



**THE
MYSTERY
OF**

JESSICA BENSON

POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS

a novel by **C.K. LAURENCE**

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CHAPTER ONE

A small crowd of jocks on testosterone overload surrounded her, enchanted by her practiced act. She carelessly flirted, laughing seductively, reminding him yet again what a jackass he'd been for so many months. Breaking up with her was not simply *an* option...it was the only option. No, he would not postpone the inevitable for another day. It was time to pull himself out of the quicksand that was Jessica Benson. Miserable, he slammed the door to the den shut and leaned against it.

"Damn!" cursed Kyle Sands, veteran quarterback for the Miami Demons. Wanting to avoid a scene, the plan had been to take her out for dinner tonight and end the charade their relationship had become. With an audience, he thought she would be less likely to go ballistic. But Jessica already had plans for their evening.

"Let's party tonight!" Party, like every other night, this time at the home of his worst nightmare, Tyrell Utley. Kyle argued against it, but she was insistent. It was easier to do it her way one more time. So here he was, imprisoned in the den of his biggest rival, with nothing to do but a slow burn.

Kyle sat down in one of Tyrell's trendy but miserably uncomfortable chairs, and stared at the enormous television screen set in backlit wall units that showcased the countless trophies chronicling

Utley's rise to prominence. Framed jerseys from high school and college, like bookends, testified that #8 was #1 in Tuskegee, Alabama. Arrogant son of a bitch.

Kyle hit the remote, figuring to watch the Miami Hurricanes whip the Gators in the University of Florida Swamp. But what he got instead was a DVD of Utley showboating on the football field. *He's an asshole*, Kyle thought, but he did move like liquid mercury whether he was throwing a perfect pass or hustling past some defensive player he had juke-stepped into giving him the first down. *The creep must watch himself all the time...and I can't even stand to watch myself play in the mandatory game films every week anymore.*

Disgusted, Kyle got up, pulled the disk from the DVD player, and switched on the 'Canes game. Unexpectedly, it was all Miami. The Gators looked like they were playing to the death—theirs. It was only the third quarter and about to get really ugly.

Damned Utley. He'd been taken by the Miami Demons in the first round of this year's draft, and his signing bonus alone made him a wealthy man. He had more incentives built into his contract than any other player on the team, possibly in the league. It was no secret he was being groomed to replace Kyle. Utley was the league's latest comer.

Kyle's fifteen years in the game made him an old man by football standards, nearly thirty-six, though he figured his pain quotient put him up around eighty-six. He couldn't help but wonder how Utley's body would withstand the unforgiving punishment the game held for him in the years ahead.

The reverberating bass of the rap music in the other room broke through his thoughts, pummeling his brain like a shotgun blast and slamming his mind back to thoughts of Jessica. Jessica with the espresso eyes, so large and deep he had almost lost himself to them.

Six months had passed since the day she showed up at practice with another player's wife. They had beckoned to him from the bleachers and Coach Raymond joked that he'd never seen Kyle run a faster forty. She touched his arm and said she was intrigued by his power. *My power...what was I thinking?*

He asked her out within two minutes of her first smile and their relationship escalated rapidly. Everything she did and said captivated Kyle. For a very short moment he had even thought about marriage. *I've got to cut back on the booze.*

The first couple of months had been the stuff of fairy tales. Kyle found Jessica bright, ambitious and always ready to have a good time. His buddies' early warnings had not registered. Hell, who in the twenty-first century didn't have a past?

As time went by, the intense burn of infatuation passed, but what should have been the comfort of familiarity failed to set in. Kyle grew analytical about their differences. Age, for instance. His thirty-five to her twenty-five was huge. It was the gap between the nesting instinct and the need to party, or appreciating a fine play and thinking theater was a good movie, or loving jazz and believing it was the prefix to ‘ercise.’

But she had qualities that kept him interested. Jessica caught on fast and could adjust to most any situation. Her sharp edges were smoothed by sensuality and a great sense of humor. And the sex! Spontaneous combustion! But it had all been so much work. Her moodiness. The arguments. The secrets.

