



Killer Clone (Stella Knox FBI Mystery #14)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Copy. Paste. Kill.

The hunt was supposed to be over. The killer—dead.

But just hours after returning to Nashville, FBI Special Agent Stella Knox is faced with another exsanguinated corpse. A college student drained of blood, ankles bruised from where he'd been strung up like an animal in a slaughterhouse.

Just like before.

But the Pennsylvania case was wrapped up. Solved. So why is this murder a mirror image? And more importantly—who is sending the message?

At first, the differences seem small. But one detail stands out—the victim's carotid artery was cut with the kind of precision used in embalming, as if he was being prepped for preservation rather than death. But before Stella can track down the one person who might have answers—the mortician—he turns up dead.

Now, what should have been a straightforward investigation twists into something far more insidious. Is this a copycat? An accomplice? Or something even worse?

With two murders in three days, Stella knows a third is coming. What she doesn't know...a killer is setting a trap. And she's the prey.

Total Pages (Source): 38

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Patrick Marrion gripped the steering wheel of his Honda Ridgeline and lifted his foot from the gas. The rattle in the old engine slowed as he pressed the brake nearly to the floor. Grime blocked his view through the unwashed side window, so he wound it down. A chill wind whipped around the cab.

One dilapidated concrete structure followed another. Bent wire fences bordered expanses of broken concrete. A winter gust brought a hint of gasoline from the dirty waters of Nashville's Cumberland River while I-24 rumbled and honked away to his right. But between the river and the road stood cracked tarmac, abandoned warehouses, and a railway line with freight wagons pattering along.

Maybe he was in the wrong place. Maybe he'd misremembered the directions.

This wasn't the kind of neighborhood where he'd expected to find his online friend, Monty31.

Patrick took a hand from the wheel and rubbed his fingers over the scars on his neck. The old burn marks started at his cheek, ran down his neck, and wound around to his back. Years of surgery had evened out the worst of the disfigurement, but the tissue remained red and swollen.

He glared at the holder on the dashboard where his phone should've been. His roommate had taken to stealing his possessions and holding them hostage. Jake had taken his keys once and hadn't given them back until Patrick bought him a coke from the vending machine in the common area. Clothes went missing until he did a load of

Jake's laundry too.

Patrick had no idea what he'd have to do to get his phone back. Something bigger for sure.

Jake was such an asshole.

Patrick had known Jake for less than three months and hated him already.

But he could deal without his phone for now. He'd checked the address on his laptop so many times, he knew the route by heart. This was the right place. He was sure it was.

Patrick pushed the gas. The rattle in the engine returned.

He was getting out at last. Meeting people. Making friends. His world was opening, getting bigger. His excitement rose.

It was about time.

He'd been so lonely since leaving home and moving across town to Central Tennessee State University. The change hadn't gone the way he'd planned. He thought he'd make real friends at last, find people like him, with the same interests and the same outlooks. They'd hang out and play video games. They might even sneak into bars. Make real friends who confided in each other.

And he'd be happy.

But so far, college had been a nightmare. Just like high school.

And his roommate was the worst.

Studying was impossible. Even being in the room—with the music pounding and Jake's friends treating Patrick's bed like a sofa—was just awful. Patrick had asked to move, but the housing officer told him he had to wait.

He couldn't bear it. The less time he spent there, the better.

A one-story warehouse came into view on the right. Patrick remembered seeing the zigzag roof on Street View and the padlocked gate in front. The place he was looking for was a few hundred yards up. He eased into his seat.

School was little better than the dorm.

He thought people would speak to him in class. His fellow history majors shared the same appreciation for the past and everything history could tell them.

But even among his classmates, he'd struggled to make friends. Conversations in the cafeteria took place without him. His contributions, when he plucked up the courage to make them, went ignored.

Before college, he'd had his family. Now there was no escape. His mom kept telling him that he could just move back home, that he could commute to class. But that felt like a kind of failure.

The result was that he'd never felt so lonely.

Patrick fingered the scars on his neck again. It was a nervous tick he'd tried and failed to break. And his mom was right—messing with the scars only aggravated them.

