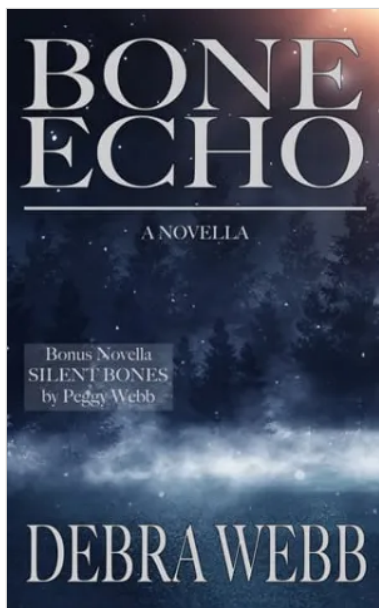




Bone Echo (Bone #3)

Author: *Debra Webb*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Just when you thought the past was dead and buried the echoes remind you that you can never outrun all your demons.

Police Chief Kurt Nichols moved to the coast of Maine to escape the tragedy of his past his murdered wife, his bad habits. But mostly he needed to land some place safe and peaceful to raise his teenage daughter and L.A. just wasn't that place.

But now a double homicide has him scrambling to find a heinous killer a killer who might know Kurt and his daughter all too well.

When genius turns to evil no one is safe.

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CHAPTER ONE

Twenty-five Years Ago

West Memphis, Tennessee

When the door from the kitchen into his garage workshop opened, he thought it was his wife coming to tell him she was back home from grocery shopping. Smiling, he continued to run the sander over the wood, thinking of how she would sneak up behind him, wrap her arms around his midsection, and kiss the back of his neck.

She would smell like roses, a fragrance she used in her shampoo, the lotion she smoothed on her skin, and the perfume she dabbed behind her ears and knees. Her small embrace would be a welcome respite from the sawdust and noise in his carpentry workshop. A small break from the work he loved, turning raw wood into beautiful furniture.

It might even lead to other things. They had been married only three years, practically newlyweds. That he, a man of forty, could be so lucky was one of the miracles of his life.

As the footsteps came closer, he whistled one of the Jerone Kern love songs his wife adored.

Wait.

That wasn't the scent of roses. It was gasoline and axle grease.

He half turned and the garrote came around his neck, tightened until he almost blacked out.

“You took everything from him.” The voice close to his ear was male, deep and gritty. Chilling. “Now I’m going to take everything from you.”

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CHAPTER TWO

Dunkin' Donuts, Memphis

Detective Dudley Stephens and his partner, Detective Jackson “Jack” Jordan, were in a Dunkin' Donuts in west Memphis grabbing doughnuts and coffee for a late afternoon break when the call came in.

“A hysterical woman is calling for assistance at 1310 Fawn Grove Road.”

Chills went through Dudley. He knew that place.

“We’re on it,” Jack said.

“What’s the nature of the problem?” Dudley asked.

“We don’t know,” the dispatcher told him. “The woman just keeps screaming, ‘Help! Please hurry.’”

Dudley put the siren on and tore toward the house he knew like the back of his hand—his brother Charlie’s new house, the one he’d bought only six weeks ago with his wife Laura.

The car roared along the river and wound among oak trees showing the first greening of spring. Flowering dogwood and wild pear trees dotted the lane with white blossoms.

Nature's extravagant display of beauty was a stark contrast to the scene he witnessed at his brother's house. Laura was standing in front of Charlie's workshop, her face red from screaming, the garage door open, a carnage behind her.

Blood. Everywhere. On the floor, the walls, the workbench, the skill saw, the hammer, the sander, and the wood that was being transformed into a chair by the carpenter, who was nowhere in sight.

Bile rose in Dudley's throat and terror seized him so it was impossible to move. "Where's Charlie?" His sister-in-law looked at him without seeing him, her eyes blank, her expression terrified. She kept shaking her head. No. No. No. "LAURA!. Where's my brother?"

Jack clamped a hand over his shoulder. "Easy now. I've got this." He called for backup then moved toward Laura Stephens, graceful for such a big man, huge and muscular. At only thirty, he had the easy confidence and skills of a much more seasoned cop, tough on criminals but surprisingly gentle with victims. He was a distant cousin to the sports legend Michael Jordan, a connection that gave him bragging rights he never used.

"Can you tell me what happened here?" He leaned close to Laura, his face a mask of kindness and concern. She backed up as if she'd been slapped. "Take your time. Do you need a drink of water first?"

She shook her head as if she were shaking off the shock. Her story came out in disconnected sighs. She'd been at the grocery store and had come home to find the workshop covered with blood and her husband missing. She'd searched everywhere, calling his name though every inch of the house and as much of their five-acre property as she could manage.

"How long were you gone?"

She hesitated, uncertain. “Two hours?”

Backup arrived, sirens screaming. Jack led her away from the door so the team would have easy access. They quickly went to work in the garage, photographing the scene then tagging and bagging.

When the bloody hammer went into the bag, Dudley recoiled at the idea of someone using it to bludgeon his brother. Or had his brother used it to bludgeon someone else, and then run?

Blood spatter went up the walls, consistent with a bludgeoning. But then...

“We’ve got tissue clinging to the teeth of the skill saw.”

This was a nightmare. When he spotted bone dust on the floor, horror took hold of him and wouldn’t let go. There was no way his older brother was capable of using a hammer against another human being, let alone a skill saw. Charlie was the kindest, most giving man he’d ever known. He had sacrificed his future so Dudley could go to the police academy, make something of himself, lift himself out of the nightmare of poverty and drunkenness they had both endured growing up.

The frightful discoveries continued. Blood encrusted a carving knife, the hatchet Charlie used to chop down smaller trees on his property that would later become a spindle or a piece of molding, and the toolbox with all manner of screwdrivers, chisels. and wire cutters. A pair of bloody goggles lay near the table where his recent work lay, unfinished.

The plastic coverings over Dudley’s shoes turned red and slick as he helped process the scene. Slaughter screamed through his mind. This was not just a murder scene; it was a house of horrors where his brother had been brutally slaughtered. He didn’t need forensic results to tell him that.

But why? Everybody loved Charlie. He had no enemies.

His gaze swung to his sister-in-law, Laura, the woman Charlie adored. She had appeared so suddenly in his life, and so late, none of them knew much about her. Not really.

Charlie had met her three years ago at the only social for singles he had ever attended. He was thirty-seven years old at the time and had given up that he would ever find someone to love on his own. Laura, a quiet redhead, had been sitting in the corner of the community center by herself. Not dancing. Not socializing. Charlie sat down beside her and they spent the rest of the evening talking.

She had just moved to Memphis from Little Rock, Arkansas, an orphan with no family, who had lived in various foster homes until she was eighteen. Then she had made her way in the world waiting tables and cleaning houses until she finally got enough money to go to beauty school. She was proud of being a licensed hair stylist, and she was excited about working in a bigger salon and meeting new people.

Was she sweet? Yes. Was she kind and soft-spoken. Yes. Did she love Charlie? Yes, it appeared so.

His mantra with his partner Jack whispered through Dudley's mind. You can't trust what you think you see.

He and his wife and two small children had been at Charlie's wedding, but Laura didn't have a soul there. Not even a friend. Was she who she claimed to be? Could she have fooled him and his brother, both?

She stood in the front yard about a hundred feet from the garage, composed now, hugging herself and rocking slightly back and forth on her Converse sneakers. Dudley felt a twinge of guilt. He should comfort her. Charlie would want it.

But what he knew, what he saw, held him in place.

The last rays of sunset cast an orange light over her, so she appeared to be standing in the middle of a fire. She watched every move inside the workshop as if she were cataloging it for future reference. There were no tears, no signs of the high emotion of the woman who had made a frantic phone call to the Memphis Police Department.

Her shoes were bloody, and so was the hem of her khaki slacks. She'd left tracks near the kitchen door and one bloody handprint on the wall nearby. She'd wiped her bloody hands along her face at the hairline and on her white blouse and the sides of her slacks.

Dudley's heart constricted. This was a murder scene, and his sister-in-law was the prime suspect.

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CHAPTER THREE

Memphis Police Department

Laura Finnegan Stephens, still wearing her blood-stained clothes, sat in the interrogation room waiting to elaborate on the sketchy details she had given police at the scene. Her hands were in her lap, her face was a perfect blank. She was so erect and unmoving, she might have been a robot.

Dudley and his partner stood on the other side of the one-way mirror, watching her.

“She hasn’t moved in five minutes,” Jack said. “Is she always like this?”

“She’s quiet, but I’ve never had any reason, and not much occasion, to study her. Charlie...” He choked up, almost lost it. “We got together every now and then for beers. No wives. You already know this.” When Jack wasn’t off with some hot young chick, he was always there to share a beer. Easy going and fun, a respite from Dudley’s increasingly stressful home-life.

If Jack was surprised by Dudley’s sparse social life, especially where his brother was concerned, he didn’t show it. He barely knew Gloria Jean. She hated being a cop’s wife and kept contact with his partner and cohorts to a bare minimum.

She would have scoffed at the idea of having beer with them. Her excuse for everything was, I’m too busy with the girls. At ages five and seven, they were a handful, but still... it seemed his wife could try to understand the pressures of his work.

He didn't have a clue whether Laura would have joined them. It was always just him and his brother, best friends all their lives.

Charlie was five years older than Dudley. Through the years he had been both brother and parent to him, clumsily changing his diaper while their mother lay drunk on the sofa; smearing peanut butter on crackers, the only food in the house; washing what few clothes they had; patching the soles of their worn-out shoes with paper bags from the liquor store.

Jack's hand on Dudley's shoulder said I'm here for you, no words necessary. Their partnership had always been like that. They always had each other's backs, no matter what.

"Have you ever seen Charlie's wife mad at him?"

"No. But I wasn't around them much, and Charlie wouldn't have told me. He was private that way."

"I'll see what I can find out. We'll get whoever did this." Jack squeezed his shoulder and then walked off toward the interrogation room.

When he entered, Laura barely reacted, just nodded and kept her hands folded in her lap. He straddled the chair on the opposite side of the table and quietly explained the procedure to her. She would be recorded. She could have an attorney present if she chose. She was simply giving a formal statement that might reveal details she had forgotten in the immediate aftermath of the events that took place in her garage.

"Walk me through the exact timeline," Jack said. "What time did you leave the house?"

"After lunch."

“Can you be more specific?”

“It was around two because the TV was on in the kitchen and my favorite soap opera had just started airing, Beyond the Sunset Skies.”

“Where was Charlie when you left?”

“In his workshop.”

“Was anyone besides your husband in the house?”

“No. Just Charlie. He went in there after we ate, like always.”

“Was he expecting anyone?” She shook her head. “A client, perhaps. Someone to pick up furniture or place a new order?”

“Not that I know of. I fix hair, he makes furniture. It’s just the way we live. We don’t discuss each other’s business.”

“How long were you gone?”

“I told you. Four hours?”

“Actually, you told us two.”

She pushed her hair off her face. “I... I was upset. It was closer to four.”

“It takes you that long to get groceries?”

“I... had to get gas. And... I stopped to pick up the dry cleaning.”

“Where?” Jack asked, and Laura shook her head. “Do you have receipts?” She shook her head again.

“I.. don’t know. I’ll have to look.”

Watching through the one-way mirror, Dudley felt his stomach clench. Until they processed the evidence from the garage and heard back from the team left behind to question the neighbors and search the property for clues, they were going to have very little to work with. So far, Laura’s information surrounding Charlie’s last moments was as sparse as the information about the life she’d lived before she came to Memphis.

