Twitter Thread by Jerri Bell #JusticeforVanessaGuillen

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@JABell27

A thread on the most unusual “victim advocate” case I handled. Not, oddly, a SA case. This is a story for NCOs & JOs especially. 1/

I was a LT (O3) assigned to USS Mount Whitney. Not a surface warfare officer, so while they stood command duty officer watches in port, I stood the lesser officer watch: Officer of the Deck. A nonrate was often assigned to my watch team as Messenger of the Watch: 2/

Let’s call her Laila. She was a seaman (E3) w/no rating (MOS), so she chipped paint & handled lines etc in Deck Department. She was 35yo, had a BA, & spoke two languages flawlessly—English & Farsi. She was SQUARED AWAY. But: she was from Iran. Came to the US as a child 3/

to go to school & live w/her older brother, a doctor. This was 1979. She got stuck in the US during the Revolution, became a US citizen. Joined the USN when her brother was killed in a car wreck. Most of the sailors called her “The Terrorist.” She did not fit in. 4/

She was VERY squared away, & always chipper & upbeat. She was a runner. She saved every penny, trying to get enough $ to get her youngest brother to Jordan & then to help him apply for a US visa & eventually citizenship. She wanted to strike for linguist, but still had 5/

immediate family in Iran so couldn’t get a clearance. One day, she came to watch & was not chipper. Very quiet. Sad. I asked what was wrong. Eventually she told me. She had been given a little promotion to department supply clerk, working directly for the ship’s boatswain, 6/

a CWO3. He told her he was going through a bad divorce, asked to borrow $ from her. Then he “needed” more. Each time, she went to NFCU & withdrew cash at the teller window. How much? I asked. $6K, she said. It was everything she had been able to save toward getting 7/

her brother out of Iran. Months passed, & Boats did not repay her. When she asked about the $, he threatened to “make sure she never got rated” & told her that no one would ever believe her b/c she was an E3 & he was a CWO3. She would get in trouble for “lying.” 8/

She had the receipts for the cash withdrawals. She did not want to report him. She was terrified. I told her that I couldn't make her report—but we could trust the XO to handle it correctly & help her. And that I would stay with her every step of the way as her advocate, even 9/

though she was not in my direct chain of command. What finally convinced her: I pointed out that she was probably not the 1st sailor he'd run that scam on, & if she didn't try to stop him, she wouldn't be the last. She wouldn't report for herself, but she would to save a /10

shipmate from going through what she had. Long story short, XO called in NCIS. They got permission from NCIS HQ to wire her, & they coached her a little. She got Boats on tape threatening her career, & even stating the amount of $ he had bilked her out of. /11

You should have seen the CO's face when we played that tape for him. CAPT Dick Enderly, USNA '71, is the salt of the earth. Rage doesn't begin to describe it. He called Boats straight to his stateroom, played the tape back for him, & had him escorted off the ship /12

and off the pier to await court-martial at the Transient Personnel Unit. Somebody from Deck took his stuff to him. He was reduced in rank to E6, dishonorably discharged, & had to repay Seaman Laila the $6K. Here are the takeaways: /13

Laila was already vulnerable & isolated: rejected by her peers b/c of her country of origin. She liked the special assignment. Thought Boats had special confidence in her. Trusted him to treat her well at eval time. He shared details of his personal life w/her, /14

& put her in an even more isolated position by making her supply clerk—the other sailors in Deck Dept resented an E3 getting the cushy paperwork assignment they felt she didn't earn. He convinced her to do him just one little favor. Then another. And then he sprung the trap. /15

Criminal behavior, yes. Also a serious abuse of power. This is exactly how predators, sexual or criminal, groom targets: pick a vulnerable mark, isolate, desensitize, develop trust, reward compliance, demand silence. /16

The only outward sign: Laila just wasn't herself. The reason she talked? Open-ended questions: "Seaman Laila, you don't seem okay. Is something wrong? Would you like to talk about it?" The reason she reported: selfless concern for her shipmates. And because at every step /17

XO, NCIS, & I made it clear: what she did in response was HER CHOICE. We gave her back the power, told her we had faith she would use it to do the right thing for herself & for the Navy. She was a courageous woman. She lived the Navy core values. /18

Bottom line: There's a lot of "people first" jargon floating around out there. It translates at the NCO/JO level to: Know your people. If something seems off, ask open-ended questions & be patient for the answers. If someone has been the victim of a crime or assault, /19

empower THEM. Don’t try to be a white knight. Get them resources. Support their choices to the maximum extent possible. And then give the predators hell. Hold them accountable & drive them OUT. Here endeth the sea story. /20

Adding, after talking w/a friend in DMs: One key difference between this story & so many cases of SA is that XO & CO believed Laila, were outraged on her behalf, & took action. How much difference would it make if leaders responded to SA like other kinds of abuse of power?