People assumed he'd get used to the staring, but he never had. He'd just come to expect it.

Monty31 would be different. Surely, he'd be different.

They'd only chatted online. Patrick didn't even know his real name, but he did know Monty31 recently moved to Nashville and was lonely too. They'd hit it off right away online. His new friend would ignore his scars. They'd sit in cafés and discuss ancient Roman military tactics and do all the things friends did together.

And Patrick would have a life.

Finally, Monty31's building appeared in front of him. Two floors of bare concrete and broken windows. Torn plastic sheets flapped in some of the gaps. Grass grew in the cracks in the ramp that led down to the underground parking garage.

Patrick took a sip from a jumbo cup in the holder of his truck and slurped down the last of the ice-diluted coke. The parking space lines were long-faded. He drove into the darkness under the building. Water dripped from a rusty pipe that ran crookedly across the ceiling. The air smelled of mold. Only one other vehicle stood in the garage, a white Toyota Tacoma, and Patrick wondered whether anyone else lived here.

The location didn't strike him as strange on the surface. Monty31 had been in the city for less than two weeks. He was probably still setting himself up, still finding his feet. Tech workers liked living in converted warehouses, according to science fiction books, so this made sense to Patrick, as Monty31 was into computers.

His new friend had probably bought the entire building and was turning it into a giant studio. Maybe, if he was lucky, Monty31 would invite Patrick to move in, too, and give him the entire second floor rent-free.

He parked beside the Tacoma and climbed the short flight of stairs to the first level, imagining what he'd do with an entire floor of a warehouse to himself.

One corner would be all bookcases. There'd be leather armchairs with brass studs and one of those globes that opened into a sophisticated bar cart. He and Monty³¹ would smoke cigars and drink bourbon with all their friends, chatting about why the government didn't know what the heck it was doing and describe how they'd manage the world better.

Another corner would become a gym. A pile of weights and a heavy punching bag. Maybe one of those fancy cycling machines. Wouldn't take him too long to build a bit of muscle, and his spindly arms wouldn't stay spindly for long.

And he'd turn an entire wall into an entertainment center, with a seventy-two-inch screen and a PlayStation, and a proper gaming chair, and...and anything else he wanted. A pool table would be good.

Of course, there'd be the bedroom.

Once he had everything else, that bedroom would see plenty of activity.

But, most importantly, there'd be friends coming and going in droves.

The thought warmed Patrick despite the dampness of the staircase's rusty handrail and the stiff wind that blew through the broken panes.

He made his way down the hall, stepping over pieces of broken tile and old timber scattered across the concrete. At regular intervals, doorways led into what might've once been workshops. But like the workshops themselves, the doors had long gone, leaving nothing but rusty hinges and cold drafts.

The only door still in place was at the far end of the passageway. Made of metal, an unlocked padlock hung from a bracket by the doorknob.

Patrick hesitated. His heart thumped in his chest, and he cursed himself. He had no reason to be nervous. Monty31 was a friend. His first friend.

He knocked. The echo from the steel boomed down the empty corridor. From the other side of the wall came footsteps, followed by a loud creak as the door opened.

And there he was. Patrick wanted to punch the air in excitement.

Monty31 seemed exceptional. He was tall, fairly handsome, and muscular. Definitely more athletic than Patrick. His track pants and t-shirt were casual and inexpensive.

But besides that, Monty31 was entirely normal. Even the glance at the scar on Patrick's cheek and neck came and went before Monty31 pulled the door all the way open and smiled.

Relief rushed through Patrick, though something in the back of his mind whispered a warning. Why did Monty31 choose to live here?

"You're Patrick, right? HistoryBoi1789?"

He beamed. "I am indeed. And you're Monty31, right? What's your actual name?"

"Call me Monty. Come on in."

Patrick wanted to hug him, but that was too much. He stepped into the warehouse.

And it was all wrong.

The walls were bare. Dust, wood chips, and what looked like chunks of asbestos coated the concrete floor. A long length of rope dangled from a high beam beneath the cracked paint ceiling, which struck Patrick as odd. The only furniture was a

mattress in one corner next to a gas cooker and a massive backpack for hiking. A laptop computer lay on the mattress.

