

*Another viewpoint of a scene from*  
*Autographs, Abductions and A-List Authors*

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L.J. Remarchik stared down at the autopsy report on his desk then looked at the sunrise brightening the sky over the Texas horizon in the distance. *Red, white and blue*, he thought. Red sun streaks, white clouds, and blue sky all mingled together to create a welcome burst of color. He'd been staring at crime scene photos or lab reports most of the night and the sight of the outside world was refreshing.

His gaze shifted to the streets four stories below. Abilene at this time of morning was silent, the streets empty except for delivery trucks and an occasional bus lumbering past. August temperatures hadn't started to build yet so the city seemed cool and clean. Later on in the day it would start to look baked and wilted as humidity and heat took its toll.

"She had motive and opportunity," his partner, Dan Haney, said from the desk across the room.

L.J. stood, pushing back his creaky desk chair. He felt baked and wilted after spending the night in the detective's squad room, hashing out details about the murder. The woman who'd been killed, Jan Pritchard, was a high-profile author in town for a writer's conference. L.J. and Dan were getting pressure to make progress on the case.

"She had motive and opportunity, but what about method?" L.J. went to the coffee machine but decided against another cup. At this rate, he wouldn't sleep for days. He ran a hand through his cropped gray hair as he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the window. The lines around his eyes and mouth seemed more pronounced and a stubble of gray darkened his cheeks. His resemblance to the actor, Sam Eliot, was getting more noticeable as he aged. L.J. scowled at the reminder of his approaching 56<sup>th</sup> birthday. *I'm too young to be this old*, he thought.

An image of B.R. Emerson sprang up, fully formed, in his mind. She was sitting on the floor, looking like a little rag doll someone had discarded. Her long hair was bundled into a braid as thick as his wrist, the brown and gold strands mixed with shimmering gray. Her skin was pale golden and so smooth he'd itched to touch her cheek, just to see if it really was as soft as it looked. Then when she opened her eyes and looked at him —

L.J. jerked his gaze away from his old man reflection. "What about method?" he repeated, his voice harsher than he meant it to be. "Emerson was standing in line with a hundred other people. How did she kill Jan Pritchard in front of a room full of people? And motive?" L.J. shook his head, wishing he could shake away the

sight of those big green eyes, so full of laughter and intelligence. Beatrice R. Emerson was smart, sassy, cute, courageous, and just about everything he'd ever wanted in a woman.

She was also a suspect in a murder investigation.

"She had motive," Dan said. He joined L.J. at the window, staring at the street below. L.J. glanced at him, noticing the thoughtful, sad look in Dan's baby blue eyes. His partner was tall, dark, and handsome with movie star good looks and the kind of body women lusted after. He was also a tenacious cop, a closet romantic, and miserable since he'd broken up with the one woman he loved. Speaking of which ...

"Interesting that Margaret is acting as Bea Emerson's lawyer," L.J. said.

Dan blushed so red it looked painful. L.J. turned away, busying himself at the desk to hide a smile. Margaret Troolin and Dan had been engaged but Dan broke it off when Margaret started to make a lot more money than he did and Dan's pride got in the way. He still regretted the break-up and L.J. had been working on him, prodding him to right a wrong before too much time elapsed.

"She looks good. I wonder if she's dating anybody." L.J. dropped the paper he was holding and picked up his suit coat from the back of his chair. "Will it interfere if she's involved in this case?"

"Of course not," Dan snapped. He headed for the exit. "I'm going to the coroner's office to check on the tox report. Do you still want to go to the conference lunch to talk to the witnesses there?"

L.J. nodded. “I want to see them when they aren’t expecting us so I can get a sense of what’s going on with this Pritchard woman. How important was she? I know she was a best-selling author, but was she famous enough to make somebody want to kill her? We need to find out more about the writing business.” He looked down at his desk where a book lay, the dust jacket off and lying next to it. Bea Emerson — no, he corrected himself, B.R. Emerson — stared up at him, her gaze straight and unflinching with a small smile on her full lips. Her hair was pulled back, hanging behind her and framing her oval face. “We need to find out more about her,” he said without thinking.

“She is our prime suspect,” Dan said as he left the room.

*Prime suspect*, L.J. thought as he followed Dan out the door. Bea Emerson had been standing in front of the victim when Jan Pritchard died a violent death. Did that make her a killer? Or was she just in the wrong place at the wrong time? True, Emerson was in competition with Pritchard, a mega-selling author, for an award. Was that enough motive for murder?

Dan and L.J. separated at the elevator, Dan heading for the east wing leading to the suite of offices housing forensics and the medical examiner. L.J. went to the locker room and shaved then changed his shirt and coat before going to the garage to check out a sedan for the day.

Bea Emerson occupied his mind as he drove the short distance to the hotel where the mystery writer’s convention was in progress. She was just a tiny slip of a

thing, barely coming up to his shoulder, but he'd seen the fire in her eyes and the firm way she took a grip on her fear as she answered his questions.