Jack walked her through the usual routine. Had there been any suspicious phone calls? Strange persons or cars in the neighborhood? Was Charlie worried about anything? Had anyone threatened him? Or her? Did Charlie owe money to anybody, perhaps have some gambling debts?

Laura’s string of monosyllabic no’s had Dudley wanting to ram his fist into the wall.

How could a woman who lived a picture-perfect life in a blissfully peaceful marriage suddenly find her garage covered with blood and her husband missing? He had to restrain himself from racing into the interrogation room and screaming at his sister-in-law. He forced himself to pay attention to every detail beyond the one-way mirror.

Jack’s impatience with the scarce information and Laura’s total lack of emotion showed in the way he tightened his jaw and sat more erect in his chair, every muscle in his body tensed for action, as if, suddenly, Laura might snap and lunge across the table at him screaming, I did it. I did it!

Suddenly Jack leaned across the table. “Mrs. Stephens, did you kill your husband?”

“NO!” She covered her mouth with both hands then hung her head, her shoulders shaking.

“Did you have someone kill him?” Clamping her lips tight, she shook her head again. “Are you sure about that? Four hours is a long time to get groceries.”

Laura turned mute again, sitting in her chair like stone, staring into space.

Dudley’s brother was out there, somewhere. Probably dead. Who could survive an attack that left that kind of carnage?

And he didn’t have a single clue where to find him.

It was senseless. Insane. Rage filled him so he lost track of what was going on inside the interrogation room. He raised his balled fists and almost smashed them through the one-way mirror before he regained control. He needed a drink.

Footsteps echoed on the tile floor, and Jack squeezed his shoulder with a hand the size of a Virginia ham. “You okay, buddy?”

“I will be. Give me a minute.”

“Sure thing. Laura clammed up.”

“I saw. What about a lie detector test?”

“She didn’t say yes. But she didn’t say no.”

“Then let’s get busy. Time’s running out for my brother.”

Night was already upon them and the hours were ticking away. Dudley pushed

through his rage and hurried down the hall with Jack where the rest of the team had gathered. A table with coffee, soft drinks, pizza, and doughnuts stood against one side of the wall, and hard metal chairs were in a haphazard semicircle around a cork-board that held photos of the scene.

Seeing them, his stomach turned. It seemed impossible that only this morning he had called Charlie to arrange to meet after his shift at Big Jim's Brews near the river. He would never share another beer with his brother. The knowledge unleashed a flood of grief that threatened to swamp him.

Buck up. You can do this. It was Charlie's voice echoing from the past. Dudley stiffened his spine and grabbed a cup of coffee. The idea of food turned his stomach.

Normally, he would be the lead detective, but considering the presumed victim was his brother, Jack would take the lead.

Commander John Evans strode into the room. He'd been in charge of the homicide squad for fifteen years, a gray-haired and seasoned man who was both street-wise and savvy.

"The intruder picked the lock and entered through the back door leading into the den." He pointed to a diagram of Charlie's house. "From there, he went through the kitchen, kicked over the cat's water dish, probably accidentally, and then entered the workshop through the door from the kitchen into the garage."

He moved the pointer to Charlie's worktable. "From the position of the victim's work table and the arrangement of tools and supplies on it, we can safely conclude the intruder would have surprised him from behind."

Coward, came to Dudley's mind. But the attack in broad daylight and the evidence of a brutal killing told him something else: this looked like a professional hit from

somebody out for revenge.

The question was, why?

With no results yet from the evidence they'd gathered, the facts they knew were sparse. Commander Evans went through the timeline as they knew it. Laura's had changed, so hers was mere supposition.

The guys who had stayed at the scene to question neighbors reported that Charlie's closest neighbor had not been home, and none of the other neighbors had seen any suspicious vehicles or persons in the neighborhood. The privacy afforded by the large wooded lots in the neighborhood also provided isolation that would allow anyone with ill intent to sneak around undetected.

"Keep digging," the commander said. "Question the neighbors again, and focus on finding the closest neighbor. This time, ask questions about the Stephens' relationship, too. I want a team at the beauty salon where the wife works. It's Curl Up and Dye off Poplar. Somebody, somewhere, saw or knows something."

Dudley had never been more grateful for his commander's never-give-up, positive attitude. It boosted morale, even his own.

Still, his need for a drink was overwhelming. By the time the criminal investigation squad left headquarters, it was two in the morning, and raining.

"You okay?" Jack said. "You need me to stick around a while?"

Dudley waved him off. "Go home and get some rest. I'm fine."

He wasn't. He stood with the rain soaking his hair and clothes while he watched his partner head for home, a neat bachelor's pad in a shabby, crime-ridden neighborhood,

which was about all he could afford on a cop's salary.

Home for Dudley was a small green cottage in an older section on the east side of town that had failed to enjoy the gentrification taking places in other parts of Memphis. His lawn needed mowing, as did most of his neighbors' yards. The paint on his green shutters was fading, his roof need replacing, and his wife was losing interest. Fast.

He couldn't face her. Not now. Although his daughters would be fast asleep, he didn't want to see them, either. The murder scene clung to him like pollen he couldn't wash off. He felt tainted by it, sickened, as if he had a contagious disease his children might catch.

He drove until he found saw the blinking neon sign, Big Jim's Brews. Open 24-7.

He sat in his car, wrestling with his need and his conscience. Charlie was out there in the rain. Lost.

Need won.

Dudley got out of his car, ducked his head against the downpour, and hurried into the bar. It was almost empty. He slid onto the bar stool. Three stools down a woman with purple hair was crying into her whiskey glass. He knew her. She worked Beale Street.

She glanced up at him. Cringed. "You after me, cop?"

"Not tonight, Brenda." Big Jim, himself, approached, and Dudley told him, "One for the road, Jim."

"Where's your brother tonight?"

The question ripped through him like shrapnel. That was the question. Where was Charlie?

He rubbed his hand over his face as if he might physically remove the fear and the rage that were tearing him apart. There was no way he could—or would—explain to Big Jim what had happened in Charlie's workshop.

“He's not coming.”

He would never come again. The realization tore a hole in Dudley's heart, and he sat there, feeling love and hope and belief in mankind leak out of him, fall to the floor, and drain through the cracks in the ancient floorboard. Without his brother, he was half a man.

CHAPTER FOUR

Somewhere in the Dark

The blood would never come out of the clothes. Too bad. It had been a favorite pair of slacks.

The driver turned the windshield wipers on high and drove through the darkened streets, every thought, every memory, hidden by the curtain of rain. It was peaceful, soothing. Just as tightening the garrote around his neck had been, feeling the body jerk in reaction, feeling a surge of power akin to an electrical current.

The garrote had been only the beginning of a cat and mouse game that used every tool in the workshop to its fullest advantage. The victim fought. Oh, how he fought. But hornet spray in his eyes, the knife slashes across his arms, and the screwdriver wedged into his left thigh made it impossible for him to land a solid blow or pin his assailant down.

The hooded raincoat, plastic rain pants, and rain boots had provided protection from much of the blood. But the amount on the floor and walls had been more satisfying than sitting down to a banquet table and eating every single item on it.

Who knew killing could be such a natural high?

The urge to share the jubilation was so great it almost burst through the driver's skin, almost spilled over and turned the expressionless face into a maniacal grin.

It had been a slick job. A secluded house. An unsuspecting man. A perfect alibi.

Nobody would ever find the killer or the victim. Ever.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dudley's House

The minute he drove up, he saw the lights ablaze in the living room. Dudley's heart sank. He had hoped to sneak into his house, take a quick shower and then finish the night on the sofa, as he often did of late, especially after a murder that required the homicide squad to work into the wee hours of the morning.

He told Gloria Jean he was being respectful of her. There was no need to disturb her night's sleep just because he didn't get one. She always countered that he was avoiding her, he didn't love her anymore, he was married to his job.

Tonight, he was too bone tired and heartsick to face that kind of confrontation. As he got out of the car, he prayed that she had just left the lights on for him.

He slid the key into the lock and eased open his door. His luck had run out. There she sat, his wife, perched on the edge of the sofa, arms crossed over her chest, a frown marring her face. The fact that she was still beautiful, even when angry, made him want to try harder to save what they'd once had.

He still marveled that a dark eyed beauty with cherry lips had fallen in love with an ordinary man you'd never notice on the street. Dudley had a plain, uninteresting face, brown hair that refused to conform to any style except a buzz cut, a cowlick that made the front of it stick up as if he were constantly startled. He was shaped like a refrigerator. No broad shoulders and trim waist. Just a boxy man with powerful arms and legs as strong and sturdy as fence posts.

“Do you know what time it is?”

The grandfather clock in the corner was chiming the half hour. Three thirty in the morning. He decided to take a conciliatory approach to Gloria Jean. “You didn’t have to wait up, sweetheart.”

“Don’t try to sweet talk me! Didn’t you ever hear of the telephone?” She jumped off the sofa and strode across the room, a tall, slender woman who made her cotton nightgown and cheap chenille robe look like some expensive costume one of the old Hollywood glamour movie stars might wear. She stopped within a foot of him, arms akimbo. “You went to the bar, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” No use denying it. Ever since Gloria Jean started pulling away from him, finding fault, expressing displeasure at his job and her lifestyle, he had used alcohol as an escape. He controlled the drinking. Of course, he did. He was a cop. He knew the dangers of drinking and driving, of fooling yourself into thinking you’ll have just one and then ending up sloppy drunk. “I had a reason.”

“You always do.” Sighing, she marched off toward their bedroom, her shoulders slumping, defeat in every line of her body.

“Gloria Jean. Wait.”

She paused, glanced back over her shoulder. “Why should I?”

“There was a murder today.”

“There’s always a murder. Or a robbery, or a mugging, or a carjacking. For Pete’s sake, Dudley! You’re a cop, and the city is crawling with crime.”

“It was my brother.”

Her face registered shock. “Charlie killed somebody? It must have been that sneaky, holier-than-thou wife of his.”

“No.” Dudley’s legs could no longer hold him. He barely made it to the sofa before he collapsed, his head on the armrest, his long legs hanging off the other end.

For once, he’d left his wife speechless. She stood there with her mouth open, comprehension dawning, disbelief replacing her anger.

“Dudley? Was the victim Charlie?” He was too tired to answer, too worried, too terrified. She sank beside him and cupped his face with soft hands that smelled like roses. “He was, wasn’t he?”

He nodded, still seeing the skill saw with bits of flesh of clinging to the teeth and bone dust on the floor. He shut his mind to the thought of what that might mean. Then he closed his eyes to shut out his wife’s face, shut out the ever-present vision of the murder scene, the image of his brother fighting a maniac who had used a hammer and a skill saw, among other unthinkable things.

“You’re crying.” Gloria Jean wiped his tears with her fingers, leaned close to croon into his ear. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Somewhere in the dark rain-soaked city, his brother’s bones screamed at him. FIND ME. FIND ME. FIND ME.

He felt Gloria Jean leave, heard her light footsteps going toward their bedroom, then returning. He felt the blanket fall over him and smelled her sweet-smelling perfume as she tucked him in. Her tenderness was such a departure from her chilly reserve of late that he felt a small seed of hope start to grow.

And then, blessedly, sleep claimed him.

But not for long. The nightmares came. A horror movie. His brother fighting, fighting. And losing.

And the bones, the bones. Screaming. Find Me.

Dudley searching dark alleys and dragging the Mississippi River that bordered west Memphis, his dream-self saying, Where are you? Who did this?