Patrick's heart sank.

Monty31 wasn't living in a giant studio warehouse he'd bought and converted for millions. He was squatting in an empty building in the worst part of town.

Patrick wondered whether he should invite his new friend to stay with him. Even the patch of floor between his and Jake's bed would be better than this place.

He stepped back toward the door. Maybe they could head to a café or something. Or a club. Talk about the possibility of Monty31 moving in with him.

He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "Do you want to go?—"

A noise came from behind him. A foot step, a crinkle of plastic. The undeniable presence of someone else in the room.

He turned. "What?—"

The world went dark, hot, and suffocating as plastic sealed over his face, pulled tight against his mouth and nose.

He gasped, and the bag sucked in against his lips, choking the breath from him.

Hands grabbed his wrists, wrenching them behind his back. A knee dug into his spine, forcing him forward. Someone else was here.

Panic exploded inside him.

More bullying. Even here. Even now.

Patrick thrashed, trying to shake them off, but his shoes scraped uselessly against the concrete.

“Get off! Get?—”

His voice collapsed into nothing, the plastic swallowing the sound. He gagged, his breath bouncing back hot and wet against his own skin.

Plastic stuck to his forehead, to his lips. The taste of old coke hit his tongue. He sucked in through his nose, but every inhale made the bag press tighter against his face.

His shirt ripped.

The sharp slap of winter air burned against his exposed back.

Patrick whimpered, the sound lost in the heat trapped around his mouth. His struggles weakened, his movements turning sluggish.

He couldn't breathe.

His limbs tingled, numbing with lack of oxygen. A bitter, metallic taste filled his mouth as his teeth clamped down on the inside of his cheek.

His body sagged, the fight draining out of him.

Just when he thought he would surely die, the bag was ripped away.

Air rushed into his lungs, cold and sharp as glass. Patrick gasped, blinking through a

haze of dizziness. The plastic crumpled to the floor beside him, but his relief lasted less than a second.

Because Monty³¹ was there.

Right in front of him.

Grinning.

His eyes were alight, his cheeks flushed with giddy excitement. Like this was the best night of his life.

“Man,” he laughed, tying a rope around Patrick’s ankles, “this is gonna be great.”

Patrick tried to get away, but the second set of hands cinched the knot tight.

A sharp yank, and he was hauled upside down.

The rush of blood to his head was instant, his vision blurring at the edges.

Patrick tried to speak, but his words fell apart in his throat. His friend. The only person who’d ever really talked to him, who’d ever cared?—

No. It’s all a lie.

“Monty...why?” The words barely escaped his mouth.

Monty’s grin stretched wider. “Because I can.”

Crouching, he gripped Patrick’s head between his hands—not roughly, but almost fondly, like an older brother about to wrestle a kid into a headlock.

But this wasn't a game.

It had never been a game.

A second pair of hands yanked Patrick's arms backward, tying his wrists together. He barely resisted.

He was too weak.

Too stupid.

Too wrong about everything.

"Come on, man." Monty booped Patrick's nose, still smiling, still thrilled before stepping several feet away. "Make the cut. I want to watch."

Before Patrick could even process the order, a sharp, cold kiss of metal pressed against Patrick's neck.

"Do it now!"

Pain.

Not sharp, not like he expected. A rush. A flood.

Scalding heat gushed over his face, his hair, his chest.

The scent of copper exploded in his nose as thick, pulsing streams poured from his neck, gravity dragging it down in sheets, in torrents.

He jerked, and the movement sent fresh waves of blood cascading over his face,

filling his ear, drenching his shirt.

His vision swam, bursting with red and gold spots, and his heartbeat thundered in his ears.

It was almost louder than Monty's laughs.

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FBI Special Agent Stella Knox, acting as Claymore Township's co-sheriff, stood outside the small Pennsylvania town's general store. She stared down at her quarry.

David Broad was Claymore's sole journalist. He was also the town's biggest drunk. And this morning, its loudest citizen.