Jessica claimed it had to do with her career. As a popular model for print and runway work she faced enormous competition and worked long hours on exhausting commercial shoots. Yet when it came down to considering their problems, she blamed Kyle’s demanding schedule as the cause of their differences. She constantly questioned his exclusivity with her. No matter that he was monogamous from the day he first laid eyes on her, she accused him of screwing every female that looked his way.

And so the relationship had steadily deteriorated, with Kyle no longer able to justify his loyalty. The truth, as wiser men than he had preached, hurt. He slowly recognized that the rumors about her had way too strong a basis in the truth. She was unfaithful. She drank too much, did too many drugs. When he pleaded with her to stop, she would look at him with truth in her eyes and lie through her teeth. His friends and teammates mocked him and labeled him the poster boy for dumb jock.

The sound of someone or something bumping against the door brought him back to the present. No shutting out the racket of this party. It was time to track Jessica down and get out of here. It would be the last time he faced this unhappy ritual and the end of the pretense that was their liaison.

Pissed at himself for letting her drag him here in the first place, he opened the door to the den and stared out at the mass of gyrating bodies. There she was, tucked comfortably into the hulking chest of some guy he had never seen before, his big shaved head nestled into the gentle curve of her neck.

“Jess—hey! Jessica,” Kyle called out as he got close enough to touch her.

She looked up and gave him her sleepy, sloe-eyed smile. “Hey baby,” she slurred. “Game over already?”

“Yeah, the game’s over. C’mon, let’s get out of here.”

The thug she was bundled with raised his head and said, “Get lost, jerkoff.”

Ignoring him, Kyle reached out to her. “Jess, please. My head’s coming off and I have early practice in the morning.”

“Find your own woman, asshole. Can’t you see this one’s mine?” He gave Kyle a sniping smile and went back to smothering Jessica. She was not protesting.

Staring back at Kyle through foggy eyes, she said nothing and made no attempt to break from the dancing bear’s arms.

Kyle stood fast. The oaf continued. “You deaf or what? Get lost. Find your own piece of ass.” He then moved Jessica aside and gave Kyle a solid shove.

Kyle looked back at him with a dangerous grin. One last flash of sanity tugged at him. *Maybe I ought to walk away and let the prick have her*, but the thought obliterated when he heard his own voice challenge, “Actually, asshole, it’s you who’s groping *my* date!”

“Looks like she’s my date now, dude.” He gave Kyle a dark stare and took Jessica back into his arms. Kyle, disgusted with the party, Jessica, the jerk, and most of all himself, reared back and punched him square in the mouth. The big guy’s eyes rolled up into his head as he released Jessica and went down with a thud.

Kyle pulled Jessica to his side and headed for the door. Pushing through the stunned crowd, he glared ferociously at anyone daring to look in his direction. He practically dragged her outside into the damp night air as he worked at taking back his self-control. When they got to the car, Jessica finally spoke.

“Ooh, Kylie, I’ve upset you again.” Her words were fuzzy, but somehow always, managed to sound sincere.

“Let’s get you home and sobered up. Then we’ll talk.”

She giggled. “Not politics again, I hope.” The fresh air must have cleared her mind some. She was making one of her weaker attempts to tickle him out of his dark mood. In the past, it had worked.

“No. No politics tonight. This time it’s all about us.”

“I like the sound of that!” *Hiccup*.

Unsmiling, he settled her into his black Porsche Carrera and clamped her seatbelt shut. The little black slip of a dress she was wearing exposed the full length of her exquisite legs. Then, angered by his thoughts, Kyle pulled the hem of the skirt down in a useless attempt to cover her knees.

The ride to Jessica’s was ice cold and stone quiet. Upon arriving at her building, she stayed seated until Kyle opened her door. As though starving for his touch, she threw her arms around his neck and moaned

softly, clinging to him as he pulled her from the seat. Once out of the car, he stood her on her own and watched her wobble to the apartment entrance alone.

Muttering, he made the three-flight climb to Jessica's studio. As a top model on the South Beach scene, Jessica earned somewhere in the six-digit range. She chose to spend her money on the outrageous rent charged in the deco district so she could live where she worked and played. This was where the in-crowd could be found. No infirmities here. Elevators be damned.