Then silence. The devastating silence of bones hidden in the vastness of the rain-soaked city.

Dudley woke to find his children astraddle him, seven-year-old Elizabeth Ann, and five-year-old Tammy.

“Play horsey, Daddy,” Tammy shouted. “Giddy-up!”

His fatigue forgotten, he smiled at his daughters. They were the two bright spots in his life, their innocence and unending joy in life banishing his nightmares as nothing else could.

“You want a horsey, do you?” He set them on their feet, then threw back the blanket, hoisted Tammy onto his shoulders and pranced around his living room, neighing and snorting in his best imitation of a Kentucky Derby racehorse.

“My turn, Daddy.” Elizabeth Ann held her arms out to him. Tammy was a petite redhead, like Dudley’s own mother, Junie Mae, but his oldest was tall for her age and already showing the beauty of her mother.

“Yes, it is.” Though her size made her unwieldily, he had no trouble hoisting Elizabeth Ann onto his shoulders for a trot around the living room. On their second round, her leg caught against a table lamp and sent it crashing to the floor.

Gloria Jean hurried in, an apron covering her pristine white blouse and the top of her black pencil skirt. Her black jacket, patent leather purse, and briefcase were already waiting beside the door where she would grab them before taking the children to school and heading to her job in mid-town as legal assistant to Cramer, Jones, and Cramer.

She glared at the broken glass on the floor and then at Dudley. “Oh, for Pete’s sake! Why can’t you, for once, act like a grownup and help me get the girls ready for school instead of cavorting like a child!”

She raced off to get the broom and the dust pan, but not before she sent the girls back to their rooms to get dressed. “Right this minute!” she yelled as they raced off.

Dudley stood in the middle of his living room feeling like a failure. To be chastised in front his children was humiliating enough, but to feel as if he had failed them and his wife was a burden he never expected to bear. All his life, he and Charlie had sworn they would never be like their own parents, careless, selfish alcoholics who neglected family to the point that Social Service officers were often sent out by one school teacher or another who had reported the Stephens boys were undernourished and threadbare.

Realizing he still wore the trousers that had blood spatters above the spot where his protective shoe coverings stopped, he hurried to the shower to strip and try to wash away the stench of death that clung to him. Afterward he made his way to the kitchen where the coffee pot was still hot and the coffee strong, just the way he liked it. Lest he take that as a sign his wife still cared about him, the lipstick on her cup reminded him that she liked her coffee the same way.

He heard his children upstairs, chattering and scurrying around as they dressed for school. Two cereal bowls with remnants of the corn flakes they’d had for breakfast still sat on the kitchen table. He rinsed them out and put them in the dishwasher.

He reached to add his wife's cup, but then, what if she wanted another cup before she left for work? He'd feel the sting of her tongue.

Indecision over such a small matter made his head hurt. He was saved by the ringing of his Blackberry. He pulled the smart phone out of his pocket.

"Dudley," he said.

"You need to get down to the station." It was Jack. "We've just had a 911 call from your sister-in-law."

"Has she found Charlie?"

"No. Someone broke into her house."

Dudley turned to see his wife standing in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest. "You work all night and now you have to go to into work early."

It wasn't a question. "That's what I do."

She glared at him, her lips pursed, a dozen unspoken accusations on the tip of her tongue. Finally, she grabbed her cup, turned her back to him and poured herself another cup of coffee. She glanced briefly over her shoulder. "Don't forget Elizabeth Ann's piano recital at seven."

"I won't."

She turned her back. "You missed her last one."

What was the use in saying, I know . Gloria Jean just wanted him to know she was keeping a tally of his shortcomings, and he was already so deep in the doghouse he

might never get out.

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CHAPTER SIX

West Memphis

Laura met Dudley and his partner at the door, the dark circles under her eyes evidence of a sleepless night. Something in him cracked.

“Laura.” He caught her hand between his. “I loved my brother. I want to help you through this.”

Tears sprang to her eyes. She glanced up at him, briefly, then turned away, her whisper barely audible. “I know.” Then she turned and led them into the den.

Her navy slacks and crisp yellow blouse looked freshly pressed, but she’d buttoned her blouse up wrong so the neckline sagged on one side. She was usually a stickler for neatness, cleanliness, and punctuality.

Blue throw pillows lay on the floor in front of her beige sofa. The calico cat lying atop one scampered away when they walked in. A darker blue blanket was wadded at one end. The serving bar between the den and the kitchen was littered with a cereal box, two empty boxes of frozen chicken pot pies, and an open bag of potato chips. The sink in the kitchen beyond was piled high with dirty dishes.

Was this departure from routine a sign of grief or guilt?

Dudley couldn’t tell by looking at the careful blank of her face. For a woman who had just called in a break-in, she was remarkably composed. Was she still in shock, or

covering up a deed so unthinkable it made him dizzy to even consider it?

He caught the back of a wing chair, then sank into it. Jack gave him an anxious look then stood beside him. A sentinel. Always ready to help his partner, he took over the questioning.

“Mrs. Stephens, can you tell us why you called 911? What happened here?”

She nodded. “I was in the kitchen, trying to... trying to clean up the mess.”

She choked up, and Dudley felt a wrench of guilt. He had failed both her and Charlie.

“Take your time, Laura,” he said. “Can I get you anything? A glass of water?”

“Coffee. In the pot.”

He knew where the mugs were. The first thing he noticed in the kitchen was the gun, lying on the countertop near the stove. It was Charlie’s Colt .45 single action Army Revolver, the design similar to its predecessor, the Colt Peacemaker, the most famous gun used in the wild days of the Old West.

He had no idea Laura knew how to use a gun. What other hidden skills did she have?

As he poured her coffee and added cream and sugar, the way he had seen his brother do, he listened to the drone of voices from the den.

“I was pouring myself a second cup of coffee when I heard the noise at the back door,” she told Jack.

“What kind of noise?”

“I had set some pots and pans in front of the door. Because of what happened...”
Laura’s voice broke before she continued. “...yesterday. That’s the door the intruder used... both times.”

“So he ran into the trap you’d set?”

“Yes. I nearly jumped out of my skin when I heard the pots and pans clanging and banging.”

“Did he say anything?”

“Yes. ‘I came to finish the job, Edna Sue.’ His voice was pure evil. Like worms crawling along my skin.”

Whether her emotion was real or acting, it was hard to tell. Jack waited for her to pull herself together.

“Mrs. Stephens, I know this is hard. Especially in light of what happened yesterday. But every detail is important. Does anyone now, or has anyone ever before called you Edna Sue?”

“Well... some of my foster parents used to call me Sue.”

“Is that your name?”

“My middle name. Laura Sue.”

“Do you know anyone named Edna Sue?”

“No.”

“Is it possible you heard the intruder wrong?”

“No. My hearing is acute. I know I’m a wreck, but I’m not that far gone.”

“All right. After he called you Edna Sue, what happened next?”

“He pulled a knife out of his belt and started toward me. I shot him with Charlie’s gun.”

Her bombshell sucked all the air out of the room, but Jack made a fast recovery.

“You shot him from the other side of the bar?”

Dudley knew what Jack was driving at. Laura had to be a really good marksman to shoot through the space between the bar and the cabinets that hung above them and hit her mark.

“Yes.” She twisted her hands together. Was it nerves or fear of getting caught?

“Where did your bullet hit him?”

“His left arm. I’m no murderer .”

Jack ignored the dig. “And then what happened?”

“He ran out the back door, and I dialed 911.”

Dudley returned to the den and handed the coffee to Laura. Once again, he was amazed at her remarkable composure. Except for her enlarged pupils and the way she occasionally gulped, as if she couldn’t get enough air, she didn’t appear to be a woman with a bloody workshop in her garage and a bullet hole in her wall.

While Jack dug out the bullet, Dudley finished the questioning. Laura described the intruder as a male of average height wearing all black clothing and a ski mask over his face. She had heard no car either coming up her driveway or leaving.

Dudley crossed to the back door to study the landscape. Thick woods surrounded the back and the east sides of the house. Easy for anyone to park a block or so away then sneak in through the trees.

“Whoever killed Charlie is trying to kill me.”

He whirled at the sound of Laura’s voice. “Until we knew more, Charlie is missing, not dead.”

She ran at him, beat her fists on his chest. “DON’T LIE TO ME!”

Jack strode over, caught her gently around the waist, and pulled her off. “Mrs. Stephens, we’re going to file this report on your intruder. Under the circumstances, we will put a patrol car in front of your house to make sure no one is trying to harm you.”

“Okay.” She brushed her hair back with her fingers. “But if he comes back, I’ll shoot him.”

Dudley and Jack stepped outside to check the backyard for clues. Last night’s rain had been heavy, and they got lucky. There was the full imprint of a man’s shoe. Large. Approximately a size twelve. He had stepped into a patch of mud, probably when he ran. The bare patch had been left behind when Charlie dug up a diseased hydrangea bush the previous week. He’d told Dudley that Laura wanted all the hydrangeas to come out so she could plant tomatoes and bell peppers.

The impression they made, along with the bullet, would be sent to the lab for

analysis. His hopes climbed. They might get a lucky break, and the perp would seek medical attention for his bullet wound. Even if the bullet had only grazed him and there was medical record to track down, the evidence combined with the name Enda Sue were puzzle pieces that would eventually lead him to find out what happened to his brother.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Curl Up and Dye Beauty Salon

Dudley turned the car in the direction of the salon where Laura worked.

“Do you think she was telling the truth?” Jack asked.

“I don’t know. The intruder was real, but was he a stranger to her or a cohort? She’s always been a sort of mystery to me. Charlie loved her, and that was always good enough. Until now.”

“We need to do a thorough check of her background.”

Jack was right. In spite of the overwhelming evidence, Dudley’s gut instinct, and his horrible nightmare, he still wasn’t ready to concede that his brother was gone forever.

He was relieved when the Curl Up and Dye shop came into view. It was incongruous in the midst of the smart-looking business section along Poplar: a small cottage painted a shocking pink with a sign out front topped by flashing orange neon in the shape of scissors so huge they looked as if they were ripping the sky into tattered bits of blue.

The shop smelled of nail polish remover and that peculiar stench Dudley knew to be permanent wave solution. His grandmother, Junie Mae, had given herself home permanents ever since he could remember. The solution smelled like rotten eggs and kinked her red hair into little corkscrew curls all over her head.

The owner, a leggy, peroxide blond wearing too much lipstick and so much mascara her eyes looked as if spiders were trying to take over her face, sashayed toward Jack, smiling, her hips swaying. Women of all sizes, shapes, and ages flocked to Jack.

Dudley welcomed the blessed flash of comic relief.

The young woman stopped just short of him and posed with one hand propped on her hip. “What can I do for you, handsome?”

Saints preserve us.

“We’re here to ask a few questions.” Jack flashed his badge, and she stepped back so fast she almost came out her sling-back high heels. The shop was filled with women at the skinks, under the hair dryers, and in the swivel chairs where their hair was in various stages of repair. “Do you have a separate room where we can be discreet?”

His smile restored her, and she winked. “Janine’s the name. Follow me. There’s no tellin’ what all we can do in my private room.”

Dudley nearly laughed at the pleading look Jack sent his way. He nodded, then clumped along behind them like a boxcar full of coal following a sleek, smoking engine.

It turned out Janine had nothing but praise for Laura Stephens. She was full of sympathy for her plight. When she found out Dudley was her brother-in-law, she told him she was going to stop at Kentucky Fried Chicken after work to take Laura some supper and keep her company for a while.