Broad had been bellowing about the apocalypse and the importance of repenting for the last half hour, forcing cars to drive around him. Stella wasn't surprised so many people had called for help. Broad's size made him intimidating enough when he was sober.

His massive frame seemed to take up twice the space of an average man, with shoulders so wide, they strained the seams of his winter coat. When he lurched forward, even the most confident locals gave him a wide berth for fear he'd trip and smash them under his solid frame.

She'd been on the scene less than five minutes, and already, she'd had enough. A few minutes more, and she'd be set to explode.

The man tottering in the middle of the road in front of her struggled to maintain his balance between the hills of slush piled against the curb. His thick, black-and-white beard was wet, and Stella could smell the tequila on his breath from ten feet away.

"Repent, repent!" His shouts came from the top of his lungs. "The end of the world is coming." He threw his long arms wide, raised his face to the heavens, and laughed.

Stella took a deep breath. She really didn't have time for this.

Drunk and boisterous at half past ten in the morning, he looked positively dangerous.

She glared at him. "Broad, you need to calm down and go home. Sleep it off. I won't say it again."

Broad lowered his chin to his chest. He examined her from underneath his thick eyebrows. "Hey, it's you. I know you. You find my truck yet?"

Instead of punching him, she simply shook her head. The truck had been missing for a couple weeks now. Broad had probably parked his Toyota Tacoma at the bottom of a lake somewhere and forgotten about it.

"The BOLO's still out."

He swayed, blinking heavy. "Tha'sallrai', hon-neh." The words blurred into each other. It took a second to untangle them. That's all right, honey. "How's about a quote fer me? Huh? Something about...murder...something. Whatever ya got, I'll take. Write it up fer you. Make you famous. Make you more famous ."

He cackled and slapped his leg, nearly falling over in the process. Stella's anger deepened.

Two weeks had passed since the end of their last case. To say she was eager to get out of uniform and back to her real job in Nashville's FBI was the understatement of the year.

Stella and her partner—both romantically and professionally—Special Agent Hagen Yates had agreed to stretch their extended leave into a temporary co-sheriff position while the governor of Pennsylvania found a new sheriff.

Under usual circumstances, when a sheriff in Pennsylvania vacated the office for whatever reason, the job passed to the chief deputy. But since the chief deputy had been murdered, the problem was kicked up to the governor.

For Stella, time was dragging. Handing out speeding fines and dealing with daytime drunks had never been rewarding work. She'd had enough of that when she was a beat cop.

And Paul Slade, their supervisory special agent, was eager for them to return to Nashville so the team would be at full strength again. He'd called that morning and told them the governor had finally found a replacement.

They needed to get their asses down south.

But the thought of leaving the mayor and the rest of the town in the hands of some stranger sat uneasily with Stella. Besides his civic duties, Dr. Bill Silow was also the administrator of a nearby psychiatric hospital and a good man who'd recently lost friends and a patient to a murderer. Stella liked him. But Slade was right. She and Hagen needed to get back to their lives and back to work.

A truck pulled out of the parking lot behind the general store.

Broad leaped into the middle of the road and stretched his arms wide. "Have ya repented, Dick? Ya gotta repent before the end of the world, Dick."

The truck swerved. Dick Terry, the owner of the town's carpentry workshop, stuck his fist out his window and yelled at Broad to get out of the damn road before someone got killed.

Broad responded by yanking off his coat and throwing it at the truck's cab. Dick drove over it without slowing.

That was enough.

Stella whipped the handcuffs out of her belt and moved in to make the arrest. “Turn around and put your hands behind your back. I’m arresting you for public intoxication.”

Broad didn’t move. He didn’t even pick up his coat. Stella drew nearer. Broad arched his back. One hand curled into a fist. He pulled back his shoulder and swung.

Stella had hoped Broad wouldn’t do anything stupid.

But she’d expected otherwise. And she was ready.

His massive fist cut through the air with surprising speed for a man his size, and his entire body twisted with the force of the blow. A small breeze swept past her face, his knuckles missing by inches as she executed her practiced dodge.

Broad’s boots skidded on the road’s icy surface, sending him crashing down with all the elegance of a hippo on ice.