After watching her fumble with the lock, he took her key. Her smile mocked him. "Always the gentleman, hmmm, Kyle? Even when something's weighing heavy on your mind."

"Yeah, really." He guided her into her apartment and sucked in his breath. "Jesus! It's like an oven in here. You could leave the air-conditioning on once in a while."

"You know I love it hot. It's never cramped your style before. Now it's bothering you? You don't wanna party. You can't take the noise because of your headaches. Early practice. Too many stairs. My apartment's too hot. I suppose there's a point to all this?" She had somehow sobered herself up, probably hadn't been as fucked up as she appeared, and was now in control of her thoughts and ready to do battle.

Kyle crossed the room and turned the air-conditioner on full blast. The studio was a twenty-five-foot square with a tiny galley kitchen and a one-at-a-time bathroom. Mauve walls with white wood borders around the floor and ceiling housed big picture windows draped in curly white-ish silky sheer curtains. A series of sepia shots of Jessica in varying styles of sensuous lingerie lined the walls. There was a glass and silver coffee table off to a corner with a deep rose velour love-seat and two matching benches. A couple of small silver-framed photos of her and Kyle as well as a Plexiglas-coated publicity shot of Kyle in uniform were on the table, along with a scattering of fashion magazines and unopened mail. There was also a bronze figurine of her likeness that one of her ex's had cast for her. A small shimmering crystal chandelier hung from the center of the mirrored ceiling over her king-sized bed, which was the focal point of the room. It was a woman's place.

Kyle dropped into the velour love-seat and watched as Jessica swayed over to him. She tried to ease herself onto his lap, but he moved quickly and brought her down next to him. This was it. He took a slow breath and spoke. "Jessica..." Short cough. "I, uh, we have issues and I don't think they're resolvable." *God, I sound like an idiot.*

She opened her eyes wide and reached to tickle his ribs. "Oh, you're so cute when you're angry with me. It's about messing with that

guy at the party, isn't it? Come on Kyle, you know I was just flirting. Sometimes I just can't help myself! Oh, you're jealous! That's so sweet."

Removing her hands from his chest, he said, "It's got nothing to do with the guy or the party tonight. It's about every night. It's about us." He swallowed in an attempt to moisten the cotton that lined his mouth.

"I don't want to argue, Jessica. I'm really lousy at this stuff, so I'm just going to say it straight up. Things aren't working for me, no, for us. Okay?"

"Our relationship started to disintegrate the day it began. You still see other men when I'm away..." He pressed his fingers against her lips as she started to protest, and continued, "Yeah, I know about them so don't bother to deny it. Damn, Jess, even when I'm in town I hear shit about who you're doing. You don't even make an attempt at being discreet anymore. And the drugs. You know how I feel about that shit. I'm too old for this garbage."

Jessica stared at him. The smile was still pasted on her face, but her jaw started to drop. Then she tilted her head as though she wasn't getting the joke.

When it became clear that her ploy wasn't working, she changed tactics and exploded. "Are you fucking serious? Other men! And you expected me to do exactly *what* while you were away every other week? I don't recall you putting a ring on my finger. Oh, and what about you? I sincerely doubt you are under lock-up on your road trips. Like anyone believes you just play football when you're away!"

"Yeah, that's what I went for and that's what I goddamned did. And Jessica, you shouldn't need a ring to keep a relationship monogamous. For Christ's sake, I was exclusive with you from the beginning, and you couldn't manage to do the same because you didn't have a ring? You seriously don't expect me to buy that crap!"

"Well, maybe I do...it's kind of like a security thing, you know?"

"A security thing, huh? We're not communicating here. We're just going back and forth about a situation that's done. "I've had it, Jess. Time for us to move on. It's over."

"So that's it? One strike and I'm out? Oopsie. Sorry for using a metaphor from the wrong sport, Sport." She giggled.

He always got a kick out of her sense of humor, but it would never be enough to make up for all she lacked. And what an actress, pouting now, gathering tears. This is where he usually caved, but not tonight.