He couldn’t imagine a more incongruous pair, plain, shy Laura and flamboyant Janine. Still, his conscience eased a bit knowing Charlie’s wife had someone to help her until they could find out what happened to him.

Janine sent her employees in, one at a time. It was a large shop, so they divided up, with Jack taking interviews in the larger room and Dudley taking them in the tiny storage room that felt claustrophobic.

The stories he heard stories were all much the same. Laura was a quiet, hardworking woman who had a seemingly perfect marriage. This was consistent with what he had believed since Charlie married her.

He and Jack took a lunch break before they questioned the rest of the staff. At the back booth of a nearby Corky's Ribs & BBQ, one of the many locations in the city, they compared notes on the interviews.

"Two of the women I interviewed gave glowing reports on Laura." Jack polished off his barbecue sandwich and wiped his mouth. "But the third woman, the pretty one..."

"The pretty one?"

Jack grinned. "Well, yeah. I might have to give Lucille a call when all this is over. She was just... I don't know. Nice . And different."

"What did this lucky woman have to say?"

"All right. Rub it in."

"I intend to," Dudley said. It felt good to have a moment of normal in the middle of a waking nightmare.

Jack sipped his coffee and got back to the task, his face turning sober. "Lucille said Laura had been crying a lot in the last couple of months."

"Any reason?"

“She claimed it was because she couldn’t have children, but Lucille didn’t think that was it. She told Laura they could adopt or find a surrogate mother so Charlie would be the biological father, but she said that made Laura even more upset.”

“Charlie never said a thing to me about any of that.” Dudley sipped his own coffee. “Did Lucille ever find out what was upsetting her?”

“She said Laura got a call at the shop about two weeks ago that had her a nervous wreck and crying all day. Then last week, Laura said she’d had an unwelcome visitor from Arkansas.”

“Who?”

“Laura wouldn’t tell her.”

“We need to subpoena her phone records. She came from Little Rock. Best I can tell, she had a hard life before she met my brother. These attacks could have happened because of something in her past instead of Charlie’s.”

After lunch Dudley drove back to Curl Up and Dye so he and Jack could finish the interview with Laura’s coworkers.

He hit pay-dirt with the last hair stylist, Belinda Martin, an older, motherly-looking woman with salt and pepper hair and thick wire-rim glasses. Right off the bat, she said, “Laura trusted me. I don’t tell my friends’ secrets.”

Dudley held his tongue. He hated having to deal with a close-mouthed witness. Jack should be the one questioning Belinda Martin. He could win over a tree stump.

She settled into the chair, her hips spreading over the edges of the seat, then pulled a tissue from her purse to wipe her face. “I’m getting too old to stand on my feet all

day.”

“I can sympathize.” Dudley shifted his sizable bulk in the uncomfortable metal chair. “I’m just thirty-five, but my knees are telling me I either need to lose weight or quit chasing criminals through back alleys.”

Brenda laughed. And just like that, she was suddenly on his side. The tells were there: the way she relaxed into her chair, the way the vertical lines between her eyes smoothed out.

“I’m family, Laura’s brother-in-law, and I can assure nothing will be shared unless it’s relevant to finding out what happened to my brother.”

“Janine told us this morning why Laura didn’t come in. It’s just awful. I’m going to call her this afternoon, see what I can do.”

“Good. Thank you.” Dudley pulled the little spiral bound notepad and a stubby pencil from his pocket. He felt like Columbo, the scruffy, seemingly innocuous detective from the only cop show his wife would watch. “We already know Laura received a phone call and a visitor from Arkansas who upset her. Can you give us more details.”

“Yes. She didn’t give me a name, but she told me somebody she had known well when she lived in Little Rock was harassing her. He showed up at her house while Charlie wasn’t there and upset her so bad, she was crying when her husband got home.”

“What did he want?”

“She didn’t say.”

“Did Charlie know the man?”

“Not until she told him about the visit.”

This could be the lead they'd been hoping for. “Did Laura describe him or say anything else about him, or what happened next?”

“She said Charlie was so mad, he drove off looking for the man. But she didn't say whether he ever caught up with him, or what happened. She never mentioned the man again.”

Bingo. His brother would have been fighting mad at anyone who threatened his wife. The mysterious man from Arkansas just moved into prime suspect territory.

But why hadn't Laura mentioned him? Who was she protecting? Herself, or the man?

What had his wife called Laura? Sneaky. Holier than thou.

Could it be she had made up the whole story to throw suspicion in another direction?

CHAPTER EIGHT

West Memphis

Following the lead Brenda Martin gave them, Dudley and Jack drove back to Charlie's neighborhood. Jack had put out the call that the team questioning the neighbors again should inquire about a car with an Arkansas license plate. But they were going straight to the source.

Dudley's heart constricted when he came in sight of his brother's house. Charlie would never walk through the front door again and grab him in a bear hug. As he parked in the driveway, he felt as if he was missing the best half of himself.

Laura's car was gone, and she didn't answer the doorbell. She didn't have a cell phone. For that matter, neither did Charlie. He'd said they were intrusive, and he didn't care whether he was trendy or even up-to-date. He just wanted to live his life and be left alone except by those he loved.

But if he'd had a cell phone he might have managed to call for help. He might be alive today.

Dudley shoved the thought aside. Playing what if was a surefire way to lose sight of the goal: catch his brother's killer.

"There's no point in waiting for Mrs. Stephens," Jack said. "If she can spend four hours getting groceries, she's not a woman who's in a hurry to come home."

“There’s a service station on the corner that Charlie used all the time. Let’s check it out.”

Cars were lined up in front of the gas tanks, their impatient drivers waiting to pump gas. The parking spaces in front of Big Bend Food and Gas were all filled. Dudley had to park around back beside a garbage dumpster.

The day had heated up, and the hot, bright sun made the sky feel like a burning blue bowl over their heads. He and Jack donned aviator sunglasses. When they walked through the door, they had cop written all over them. The shop bell tinkled and heads swiveled their way. Most people gave them a mere passing glance, but the ones who had heard about what happened at the neighboring house stared and then shuffled closer, hoping to hear some little tidbit that would make them even more grateful the bloody massacre had occurred at Charlie’s house and not theirs.

There was only one employee visible in the store, a harried young man around twenty-four, checking out a line of disgruntled customers lined up all the way to the rack of Hershey’s chocolate bars. His scowl announced he was having a bad day. When Dudley and Jack approached, he snapped. “You’ll have to wait your turn like everybody else.”

Dudley lost it. “I don’t think so.” He moved in fast and close, his badge in his hand. “You want to rethink that?”

The young man’s hands shot into the air. “I didn’t do it. I’m not the one taking money from the till.”

Dudley was not in the mood to make this punk feel better. If money was missing from the till and the culprit hadn’t been found, it was best to let the young man sweat a while. “Where’s the owner?”

His cheeks blazing, he nodded toward a hallway in the back. “In his office.”

“Keep your hands clean,” Dudley growled, then headed that way with Jack keeping pace.

The office door was open. They flashed their badges, and a man whose girth showed his partiality for the chocolate doughnuts in an open box on his desk motioned them in. A plaque on his desk read JW Cartright .

“Mr. Cartright, Charlie Stephens was a customer of yours,” Dudley said.

“Call me JW. I’ve seen you here with him. You’re his brother, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“He was a good man. It’s a nightmare what happened over at his house. The whole neighborhood is spooked.”

As always, the grapevine was alive and well in this small southern community. Though the larger metropolitan area lay just east of them, their proximity to the river— Memphis’ western boundary—and the abundant trees protecting the houses gave them the feeling of being set apart from the city, safe from the crime that lurked in the shadows just waiting for an opportunity to wreak havoc.

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“I can tell you exactly.” Though a rather antiquated computer sat on the table to his right, JW rifled through a stack of receipts. “This past Monday.”

Four days ago . Dudley and Jack exchanged glances. The man from Arkansas came earlier.

“Did you talk to him?”

“Just the usual. ‘Hey, how’er you doing,’ that kind of thing.”

Jack leaned forward. “Did he seem worried or upset about anything?”

“No.” JW leaned back in his swivel chair and rocked a time or two, then came upright and steepled his fingers together. “But I can tell you when he was. On Friday of last week.”

Dudley had a gut feeling he was going to finally discover the identity of the killer in his brother’s garage. “What happened?”

“This feller driving an old black 1990 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am with Arkansas license plates was in here paying for gas when Charlie came roaring in here, grabbed him by the collar, and spun him around so fast it left my head spinning. He said, ‘If you ever come near my wife again, I’ll kill you,’ then he walked out and drove off.”

“Was Laura with him?”

“Yes. She was standing at the door, watching.”

“Do you have the man’s name?”

“Naw. He paid cash. Seemed anxious to get his gas and leave.”

“Can you describe him?”

JW’s description could have been that of a thousand men you’d pass on the street without even glancing twice. Medium height and weight, a bit of brown hair showing beneath a Razorbacks football cap, jeans and a green jersey that looked new. No

distinguishing features or marks.

Dudley thanked JW and left his card. “If you think of anything else that might help, let me know.”

The staggering discovery felt like a punch in the gut. “You drive, Jack.” He slid into the passenger side. “I can’t believe Laura kept something like this from us.”

“Maybe she was too scared,” Jack offered. “Most people who suffer major trauma don’t think clearly. Especially just hours after it happens.”

“He might be her hitman. She’s been acting like she’s covering up something.”

“Dudley, you can’t trust what you think you saw.”

Jack turned the car in the direction of the police station. Good, bad, or horrible, they would soon find out.

CHAPTER NINE

Only family and a few close friends had Dudley's cell phone number. When his Blackberry rang about five miles from the station, he didn't hesitate to answer it.

"Oh, Dudley!" It was his mom, Junie Mae, calling from small-town Mooreville, Mississippi, her voice quivering. "I saw on the news about Charlie. The news!"

"Awww, Mawmaw. I'm sorry. I should have called you. I never meant for you to hear it this way." His voice cracked, but he was unaware of the tears rolling down his cheeks. "I'm just so sorry."

"That's okay, hon. I know you're trying to find him. Wait just a minute." The television was playing in the background, and he heard her footsteps tapping on the wooden floor. The sagging springs on her old sofa groaned as she sat down. "Let me turn off this TV. My hearing is not what it used to be."

The volume went up then back down before Junie Mae could figure out how to get the TV off with her remote. She'd never understood gadgets.

"Have you found him? Have you found my Charlie?"

Her question was nails hammered into his heart. "Not yet, Mawmaw, but we will. Jack is leading the team. He's the best detective on the homicide squad." The minute the word homicide was out of his mouth, he could have kicked himself. There had been no official statement yet that Charlie's disappearance was a homicide.

“My Charlie was murdered?”

“It’s possible, but we don’t know exactly what happened yet.”

“Poor Laura. If I could see to drive, I’d come up there and keep her company.”

The idea of Junie Mae behind the wheel of her ancient Chevrolet, dodging every time a car in the thick Memphis traffic passed in the lane beside her, was enough to make Dudley want to ground her, the way he would Elizabeth Ann if she got out of hand when she became a teenager. But then, Mawmaw would have no way to get groceries or go to church or drive to her neighbor’s house to play bridge.

Even worse would be his mother witnessing the inside of the garage that was sealed with crime tape.

“Soon as I can I’ll come down there and drive you back so you can visit with Laura.” Unless it turns out she’s the perpetrator.

“Don’t you worry about me, hon. You just find Charlie. I know you can.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“I never doubted that for one single minute. My boys are the best! You find Charlie and tell him to quit scaring his Mawmaw this way.”

