The tears and the wiping have smeared her mascara and they make raccoon shadows on her bottom lids. He's always wanted to tell her she doesn't need all the make-up, but of course he never did.

"What do you mean?" he asks again.

She lowers her eyes and shakes her head. "Nothing." Jack barely hears her.

He wonders how much to push her. If his gut is right, she needs to tell someone, and someone needs to protect her.

"Celeste?" She looks up for just an instant. "What will happen? Are you afraid of him?"

"No," she says quietly, averting her eyes again. "As long as you don't tell him anything, as long as you wait a bit before dropping me off, then he won't do anything."

He takes a deep breath. Either she doesn't get it, or she does and she's trying to protect her father. "And if I *do* tell him, what will happen? What will he do?"

She shrugs.

Repositioning himself as a means of getting his arm back, Jack looks out the front windshield at the beams of gold coming from the headlights. When he and Claire were still in law school, they used to drive out here on the weekends, hike deep into the woods, and pitch a tent for the night. It was against park rules, but no one ever caught them. He wonders if they patrol the area better now, but as soon as he has that thought, he thinks, *as DA, I should know the answer.* If someone were to come along just now, how would he explain it? Being here—he glances at the dashboard clock—at

one fifteen in the morning with his son's girlfriend. And she's got alcohol in her system. And she bears a striking resemblance to another woman he wasn't supposed to be with.

What a headline that would make.

"Will he hurt you somehow?"

She straightens up in the seat and stares forward for a long time. She's still crying, though. He waits, because he thinks she's about to confide everything. He starts thinking of his next step. If it's bad enough, does he take her back to his house and call the hotline immediately? If it's not, does he give her the time she wants, and then drop her off at her own home, but still call the hotline in the morning? And if it's the latter, what would he say? That he wants to report a sixteen-year-old girl who's afraid to go home after getting caught drinking and having sex? He can just imagine the look on the police officer's face assigned to investigate that report.

Given her intoxicated state, she almost manages to keep her voice level and composed as she speaks the next words. She still doesn't look at him. "Mr. H, I shouldn't have said what I did, okay? You're misunderstanding. I just don't want to get in trouble. That's all."

She reminds Jack of all the abused women who call the cops in the heat of the moment but then refuse to testify when the case comes to trial. But maybe he's blown things out of proportion. Maybe she's just a kid who said things to get him to do what she wanted.

Before Jack responds, her shoulders slump and she adds, "Just take me home. I'll deal."

And this is when Jack makes his first mistake. With a sigh, he cuts the lights and turns off the ignition. These actions cause her to finally turn to him, her brows furrowed in confusion.

"We'll just let you sober up some more," he explains. He prays no one comes along in the meantime.

She speaks a soft "thank you" and resumes playing with the button on her sweater. He switches on the radio for lack of anything better to do.

After a while, the two of them start talking. Just idle conversation. He asks about school and her teachers and what she wants to do after graduation, where she wants to attend college. She asks him what it's like to be the DA and whether he likes being a lawyer and if law school was hard. He keeps thinking that eventually he'll segue to talking about the drinking, about her relationship with Michael, but she's opening up so much and he doesn't want to cause her to shut down again.

"What's the worst case you've ever been involved in?" she asks.

He tries to read the meaning of the question. It's an innocent question; after all, her family didn't

even live in Missouri back when the Barnard case—and then Jenny's case—was news. But still, he wonders how much she knows, if Michael has told her anything.

"Um . . ." He takes a long time to answer. He can't think about the Barnard case without thinking about everything else that happened afterwards. Jenny charged with the murder of Maxine Shepard, a prominent client at the law firm where Jenny practiced law. Jack her alibi, because he happened to make the worst decision of his life on the same night Maxine was murdered. This fact set Jenny free, but it changed Jack's life forever.

He shakes his head as if to dust the cobwebs away and tells Celeste about the Barnard case. "It was this case, a little girl named Cassia Barnard had been abducted and murdered. I mean, I've seen a lot of bad things happen to kids, but . . . I don't know . . . this one was harder for some reason."

"Why?"

"A lot of reasons, I guess. For one, we were pretty certain she suffered a lot. He'd raped her, really hurt her. Then he left her in the woods to freeze to death." Celeste winces. "But we didn't ask for the death penalty, and a lot of people thought we should have and were angry that we didn't. Angry at me. At the end of it all, I almost thought we should have, too, and I'm opposed to capital punishment. That's how bad it was."

She looks down at her hands. "I'd like to do what you do, I think."

"Really? Why?"

"I don't know." She shrugs. "What you do makes a difference, you know?"

Jack tenses, remembering a conversation between Claire, Jenny and his brother Mark, back when Jack was an assistant prosecutor. He was trying to decide whether to run for DA. The three of them had been discussing whether Jack should run despite his opposition to the death penalty. What had Jenny argued? *To get into a position to make any difference, you sometimes have to compromise.* The comment had made Claire mad, though she'd restrained her anger. *He makes a difference now*, she'd said. The conversation now seems as if it took place in another lifetime.

Jack laughs a little, regretfully. "I did make a difference in that case, I guess. I'm just not too sure it was the difference people wanted."

"But it seems like you really care about what you do," Celeste argues. She doesn't understand. Can't understand. "I don't think many adults care much about what they do."

"Yeah," he agrees, softly. "I do care about what I do."

They're both quiet for a moment, and then he asks, "Do you really mean it, that you'd like to be an attorney?"

"Yes, but not the kind that sits at a desk all day. I'd like to be a prosecutor, like you, and be in a courtroom all the time."

Jack grins, suppressing a laugh. He's about to tell her that even prosecutors often sit at a desk and some other types of attorneys also go to court, but then she adds, "I want to protect people."

The statement gives him pause. He thinks again of the fear she expressed earlier. Maybe the two are unrelated, but his instinct tells him otherwise.

And this is when he makes his second mistake. In that instant, almost without realizing it, he decides he's going to cover for her, just as she's asked.

"Celeste?" Her big eyes look up at him. "If you mean what you say, don't make it harder on yourself, okay?"

"What do you mean, Mr. H?"

"College and law school are tough enough without a kid in tow."

It takes her a minute, but then he sees it sink in. She's silent for a long time. Then, so softly he has to strain to hear her, she says, "Okay." She nods vehemently and says it again. "Okay."

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