A sudden thought made him brake a bit too abruptly as he pulled into a taxi parking spot in front of the hotel. Two women had been with Emerson yesterday, acting like bodyguards. He tossed a *Police Business* placard onto the dash before striding into the hotel. Those women...

L.J. pulled out his Palm Pilot and checked his notes. Meecham and Powers were their names. They'd clung to Emerson like dirt on pigs. He could swear they were lesbians. Was Emerson...?

His gut clenched at the thought. What a waste of a good woman if she was. Then he shook his head at his own ramblings. What did it matter who Bea Emerson loved or didn't love? As soon as the conference wrapped up, she'd go back to her life in Minnesota and back to whoever she had in her life, whether it be a man or a woman.

The thought still galled him, though. She was beautiful woman, smart and loyal and funny. What a pity if ... L.J. pushed the thoughts away. *Time to get back to the case. Time to forget about Bea Emerson as a woman and start thinking about her as a suspect.*

He took the escalator two steps at a time, crossing an open area to stand at the door of the ballroom where the crime occurred the night before. How did someone kill Jan Pritchard? She was sitting at a table at the front of a ballroom full

of writers, fans, and other publishing people. She signed the book for Emerson, spoke with her, then pitched over and died. How the hell did someone —

Movement to his right made him turn his head. Bea Emerson entered the hallway in front of the ballroom. Today she wore a long striped shirt over shorts and flip-flop sandals. Tucked into the crook of her arm was a soft-sided bag and what looked like a stack of letters. When she saw him look at her, she crossed the room, moving slowly but obviously curious.

“Miss Emerson,” L.J. said. “You’re up early.”

“I like to get a jump on the day.” She hesitated then inched closer, peeking in the ballroom. “You’re early, too. Where’s your partner?”

*Of course she’d ask about Dan*, L.J. thought sourly. He frowned but then she looked up at him with wide, curious green eyes. She blushed, a soft red tinging the whiteness of her cheeks. Once again he had the urge to touch her, to see if her skin was really as soft as it looked. “Dan had some things to wrap up last night. He’ll be along later.” L.J. turned back to the ballroom, jerking his face away from her so he couldn’t see how soft she looked, how warm and pretty, how ...

She took a step closer to him. He swallowed, hard. A scent like clean wildflowers seemed to waft around her. She was saying something about the hotel staff and all he could do was nod, his mind whirling as they chatted about her book. As she started walking, he kept pace with her, talking about God knew what — L.J. felt like a babbling idiot, just talking and watching her as they hurried down the hall.

He remembered the police file they'd compiled on her. She wasn't married and her ring-less fingers confirmed it. Of course, the lack of a ring didn't mean anything, but still, it was good to have confirmation.

"I'm going swimming now."

L.J. blinked, suddenly realizing they were at a bank of elevators in the interior of the hotel. "I'll go along for the ride."

She pushed a button inside the elevator then rocked up and down in her flip-flops. L.J. stared down at the shoes, afraid to be caught staring at her smooth, silky thighs.

"They were a gift," she said.

He mumbled a reply that must have made sense because she started talking about her house and her neighbors. When the elevator door opened, she stepped out. "It was nice chatting with you." She started off down the hall, walking so fast she stepped out of her shoes.

L.J., following behind, almost ran her over. For one brief moment he was pressed against her body, her long hair just inches from his face, her warm butt pressed against his middle, her silky thighs within touching distance. It was like the day before when he'd brushed against her and felt an electric shock go over him. Today was stronger, though. Chaotic images of Bea Emerson naked, smiling at him, laughing with him, loving him, suddenly flashed through his brain. He longed to clamp his hands on her arms, drag her to him, and kiss her until she dropped.

“I told you,” he said, his voice ragged. “You need brake lights.” He leaned closer to take a long whiff of her clean, sweet smell.

She trembled against him before she steadied herself. “And I told you to stop tailgating.”

“But it’s such—” He stopped himself just in time from saying, *It’s such a nice tail*. He longed to confirm for himself what he suspected: her body was as sassy as her personality.

She started walking as she glanced back at him. He prayed she wouldn’t see the lust in his eyes. “I’m going to swim now,” she said breathlessly. They went into the exercise room and he watched as she fumbled out her room card, swiping it to give them access to the swimming pool. As she opened the door, he grabbed it and held it for her.

“No problem. I’ve got plenty of time.” She passed under his arm as he stared down at her, wishing he could tell her what he was thinking, wishing they were somewhere else and not in the middle of a murder, wishing ...

Wishing she wasn’t a suspect.

“Time for what?” she asked as she grabbed towels from the bin.

L.J. watched as she went to a deck chair and settled down, stretching out and putting her gear next to her. He prayed she wouldn’t be wearing one of those little bikini suits. If she was, he’d probably have heart failure.

He jammed his hands into his jeans pockets to still their trembling. He was too old to fall in love with a woman he just met. Too old for love at first sight. Too

old to be gawking at a woman and thinking how pretty she was and what it would be like to make love to her and get her to smile at him ...

She was peering up at him. L.J. knew all his mental arguments were in vain. It was way too late for all that. He was already in way over his head.