If only that were possible!

“I will. You get some rest now, and don’t worry.”

After he closed his Blackberry, Jack said to him, “I wish my mother was still living. I’d didn’t always do right by her.”

“Yeah. I know what you mean.”

They both stared out the window and drove the rest of the way to the station in pained and nostalgic silence, two grown men turned to little boys by the sound of a mother’s voice.

CHAPTER TEN

Memphis Police Station

The bullet casing and the casting of a man's shoe added to their slim pile of evidence. So far, there was no record of anyone with a bullet wound to the arm coming to the medical clinics after the break-and-enter at Laura's. The name EDNA SUE was posted in large letters on their board. Who was she? What did she have to do with Charlie?

While Dudley and Jack had been interviewing Laura and the gas station owner, the research team had scoured the internet and discovered a wealth of information about Charlie's wife. Laura Sue Hilliard Stephens had lived in four foster homes before she was sixteen and had run away from one when she was only fourteen.

She lived in the first two homes until she was twelve without incident: Jimmy and Jane Gruber and Wesley and Anna Palmer, both Arkansas farm families. She was moved into Little Rock with school teachers Abel and Cynthia Jones when she was thirteen and ran away at fourteen. Records show she was sexually molested by both her foster parents.

Both were stripped of their teachers' licenses, charged, and served ten years of their twelve-year prison sentence.

After counseling, Laura was moved into the home of Dr. and Mrs. Clifton Adams, where she lived until she aged out at eighteen.

Things got really interesting after that. If their hunch was right, the illusive man in a muscle car with Arkansas license plates could be the same one Laura became engaged to within a month of leaving the Adams home. A ne-er do well by the name of Maxey Cayson, arrested and charged six months later with assault and battery with a deadly weapon and felony rape. The accuser was none other than Laura, herself. He was convicted to twenty years and was currently out on parole.

The piece of evidence that would tie them together in Charlie's murder was still missing. It would take a while for her telephone carrier to release her records.

"It's time for some outside agency assistance," Jack said.

"And food," somebody yelled as boxes of pizza were brought into their war room.

By the time they were all pouring coffee and stacking pizza slices onto their plates, Dudley finally noticed the time. it was already seven o'clock. He bolted toward the men's room like he'd been shot.

Behind closed doors, he punched in his wife's cell phone number. She answered on the first ring.

"I'm still at the station."

"I don't want to hear any excuses, Dudley. In the morning you can explain to Elizabeth Ann why you didn't care enough to come to her recital."

"I probably won't be there in the morning." His statement was met with blistering silence. "It looks like Jack and I will be in Arkansas, following a lead."

"You realize what day tomorrow is?" The question was loaded. She wasn't asking him about the day of the week. Tomorrow was the start of the children's spring

vacation from school. Gloria Jean had already asked for time off from her firm.

Tomorrow Dudley was supposed to take his family to the Smoky Mountains for a spring vacation.

“We’ll have to postpone it a couple of days. Or you can go ahead with the children and I’ll join you when I can.” Silence from her end. “Gloria Jean? I’ll make it up to you. I promise.”

She hung up. He thought about calling her back, but why bother? After eight years of marriage, she should know that criminals don’t keep business hours. Most of them hide their deeds under cover of night, and then skulk off somewhere to get high on drugs or booze. During normal business hours, they’re holed up somewhere, sleeping.

Besides that, if Gloria Jean didn’t understand the gravity of a homicide detective trying to find his own murdered brother, then she had no business being a cop’s wife.

She’d always been above his pay-grade, anyhow, a gorgeous, highly intelligent woman who could have married anybody she wanted. Heaven only knew why she’d settled for him.

He pocketed his phone and trudged back to the war room, his appetite for pizza gone.

Jack was on the phone to the homicide division of the Little Rock Police Department. “Detective Jack Jackson here. I’m inquiring about a person of interest in a homicide case here in Memphis. Maxey Cayson. “

“We brought him in yesterday. He’s sitting in a cell awaiting extradition back to prison for breaking parole. He skipped out of state and made contact with his victim.”

“We know her. Her husband is missing and likely dead. We need an agency assist.

Can you hold him until we get up there to question him?” Jack looked at Dudley, and he nodded. “We can be there in less than three hours.”

“Will do.”

Excitement in the room was high. The sooner they found Charlie’s attacker, the sooner they would find him. Arresting Maxey Cayson would be a relief, not just for the family but for forensics who knew that fresher bodies always have a better story to tell.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Little Rock, Arkansas

Maxey Cayson had been brought into the interrogation at the Little Rock Police Department in the middle of the night, and he was not happy about it. His thinning brown hair stuck up in a wad on the left side of his face where he'd been sleeping, and his scowl looked permanent. He was smaller than Dudley had pictured him, hardly the type of man who could have overcome a big man like Charlie and created the carnage he'd witnessed in his brother's garage.

Still...rage can fuel extraordinary strength. And so can drugs.

When Dudley and Jack sat down on the other side of the table, Cayson fisted his cuffed hands that rested on top of the table and shifted in his chair. As if they needed any reminders, the chains rattling on his leg restraints reminded them that they faced a dangerous man.

Detective Rafe White, who had briefed them, was on the other side of the one-way mirror. He'd said Cayson had a hair-trigger temper and a record of assault that went back to his teenage years. He'd been in a juvenile facility more than once, and had spent time in jail for everything from petty theft to misdemeanor assault before doing time in prison for felony assault and rape.

Jack led off. "Do you know Laura Sue Hilliard Stephens?"

Cayson's jaw tightened. "What kind of fool question is that? 'Course, I know her!

She's my woman."

"She's the wife of Charles Stephens," Jack said, and Cayson's glare was daggers aimed at him. "When was the last time you saw him?"

"Never heard of him."

Dudley slammed a recent photo of Charlie on the table, blown up so there was no mistaking his jovial face and the beard that had a hint of gray. "Does this refresh your memory?"

"Is that him?" Cayson was being a smart Alec. Dudley didn't bother to reply. Laura had been standing in the doorway when Charlie threatened Cayson. Of course, he knew. "He's one mean dude. Threatened to kill me. He ought to be in jail."

Dudley's own grief and rage threatened to swamp him. He found the man unbearable. "Did you visit his wife?" Silence from Cayson. "Did you try to get her to go off with you?" No answer. "Did the two of you plot to get rid of her husband so you could be together?" More stubborn silence.

"Did you kill Charles Stephens for your woman?" This from Jack.

Cayson shoved back his chair and jumped up, his body rigid with rage. "What are the two of you trying to pull? I ain't going to prison for no murder!"

Ignoring the outburst, Jack cited the day of the murder and asked where he was.

"Picking my teeth." Cayson sat back down. Smug.

"Is that your alibi?" Not a muscle on Jack's face showed what he was thinking.

“I don’t need no alibi. I barely knew the man. Why would I kill him?”

“You tell me. I think you and Laura planned it, and you carried it out. If you can’t come up with a better alibi than picking your teeth, I see nothing to do but extradite you to Tennessee and let the homicide division of the Memphis Police Department deal with you.” Cayson paled. “By the way,” Jack added. “That would be me. And I’m already ticked off.”

“A’right, a’right. ‘Bout a week ago, I drove down there to try and talk some sense into Laura, but she wouldn’t listen. Just kept telling me to leave. Even had her nose curled up like I was a rotten egg or something.”

Dudley felt the truth in his bones, and he was quietly relieved that his brother hadn’t been married to a woman who wanted to kill him.

Cayson hung his head, and Jack urged. “Did you go back to Memphis two days ago to get revenge because she wouldn’t leave you, and Charlie Stephens threatened you.”

“No. I swear to you. I was right here in the city that hates me.”

“Doing what?”

“Man, I don’t know.” Cayson held out his hands, palms up. A conciliatory gesture. “Ever since Laura Sue had me hauled off to jail, I’ve been doing drugs. One day’s just like the next, a fuzzy blur where it don’t matter what happens. It’s all the same to me.”

“Was anybody with you?”

“Yeah, man. This gal I met at Sleuter’s Bar. Bitsy something or other.”

“Does she work there?”

“The night shift. Off and on.”

Dudley leaned across the table. “Tell me again. Did you kill Charles Stephens in Memphis, Tennessee?”

Cayson hung his head and slumped his shoulders, the posture of a guilty man. Was he about to confess?

CHAPTER TWELVE

Exhaustion felt like a seven-ton elephant sitting on Dudley's chest. After they left the Little Rock Police Station, they discussed getting some rest and waiting until the next day to find Maxey Cayson's witness, but he never confessed. Urgency drove them forward.

Jack took the wheel as they drove into downtown Little Rock in search of Sleuter's Bar. "Do you think he killed your brother?"

"I wanted it to be him so badly I could tell you I think he was lying, and we could drag him down to Memphis and sweat a confession out of him. But I don't think he did it?"

"Me, either." Jack glanced at him. "Did you notice his shoes?"

"Yeah. Size eight, nine at the most. He wouldn't have left that big shoe track outside Laura's house. I think the man who killed Charlie came back to kill her and do what he said. Finish the job."

"Which means he was probably a professional assassin for hire."

"I agree. The odds we'll ever find him just went to zero." Dudley thought of the deadliest hitman in the world, a Brazilian named Julio Santana, who killed a documented four hundred ninety-two people before he was captured.

Jack turned into a district lit with neon signs. "The only flaw in our theory that a

hitman killed Charlie is why ?”

“I can tell you this. My brother never did a single thing in his life that would make him the target of a paid killer. Everybody loved Charlie.”

The bar came into sight, and they both fell silent. There were in a sleazy part of town where the dregs of society hung out on street corners buying illegal drugs, and those not on the streets were hanging over one of the bars that line the street, getting drunk enough to forget the sorry lives they led.

Jack found a parking spot two blocks from Sleuter’s Bar. They were likely to have their hubcaps stolen while they were inside. They didn’t have to worry about being the target of a mugging. Jack’s size, alone, would have been enough deterrent. Add Dudley’s refrigerator figure and formidable face, and the customers gave the two a wide berth as they walked into the bar.

The music from a jukebox was too loud, the air was blue with smoke, and there was no telling who would be lurking in the haze.

They approached the bar together and flashed their badges. The bartender blanched but kept on polishing glasses.

“We’re looking for a girl who works here,” Jack said. “Goes by the name of Bitsy. Do you know where she is?”

“I don’t want no trouble.”

Dudley leaned in. “Neither do we. Answer the question, and we’re good.”

“That’s Bitsy Jenkins. She just finished her shift. She might still be in the dressing room back there, changing into street clothes. Tell her Stanley sent you.”

The door from the bar led into a dim narrow hallway lit by a lone bulb suspended from the ceiling. It stank of smoke and stale sweat. A skinny young woman with long legs clad in jeans and thin hair tortured by peroxide and curling irons emerged from a doorway at the end of the hallway. She glanced at their direction then hurried toward the exit.

“Bitsy Jenkins!” Jack’s voice boomed like a cannon shot in the tight space, and she halted, quivering like a rabbit. “I’m Detective Jack Jackson, and this is my partner, Detective Dudley Stephens. We just want to talk.”

She nodded then led them into a cluttered dressing room where a sleazy red satin blouse and a black skirt with barely enough material to cover the subject hung on a wooden rack.

“I’m sorry. There’s not much room to sit.”

“That’s okay.” Dudley felt sorry for her. She was just a down-on-her-luck girl with an unfortunate connection to the wrong man. “We’ll stand.”