"Come on Jessica. You're always bitching about what a bore I am. My idea of a great night is renting a DVD and watching it at home

with popcorn and beer. The only thing that consistently works for us is sex. And as good as it is, it's not enough."

Her tears started to roll. He was unprepared. She never actually cried. He often thought she had ice water running through her veins.

"Jessica, look, I'm right about this and you damn well know it. We're both looking for something that neither of us is capable of giving."

He stopped, grasping for the right words, anything that would help her understand, and stop with the tears. "Don't you recognize that if you have to see other men, then something's wrong? The guts of a decent relationship are missing here." He paused for a second and she seized the moment to take the offense.

"Oh, I get it now. You met someone else. You're turning it all around to make everything my fault because you're a gutless bastard, a shit-eating coward is what you are!"

She was wailing now, which was not nearly as appealing as the glistening eyes earlier. And she was getting louder.

A note of desperation crept into his voice. "Jessica, listen to me. Shhh! Calm down."

He forced himself to take a couple of deep breaths before he continued, then reached for her hand, which she violently jerked from his grasp. She stood and began to pace, bitching all the while about his 'new girlfriend.'

"Jessica, shut up, damn it!"

"Oh, there you go now. The great quarterback's calling all the plays. Get over yourself, huh?"

The cotton that lined his mouth had turned to sawdust and his chest was so tight it locked. He could feel the deep color of rage as it spread over his face. He hoped she would recognize it for what it was and back the hell off.

"It's not about either fucking game, football or you and me! I feel old, Jessica. This is probably my last year with the Demons and I'm getting to a place in my life where I want to settle down. The parties bore me. There's not a part of me that doesn't ache from the pain of fifteen years of taking hits from assholes who want to destroy me. My brawling days are behind me. You're just getting started. We're nearly eleven years apart. I thought I could deal with that, but I know now I can't.

"I'm not trying to be a bastard about this. When I was in my twenties I was exactly like you. No time for serious relationships, just party to party and partner to partner. I'm not there anymore. So why don't we make this easier on both of us and agree to move on..."

She broke into his sentence as though she had missed the entire dialogue.

“Give me a break, huh? Tell it like it is. Tell me about her, Kyle. Is she someone I know? I’ll bet the bank she’s no older than me, maybe even younger.”

He continued his defense in slow, carefully enunciated words. “Have not found anyone else. I have not been looking for anyone else.”

His jaw was taut, his teeth clenched. An angry muscle ticked at his temple. His voice got very low. “Listen to me, Jessica. We’re finished. I’m moving in one direction and, well, you’re not.”

The two sat in silence for a moment, glowering at one another. And then Jessica switched gears on him.

“I do understand, Kyle. I’ve really pissed you off, and truly, truly, I’m sorry. I’ll do better, honey, I promise. No ring required.”

She moved toward him, flashing her most alluring smile. Her brooding eyes sending the unmistakable signal that she was ready for some of the sex they agreed was so good between them.

He actually felt himself growing hard. *Damn, she’s good*, he thought. He even considered one quick lay for the road before mentally punching himself serious. *What the fuck am I thinking?* Furious at his body’s response and his own weakness, his tone grew harsh and his voice loud.

“You are not listening. Turn out the lights, Jessica. The party’s over. I don’t want anything from you including sex. *We* is past tense when it comes to us!” He stood and started for the door.

She seemed to be getting it now. The tinge of seduction was gone and she spat another round of vitriol at him. “You, you, you sanctimonious prick! Who do you think you are talking to me like that? You’re right. It’s over. Just get outta here. There’re plenty of guys who’ll be glad to know you’re out of the picture.” Her voice had gone shrill and by the time she stopped for a breath, she was shrieking. Taking his cue and the opportunity, he opened the door. She was right behind him, shouting about how he was old news anyway. “And don’t come around when you’re desperate for a good blow job...”

She was still yelling when he hit the stairs. He took them four steps at a time, as though it was devil herself chasing him. Her voice followed him out the front door. His head was exploding.

Kyle reached the car just as a meter-maid was slapping a ticket on his windshield. After a feeble attempt to charm her out of it, he thanked her and tossed it into the glove compartment with the others.

Damn, what a night!

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