“You don’t mind if I do?” She waited for his nod, then raked off a pile of magazines and almost collapsed into a hard wooden chair.

The array of glossy magazines scattered on the floor told their own story of a girl longing for the glamour they promised if only she would follow their rules. Dudley hated towering over her. Imagining the heartbreak of seeing one of his own daughters in her position, he backed up and perched on the edge of a dressing table.

“Bitsy, do you know a Maxey Cayson?” he said.

“Yes. He comes here a lot.”

“What’s your relationship with him?”

Her pursed lips looked like a pink bow his youngest daughter wore in her hair.

“This is not a trick question.” He softened his voice. “We just need you to be honest with us.”

She blew out a breath. “Okay. I hang out with him from time to time, but it’s nothing serious. He’s kind’a fun, but he has a drug problem. I don’t want another druggie in my life, permanent like.”

“That’s smart. You stick to that and find yourself a responsible man who will treat you right.”

Jack couldn’t hide his smile. He’d seen Dudley do this too many times. Dish out fatherly advice to broken and hurting young women who could be his own daughter, grown up and needy.

Dudley led her back to the day of the murder and asked if she was with Maxey Cayson that day.

“Yes. I went to his apartment after my shift at the bar.”

“What time did you leave his apartment?”

“I usually leave early in the morning. I’d been with him a couple of times, and that’s what I always do.”

Dudley’s pulse kicked up. That would still give Cayson enough time to drive down and kill Charlie that afternoon. The shoe print outside Laura’s house could have come from an intruder totally unrelated to the murder.

The theory was a stretch, and he knew it. He was so desperate he was grasping at straws. Not a smart thing for a detective to do.

Jack spotted his uncertainty and stepped smoothly into the breach. “Bitsy, can you tell us exactly how long you were with Maxey Cayson that day?”

“I don’t want to get him in more trouble.” She chewed her bottom lip. “The thing is, he got up before me and started doing lines of coke. By the time I got out of bed, he was passed out on the floor. I thought he was dead.” She covered her face with hands and bent double, heaving.

“Take your time,” Jack said.

“Okay.” She sniffed, then sat up straight and looked them in the eye. “I was there with him all day, making sure he didn’t die.”

“Can you be specific about the time?”

“See, the thing is, I would’ve been in trouble with the law if I was seen in the apartment of a dead man. So I called the bar to say I was sick and couldn’t come in to work.” She sighed, as if telling what happened was a relief. “I didn’t leave Maxey Cayson that day until six o’clock in the evening.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

After the interview with Bitsy, Dudley and Jack had found rooms in a cheap motel on the outskirts of Little Rock so they wouldn't have to fight city traffic the next morning. Both of them collapsed to get a few hours of sleep.

Jack's snores raised the rafters in his room, but Dudley tossed and turned, tangling the covers in a wad around his legs. Peaceful sleep eluded him. He was haunted by his brother calling to him, Find me, tortured by his bones somewhere in the dark unknown screaming for justice.

At four the next morning, Jack drove back to Memphis. Both of them knew the trip to Little Rock had turned from following a promising lead to finding a dead end. With the knowledge heavy on them, neither said much on the way home. Both needed to let the Maxey Cayson/Laura Stephens collusion angle rest and start digging for clues in another direction.

It was barely six when they arrived back in Memphis. They drove straight to the Memphis Police Department. There was no use for Dudley to go home. His wife would be explaining to the girls why they weren't heading to the Smokies today, probably in terms extremely unflattering to him. Patching things up with Gloria Jean would have to wait until evening.

He and Jack joined the team in the war room. They were all grabbing doughnuts and coffee when the call came in from the Memphis Fire Department.

"We've put out a blaze and found two bodies inside. Cut up really bad. Lots of

blood.”

As the rest of the details unfolded, the similarities to Charlie’s murder had Jack and Dudley assembling a squad to check out the residence of Brad Williams in Germantown.

As soon as they turned into Windy Oaks Drive, the smell of smoke permeated their car. Germantown was an upscale suburb that bordered the east/southeast side of Memphis. The Williams’ Georgian brick home was on a quiet, tree-studded street of houses that cost half a million or more.

All manner of emergency vehicles had converged on the scene—firetrucks pulled close enough so the firemen could assure there were no smoking embers left, an ambulance standing ready for the bodies, cars marked MPD as well as the unmarked cars of the detectives.

Spectators were gathering on the periphery, neighbors, some still in nightclothes and robes, coming to gawk.

The red brick walls were blackened with soot but remained intact. The next-door neighbor, a retired doctor with a headful of silver hair and thick glasses, said he had gotten up early to have coffee on his second-floor balcony and detected smoke at the back of the house beside his. He called the fire department in time to prevent the house and everybody in it from being burned to cinders.

Dudley asked how many lived there, and his heart sank when the man told him, “The parents and two young children.” He hated this part of his job, discovering the many ways evil could find and destroy children.

The fireman who placed the call to MPD said they had found two bodies, both adults, but Dudley would bet they would find the children in there, too, tucked out of sight

somewhere. Probably dead. Even if the intruder hadn't killed them, they couldn't have survived the smoke inhalation.

The homicide squad entered through the front door, led by Dudley and Jack.

The first thing they noticed was the strong smell of gasoline, a sure sign the fire had been set. The blackened hole in a large sitting room downstairs where the back door had collapsed and fallen onto the patio, as well as the heavy damage to the immediate area around it, told them that was where the fire started.

They found the first body in the kitchen. A female, her body protected from the fire by the wall that still stood between the kitchen and the sitting area. She appeared to be around thirty-five. The upper part of her body leaned against the blood-spattered refrigerator door, her head hanging at a macabre angle where her throat had been deeply slit. Her bare legs and arms were covered with so many knife wounds they were nothing more than bloody masses of flesh. A pool of crimson spread out around her.

The brutal nature of the attack suggested rage and revenge. The killing was personal.

His brother's garage suggested worse than that. He pulled himself together. His team was counting on him, and so was Mawmaw.

Dudley quieted his mind and stood beside the body studying the room, putting himself in the mind of the killer, searching for something there that didn't belong. The coffee carafe was full and two ceramic mugs sat on the counter beside it. A pack of English muffins, the plastic covering melted and curling, sat beside the toaster. The victim had been making breakfast.

He continued his visual search. There. On the edge of the bar sat a take-out coffee cup from Dunkin' Donuts. He motioned to Jim Foote on the forensics team, who

carefully bagged it.

While one team set to work dusting for fingerprints, taking scrapings from under the victim's fingernails, and searching for evidence, another team spread out to search the downstairs. Dudley and Jack headed upstairs where the second body had been found. The stench of gasoline rose from the charred carpeting and walls going up the stairs and continued down the carpeted hallway to an office at the far end.

"It took a while for the killer to do all this." Dudley pictured how the murders had unfolded. "Somebody entered the house through the back door in the wee hours of the morning and killed the wife in the kitchen first so she wouldn't sound an alarm. Then he went upstairs to kill the rest of them. He probably got the father next so he wouldn't come to the rescue when he killed the children. He took the time to leave a gasoline trail from the upstairs hall, down the staircase, and to the back door. He was planning to destroy all evidence."

"He didn't count on the neighbor's quick phone call." Jack pushed through the door on their right.

The room was obviously an office, walls lined with bookcases of charred books, expensive file cabinets in ruin, a mahogany table-top desk filled with stacks of paper, office equipment, and pens, all covered with soot and blood. The victim was still sitting in his desk chair, bullet holes riddling his head and chest.

The wall behind him and the Persian rugs at his feet were also drenched in blood.

"Somebody wanted to be sure he was dead." Jack pointed to the knife wounds that covered his face and body. Twenty-five of them.

Dudley was awestruck. Not by the wounds, but by the victim's similarity to his brother. Same tall frame and husky build, same sprinkling of gray in his hair and

beard, same large hands. Even with the face slack by death, he could see how Charlie might have been mistaken for this man.

“You see what I see, Dudley?”

“Yeah. He’s a dead ringer. No pun intended.” He studied the desk. “I wonder if Charlie knew him. That desk is similar to furniture I’ve seen him make.”

“If we can get your sister-in-law to tell us the whole truth, we can find out.”

The search for evidence in the room yielded a fiber from an area of the carpet that had been protected by the large chair sitting there. There was a bloody footprint near the door, the markings of the shoe clear.

Dudley’s excitement grew. “It looks like the one I found in Laura’s backyard.”

Jack agreed. “The perp thought he was burning the evidence, so he got careless.”

Forensics entered to bag, tag, and photograph while they searched the rest of the upstairs. The children’s rooms were at the head of the stairs, connected by a bathroom. The little league trophy and small baseball glove was enough to crack their hearts in two. Small ballerina slippers and a child-size tutu in the adjoining room made them want to smash their fists into the wall.

The children were not there. The large, bloody footprints on the soot-stained beige carpeting of both rooms confirmed Dudley’s theory of the killer’s hunt through the house.

“Did he take them?” This, from Jack.

“Not alive. With the parents dead, who would feel the hammer of revenge by

kidnapping the children?”

The homicide squad combed every inch of the house.

They found a blackened lighter at the back entrance that opened onto a patio backed by woods. Though there was nothing left of the wooden door but cinders. The bent metal deadbolt and the dents in the metal surrounding it indicated the lock had been jimmied.

It appeared whoever murdered the Williams had entered and exited by the back door, tossing his lighter onto the gasoline saturated floor, thinking that nothing would be left of it but a blackened twisted piece of metal, indistinguishable among the rest of the debris from a completely burned-out house.

But even though they looked in every closet, underneath every piece of furniture, inside the showers and bathtubs, behind the canned goods in the pantry, and even in the giant wooden toy-box, the two children were nowhere to be found.

CHAPTER 14

Memphis Police Station

Back at the station, Jack followed protocol and immediately called in the FBI about the Williams children. Even without an interstate connection, the FBI's jurisdiction superseded local authority in cases of missing children.

Then he and the homicide squad worked feverishly to establish any leads and assemble everything they could find about the victims—Brad Williams, his wife, and two children.

At first glance, Brad Williams appeared to be nothing more than a successful attorney, an ordinary husband and father, and a civic-minded citizen who supported several of Memphis' charities. Further digging turned up evidence that some of his clients were not only sleazy, but out-right criminals.

Several known leaders of small-time robbery gangs were his clients, some still on the streets, some of them now doing prison time. Excitement grew when Williams' frequent trips to the Bahamas turned up a connection to elusive gambling kingpin, Juvencio Ancira. Nickname, Bloody One.

Authorities had long suspected Ancira's casinos in the U.S., Mexico, and Central and South America served as fronts for his illegal gambling operation. Charges of money laundering had been brought against both Ancira and Williams four years back, but dropped for insufficient evidence.

But the big tell was the string of gory murders attributed to Ancira. Politicians, businessmen, farmers, schoolboys, and even priests had all met horrible fates. And all the victims had been tied in some way to Ancira.

Standing at the front of his weary squad, their Commander pointed to a blown-up photo of Williams body. “The multiple bullet and knife wounds suggest revenge. Given his known connection with Ancira, we can extrapolate that his murder was revenge for double-crossing the man whose books he kept. The bad news is we’re looking for a professional killer. The good news is he got careless.”

While part of the team threw out a wide net to find motive for Ancira to hire a hitman for the Germantown killings, Dudley and Jack started tracking down the wife’s history.

There was a wealth of information in various society columns showing photos of Mr. and Mrs. Williams at charity fundraisers and glittering social events. They had first moved to Memphis five years earlier, living in a large apartment on the riverfront. Their next purchase had been a home in a gentrified area near the Memphis Botanical Gardens. From there they had bought a house on the west side of Memphis in a quiet neighborhood by the river.

1310 Fawn Grove Road.

Dudley felt all the air leave him. His brother had been a sitting duck in the house previously owned by a target of the Bloody One.

“Look at this.” Jack started reading from an article in the society pages of the Memphis Courier, dated only three weeks ago. “The residents of Germantown threw a housewarming party welcoming philanthropist Brad Williams, attorney at law, and his wife and two children to their community.’”

An awful reality was taking hold of Dudley, and he had to sit down.

Jack continued reading. “The children, ages eight and ten, will enroll in Germantown Elementary School, while Brad’s wife will continue her amazing charitable work in our community. Germantown is proud to welcome Brad, his children Anna Lisa and Patrick, and his wife Edna Sue.”

Edna Sue.

They both glanced at the name tacked onto their crime board. The same name Laura’s intruder had called her when he came back to finish the job.

All the pieces fell into place. Ancira had sent his hitman to the wrong house to take out Brad Williams and his entire family. Dudley felt as if a bomb had been detonated as his feet and left every part of him in shreds.

“My brother didn’t have to die.”

CHAPTER 15

The sun had gone down and night was fast approaching when news came into MPD headquarters from FBI Special Agent Kent Wayne.

“We’ve found the children. Alive and well. They were with Edna Sue’s brother in Horn Lake.”

Anna Lisa and Patrick Williams had spent the night with their cousins in the suburb of Memphis and left early that morning to spend the day at a farm and petting zoo outside New Albany, Mississippi. From there, the couple, Ted and Joan Shumpert, drove to Oxford with their two children as well as the Williams children to tour the home of famous novelist William Faulkner.

No one except the parents knew where the missing children were, and the tragic news didn’t reach the shocked couple until they returned to Horn Lake. Child Protective Services was already involved, and had determined the children should stay with their aunt and uncle until permanent custody could be determined in court.

The Shumpert house would be under twenty-four/seven surveillance until the killer was caught

The manhunt was on.

Dudley didn’t leave the station until ten o’clock that evening. He was so exhausted he could barely hold his eyes open long enough for the drive home.

It was in total darkness. Not even an outside light to show that anybody inside cared whether he could see to get into his own house. Sighing, he trudged up the uneven sidewalk that needed repair to the front door that needed a fresh coat of paint.

Gloria Jean wanted to paint it blue, but he liked barn red. They couldn't agree on the color, so it remained green with peeling paint that revealed a putrid looking yellow underneath.

Inside, he flipped on the lights, and tiptoed to the hall closet to get a pillow and blanket. He'd sleep on the couch. No use waking his family

The door squeaked when he opened it, and he froze, expecting Gloria Jean to call out for him to get quiet. Nothing happened, so he pulled out a blue wool blanket and a pillow too flat for his taste. Who cared? At this point, he could sleep on a pile of bricks.

He made his way back to the sofa, and that's when he saw it. Lying on the coffee table. The envelope as stark as a heart attack. His name scrawled across the top.

I've taken the children to the mountains. Why disappoint them? They've had enough disappointment to last a lifetime. And so have I.

I can't go on like this, taking care of our children by myself, explaining why Daddy is hardly ever here, making excuses that even children can see through. Even worse, making promises they know you will never keep.

The worry, the disappointment, the loneliness are just too much. I want a life.

Don't bother coming to the mountains. I'm done. When I get home, I want you gone.

My attorney will be in touch with you about terms of a divorce.

Gloria Jean

P.S. I'm sorry about Charlie. He was a good man.

If his wife hadn't added the PS, Dudley would have hated her. As it stood, he couldn't hate her. Or even be mad at her. She was right. She deserved a life, and so did his children.

He carefully folded the letter back into the envelope and centered it on the coffee table so he wouldn't forget to take it when he left. It was a map to his future.

CHAPTER 16

Germantown

While a team worked feverishly processing the evidence found at the Williams' home, a wide net was spread all over the city to catch the killer who slaughtered the couple, and most likely Charlie, too. Boots were on the ground, questioning everyone in Germantown about what they saw the morning of the murders.

Dudley and Jack focused on nearby businesses that had cameras. Their first stop was the Dunkin' Donuts closest to the Williams residence. Camera footage of the hour leading up to the murders showed nothing except a couple of senior citizens and a smartly dressed young woman with a briefcase who had stopped there.

They systematically worked the shops in the franchise, fanning out from there. Half a mile from the Germantown neighborhood, they hit pay-dirt. Camera footage showed a man of slightly more than medium height, dressed in black jeans and jersey, entering the shop, a generic black baseball cap angled so the bill put his face in shadow. But his bull-like neck was on full display. As were the arm muscles that bulged under his jersey top. He bought a cup of coffee but was careful to angle his face away from the camera when he paid. His exit showed the lithe, quick-footed walk of a boxer.

Or a professional killer.

"Do you remember this man?" Dudley asked the shop owner.

“Yeah. Swarthy skin. Beefy hands. Couldn’t see his face, but there was something about him—his attitude, maybe—that made me want to back up and stay out of trouble.”

“Did he say anything?”

“Not a word. Just paid with cash and walked out.”

The outdoor footage during that timeframe showed no car arriving or leaving, which didn’t surprise Dudley. Any criminal with a mission to murder would park on a street that had no cameras.

“Did you see what kind of car he was driving?” he asked.

“Naw. He just walked in and walked out. Quick like.”

Back in their car, Jack said, “I have a gut feeling.”

“Me, too. That’s our man.”

In the few years the two of them had been partners in homicide division, their instincts had been ninety-five percent accurate while their thorough investigations did the rest. Based on their record of arrests and convictions, Dudley and Jack had built up an unmatched reputation.

When they got DNA from the coffee cup Dudley had spotted in the victims’ home, they might match it against the database of criminals’ DNA and discover the killer’s name.

But what were the chances he would still be hanging around in Memphis? He could be anywhere in the world by now, including holed up in one of the hideouts Ancira

had all over Mexico and South America.

It was dark before Dudley and Jack headed back to the station and assembled with the rest of the team. They had found no further leads, but a graying detective nearing retirement who had worked Germantown found a neighbor who remembered seeing a gray Toyota Camry driving slowly through the neighborhood the day before the killings. They had checked with rental agencies and discovered a man named Kelly Briley with a driver's license from Arizona, had rented car that fit the description. It had not been returned.

A copy of the license, now tacked on the crime board, showed a clean-cut young man who looked like somebody's beloved little league coach, the kind of man who might have a wife and a new baby waiting for him back home.

The seasoned detective told the team, "The girl at the counter said the man didn't look much like his picture, but he told her he just got back from a month working an off-shore oil rig and his wife probably wouldn't let him in the door without ID. The good news is, the man rented the car for a week."

Jack pointed to a photo of the rental car with the license plate blown up to show the numbers. "We've issued an APB for the car and this man." He pointed out the photo taken from the footage at Dunkin' Donuts. "Unless he headed southwest and drove across the border, he's still in the city. And we're going to find him."

Dudley was relieved to finally leave the investigation in the hands of the undercover homicide detectives coming in for the night shift. He went to the restroom and pulled out his Blackberry.

Gloria Jean might be regretting the letter. She might have changed her mind.

He could hardly catch as his breath as her cell phone rang. His hopes soared and then

plunged as the ring went unanswered. Finally, he pocketed his phone.

But what if she was helping the girls with their baths and didn't hear her phone? What if she heard it but decided to make him sweat before she talked to him?

He called her again then leaned against the wall as if it might hold him up in case of another blow from his unhappy wife. She didn't answer that call either. Or the third.

He was too proud to try a fourth time. Hadn't she been plain enough in the letter? What more did he want from her? Additional salt rubbed into his wounds?

He hurried outside, welcomed the blast of chill night air that made it possible to breathe again without aching.

Jack caught up with him in the parking lot. "You can tell me now. What's eating you?"

It never entered Dudley's mind to hide the miserable state of his broken marriage. After he'd finished the telling, Jack got straight to the point. "There are plenty of apartments for rent in my shabby building. Nobody else wants to live there but me. Come on. I'll help you move."

"Tonight?"

"Might as well. Unless you think she might change and come back."

He thought back over the month, days, and hours that had led him to this. They had been going through the motions for a long time. The ending was inevitable. At least Gloria Jean had the courage to finish it.

It hurt him to think about moving out of the house where he had once been happy

with his beautiful wife and precious daughters. Still, the only thing he wanted was the eight by ten photograph of them that sat atop the chest of drawers in his bedroom.

And his camping equipment. He would need that.

He turned to his friend Jack. “No. She won’t.”

CHAPTER 17

Dudley's apartment

The sun slanted through curtain-less windows, waking Dudley from the ever-present nightmare where he heard Charlie's bones screaming, and he was running through deep fog to find him.

He sat up, blinking against the glare, and it hit him, suddenly. This was his life now. One room, a camping cot, a tin coffee pot and a few tin dishes, a duffle bag with his clothes, and the photo of his wife and children sitting on the floor.

He didn't have time to feel sorry for himself.

He went into the small bathroom, a big man trying to fit himself into a tiny shower. It wasn't what he was used to, but it would do. For now, all he needed was a roof over his head, food in his belly, and time to catch a killer.

His stomach rumbled while he dressed, a reminder that he didn't have coffee for the pot, a stovetop to cook it on, or a single bite to put in his tin plate. Sitting on the edge of his bed, he called Charlie's wife. It was hard to think of her as his widow. Even harder to think of his brother as gone. Dead. Murdered.

"Dudley?" Laura sounded tired, her voice hoarse, as if she'd been crying. "I've been following the news. Those poor little orphaned children." She paused to blow her nose. "Charlie bought the house from Brad Williams."

“That’s why I’m calling. Well...to see how about you, too. How are you?”

“I’ll be okay. Eventually.”

“Laura, we believe the man who killed Charlie was after Brad Williams. That’s why he came back and called you Edna Sue. That was Mrs. Williams.”

A sharp intake of breath was her only answer. He could picture her gripping the phone, probably standing in her kitchen with Charlie’s gun securely back in the drawer, grieving her husband and scared for her life. He felt a twinge of guilt for having suspected her, but that was his job. Solving a murder case was messy and complicated. The innocent could be thought guilty while the guilty spun alibis to make them appear lily white.

Being a detective was not for wimps and cowards. Dudley had to step on toes, heat up tempers, risk relationships.

Sometimes even lose them.

Finally, Laura said, “Do you know who did it?”

“We’re closing in. And we believe you are now perfectly safe. Once the killer realized his mistake, he corrected it. He has no reason to come back looking for you.”

“I guess I can take some comfort in that.”

“I hope you will. And accept my apology for being so hard on you.”

“You were just doing your job, Dudley. Charlie always said you were the best.”

He cleared a lump out of his throat. “Laura? You need to know Gloria Jean took the

girls and left, and I'm living in an apartment in Jack's building."

She made no comment about his wife, which was a relief. Rehashing his life with her would have been made it seem fake, like some tear-jerking TV drama.

"If you ever need a place to stay, you are welcome here. I have a guest bedroom with ensuite bathroom you can use."

"Thanks, but I'm all set. You might want to sell the place and move on." He didn't say with somebody else. He didn't have to. He read her long silence.

"This house holds all my memories of my life with Charlie. I'll never sell. And Dudley... any time you get lonely or need a home-cooked meal, come to see me. I don't have Charlie anymore, but at least I have his brother."

"Same here, Laura. You need me for anything, chopping wood, digging out the rest those hydrangeas, patching up the fence, stuff like that, you just let me know."

"Charlie always said you are kind."

Kind. Her compliment washed over him like a cool breeze. A warm hug. A memory of his brother.

When he thought about all he had lost, he could hang onto that one small thing.

Maybe it was hope.

CHAPTER 18

Dudley was pocketing his Blackberry when he heard the knock on his door.

“It’s me.” Jack was standing in the hallway with two coffees in take-out cups and two sausage and biscuits from the fast-food place down the street.

“Thanks. I’d say pull up a chair if I had one.”

“We’ll be eating in the car. Our perp was brought in last night.”

Charlie’s killer! The news almost brought Dudley to his knees.

“How?”

“At one a.m. this morning, a couple of patrol officers spotted the rental car at a bar on their beat and called it in. The new kids on the block checked it out and brought him in.”

Chuck Reeves and Johnny Gillespie, the MPD’s newest and youngest undercover homicide detectives, were on the night shift. Both were in their late twenties and whip smart.

“Who is he?” Dudley’s desire to question him was so visceral he felt the ache in his gut. Unanswered questions about his brother’s murder burned through him like a wildfire.

“He won’t say and we don’t know yet. Lab is rushing on the DNA.”

“Lawyered up?”

“Big time.” Jack named a hotshot firm based in New York with offices in Chicago, San Francisco, Atlanta, and Memphis.

When they arrived at the MPD, the suspect was still in the interrogation room with his attorney, a woman who wore her blond hair severely pulled back and a plain black suit with a loosely fitting jacket in an attempt to appear older. Her smooth skin and her long shapely legs crossed under the table gave away her as somewhere in her early thirties.

But it wasn’t the woman who took Dudley’s attention. It was the man with her. He had the stocky build of a prizefighter and the nonchalant attitude of a criminal secure in the knowledge that he can do whatever he pleases and his lawyer will see that he walks free. Or at the very least, gets a light sentence.

His fists and clenched jaw had Jack putting a hand on his shoulder. “You can’t go in there.”

He would turn in his badge and gun for the opportunity to march into that interrogation room and have his revenge on the man who so brutally slaughtered his brother.

“You make sure to nail him, Jack.”

“I will.” His partner strode off to join the two acting as if they were at a social event.

Jack’s size, alone, was enough to change the lawyer’s attitude. It didn’t faze the sorry lowlife who slouched in his chair as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

Jack fired off his first volley. “There is no such person as Kelly Briley, so you can drop that charade right now.”

“No comment.” The perp had the arrogance to smirk. He also clammed up for questions about where he was the afternoon of Fawn Grover murder, the day of the break-in at Laura’s house, and the early morning of the murders in Germantown.

The door to the war room down the hall opened, and Detective Chuck Reeves called, “Detective Stephens, you need to come down here.”

Dudley hotfooted down the hall. Detective Johnny Gillespie was also there. “I thought you two were off shift.”

“We heard DNA results were coming in,” Johnny said. “We wanted to be here to nail the killer.”

They all sat in a semicircle to listen to a member of forensics deliver results from DNA on the coffee cup found at the Williams’ residence.

“It’s a perfect match to the professional assassin, Karl von Hoover. Known as the Eliminator. He has direct ties to Juvenico ‘Bloody One’ Arnica, and is believed to be responsible for murdering eighty-five of Arnica’s targets in South and Central America, Mexico, and the U. S. Furthermore, the bloody footprint in the Williams’ home and the muddy print in Charles Stephen’s back yard match the sole of shoes we found in the apartment where the Eliminator has been staying.”

They had more than enough to arrest him for all three murders in Memphis. Dudley felt a boulder lifting from his chest. Now, he might finally know where to find Charlie’s body.

The Commander of the homicide division stepped up to the podium.

“The Eliminator has been arrested before, but no charge ever stuck. We are lucky enough to have Mrs. Laura Stephens who has agreed to come in to identify his voice, and witnesses at the car rental agency and the Dunkin’ Donuts where he stopped the morning of the Williams’ murders who can identify him. This time we have enough evidence to get a conviction. Good work!”

The room erupted in cheers, then the captain came over to Dudley. “I know you’ll want to be there for the arrest. But no tactics to get information about your brother.”

“Understood. “He fell in step, but the walk to the interrogation room was one of the longest of his life.

When he saw his brother’s killer face to face, rage roared through like an avalanche capable of burying an entire city of people alive. That such a cocky, insignificant wart of the face of humanity could take Charlie’s life was unbelievable.

As the killer was lead from the room in shackles, he did a double take when he saw Dudley. His resemblance to Charlie would be unmistakable, the same square jaw, the same beefy hands and refrigerator size, even the same cowlick that made their hair stand up in front like the comb of a mad rooster.

Dudley wanted to punch his face. But more than that, he wanted to know where his brother’s body was hidden.

“Sucker,” the killer hissed at him, and then laughed. A maniacal sound that haunted Dudley throughout the man’s trial and conviction.

Karl von Hoover received life in prison without parole.

His punishment would never be enough to compensate for the loss of Charlie.

CHAPTER 19

Mawmaw's cottage

His mother's cottage in small-town Mooreville, Mississippi, proved to be the perfect place for Dudley to combine a compassionate leave with a long overdue vacation. The two of them sat on the front porch together watching a sunset.

The rope swing under a large oak tree in her front yard moved in the breeze, a stark reminder that his children might never play on Mawmaw's swing again. It was all left up to Gloria Jean, who had primary custody since the divorce.

Still, the peace and quiet of the neighborhood was enough to scab over the worst of the wounds inflicted by his ex-wife.

But nothing would heal the gap left by Charlie until he was found. The Eliminator had kept his secret throughout the trial and still wasn't talking.

Mawmaw was making up for his silence with nonstop chatter about Dudley's future.

"This house will be yours when I'm gone, hon," she told him.

"You don't have to do that, Mawmaw. You might want to sell it and move into a nice place where they serve two meals a day and play bingo in the parlor."

"Pshaw. It's been in this family for generations and I aim to keep it that way. If I go before you retire, you'll want to rent it out until you're ready to move in."

She spoke of death as if she might be planning to go on a vacation with her best clothes packed in her suitcase. Still, the house was important to her.

“I promise you, I’ll do that.”

“That’s good, hon. I’m going to pack up some dishes and small appliances for you to take back to your apartment in that city. You won’t have to buy a thing for it except maybe a microwave oven. And I’m going to give you the bedroom set in your old room.”

“You don’t have to do that, Mawmaw. It’ll leave the room empty.”

“Pshaw! I don’t care about stuff. I just care about my boys.”

She still spoke of Charlie as if he might suddenly appear around the corner of her cottage and say, “Man, that was some fishing trip! Did you miss me?” Dudley hoped the memorial service Laura was planning would give all of them some closure. Especially Mawmaw. Charlie was gone, and he wasn’t coming back.

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Memphis

Dudley stood in the cemetery in his uniform, the hot sun beating down on his head, his heart feeling like a giant hole inside his chest. His mother and Laura had dressed in their Sunday best. They stood on either side of him, clinging to his arms and silently weeping.

The gravestone had his brother's name, birthdate, and a simple inscription from C. S. Lewis' modified to fit Charlie. "His loss is like the sky, spread over everything."

Laura had asked a minister to read scripture but she delivered her husband's eulogy. It was from the heart, delivered in broken pieces, interspersed by sobs.

But no one was in the grave to hear. Did the dead even hear the living anyhow? And could there ever be any peace for them if they were not laid to rest in a quiet place where birds sang in the trees and the nearby brook voiced its own song as shallow water rushed over smooth rocks to form small pools where you could sit on the bank and cool your feet.

The memorial ceremony was over too soon. Dudley not only had no closure, but being back at Charlie's empty-feeling house made him so furious he wanted to ram fist through the wall.

Mamaw sat with Laura on the sofa, drinking tea, which he had declined, and talking in hushed voices.

"I'm going to stay with you a while, hon, so we can both grieve together. Dudley will

take me home when I'm ready."

"Thank you, Mawmaw." Laura talked about the hydrangea bushes he was going to dig up for her, another reminder of life without Charlie. But when she began to talk about tearing down the garage and planting a garden in its place, it was more than Dudley could bear.

Charlie's workshop. Vanished. Just like him.

"I've got to go," he told them.

"Where're are you going, hon?"

"I have some things to do. Don't worry and don't wait supper. I'll stay in my apartment tonight."

He kissed them both on the cheek and hugged them close, as if he might never see them again.

Who knew? Maybe he wouldn't.

Life had become a time bomb. Just waiting to explode.

Dudley sat in a hard chair watching through the glass for his first glimpse of Karl von Hoover since the trial. When he shuffled in wearing his orange prison suit, handcuffs and leg irons, he had lost so much weight he looked shrunken, not all the muscular, cocky man who had sat in a courtroom and believed until the bitter end that he would get off for murder. After all, what were three more bodies added to his massive body count?

When he sank into a seat on the other side of the glass, the cheeky grin he gave Dudley showed that the Eliminator was there, underneath all the humiliations prison

life had heaped on him.

“Well, well,” he said. “If it’s not the cop brother.”

Dudley felt as if he’d just been slammed into a brick wall, headfirst. It was the first direct reference he had ever made to Charlie’s murder. He wanted to smash his fist through the glass, grab the man by the throat and squeeze until his eyeballs popped out. He forced himself to remain calm.

“Where is my brother?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” A macabre sort of glee spread over the killer’s face. He was playing a cat and mouse game. And enjoying it.

“Yes, I would.” Dudley refused to make this a sick game.

“What’s it worth to you?”

“You’re in no position to bargain. You’re here for the rest of your life, and I intend to keep coming back until you tell me.”

“Hmmm. Let me think about that.” The Eliminator tapped the side of his head with his forefinger, as if the answer needed dislodging. “There have been so many bodies.” His grin was ghoulish. “And Charlie was in so many pieces.”

Dudley’s stomach lurched and he thought he might be sick. Still, he sat in his chair, forcing himself back under control. What he was enduring was nothing compared to what his brother had gone through.

“Where is he?”

The Eliminator clamped his mouth tight and sat that way for five minutes. Dudley

waited him out. He had nothing left but time.

Correction. I have Laura and Mawmaw and Jack.

What would Jack say if he knew what about this visit?

Suddenly, the Eliminator leaned forward, his face so close to the glass Dudley could feel the heat of evil.

“I’ll never tell and you’ll never find him, cop! I’m here because of you and your kind. I want you to spend the rest of your sorry life hearing your brother’s bones screaming for you.” He leaned even closer, his nose flattened against the glass, his breath fogging it, his voice low and menacing. “Just like he did the day I killed him.”

Nothing, nothing, could have pierced Dudley’s soul the way those last words did. Not the empty grave. Not the nightmares. Not even the loss of him.

His brother had cried out for him to help. And Dudley had failed.

He had failed everybody.

He watched the guards take the Eliminator back his cell before he left the prison and drove to his mean apartment in an even meaner neighborhood.

Maybe this was all he deserved. Heartache and uncertainty. Maybe there was no such thing as redemption for the likes of Dudley Stephens.

He was not eager to find out.

He lay down on his cot and flung an arm across his eyes, as if that might prevent him from seeing his future. As if he could ward off the nightmares where his brother’s bones still screamed.

Silent Bones is a prequel to the full-length novel, No One to Hear Them Scream:
Alice and Dudley Thriller .