In a second, Stella’s knee was in the small of his back. She yanked his arms behind him and snapped the handcuffs around his wrists.

“You’re an idiot, Broad. You know that?”

Stella picked up his coat and tossed it over her shoulder. The material stank of sweat and tequila. She then pulled Broad to his feet, draped the coat over his shoulders, and shoved the drunk headfirst into the back of her SUV.

Her phone rang.

She took a moment to catch her breath before answering. “Knox.”

“Yates.” Hagen was a welcome change to the morning. Stella was only a little envious that he was spending it in the sheriff’s office while she managed the callouts.

“Hey, got my hands full here. Just on my way in.”

“Excellent. I just spoke to Bill. He wants to speak with us both at the office.”

“I need to drop someone off in the cells first.”

“Sounds good. Find me after you’ve booked him.”

Stella pocketed her phone, climbed into the warm SUV, and clicked the seat belt into place. “Hope you’re excited for your bed and your nice, warm cell, Broad.” Without waiting for a response, she released the parking brake.

The local newspaper lay on the passenger seat next to her. There she was with Hagen on the front page, leaning against the patrol vehicle while they sipped hot drinks.

The headline told the whole story.

More Details Emerge about the Psychiatric Patient Killer.

The sight of their faces and their names infuriated Stella. Again.

For two weeks, Broad had sobered up enough to milk that story, writing two print editions and daily online articles—now nationally syndicated because of the interest the case generated. They’d asked him repeatedly to leave their names and faces out and warned him he was endangering federal law enforcement officials. Broad had ignored them.

He'd named them, photographed them, and even suggested in one editorial that they should've taken the killer alive. As if he'd been there in the room on that dreadful day two weeks ago.

The gall of the man.

Yet sometimes Stella did wonder if they couldn't have done more to prevent the killer's death.

She swept the newspaper to the floor and pulled out onto the road.

Broad chuckled. "I see you're a fan of my work."

"I wish you'd just stop writing about this."

"Hey, it's in the public interest, right? And you should see the kind of response this story's been generating." He belched, loud and wet. "Online, that stuff's getting hundreds of thousands of hits. Most popular story I've ever covered. People can't get enough of those killings."

Stella swore under her breath and pushed the gas. The last thing she and Hagen needed was to be known. She'd even gotten a call from her mother—wondering whether her career might be too dangerous and asking if she'd please find a nice desk job somewhere.

The sheriff's department was no more than five minutes away. As long as three-foot snowdrifts or six-foot David Broads weren't blocking the road, nothing in Claymore was more than five minutes away. But by the time Stella pulled up, Broad was already snoring.

She stepped out and opened the back seat. "Wake up!" The combination of her voice

and the blast of cold air served to stir him.

After muscling Broad inside, booking him, and dropping him in the drunk tank to sleep it off, Stella returned to the temporary office she shared with Hagen.

She found him seated behind the sheriff's desk. Across from him sat Dr. Bill Silow and another man in a sheriff's uniform. The man sat with his legs crossed at the ankles. He was in his early fifties, had a long, bare chin, and hadn't taken off his hat. His sausage fingers drummed the arm of the chair.

Hagen smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Come on in."

The man greeted Stella with no more than the lightest of nods.

Dr. Silow turned with a smile. "Stella, good morning. Let me introduce you to Sheriff Louis Deacon. He just received his commission from the governor, and he'll be taking over from you and Hagen starting immediately. Much as I'll be sorry to see you go, I know you've got lives and jobs to get back to. Wanted you both present for the handover."

A weight lifted from Stella's shoulders. They were done here. Their leave was over. The murders in the town were solved, and their responsibilities had been fulfilled.

They had their lives back.

She knew Hagen well enough now to recognize the relief in those dark-green eyes. But there was also a tightness in his jaw that suggested worry. They hadn't been a couple for long—and almost all of it had been on their leave from work. Now, as they returned to Nashville, they'd be building a life together.

Unfolding before them was a whole new adventure. The thought excited Stella, even

as it worried her.

She nodded to Sheriff Deacon and stretched out her hand. “Nice to meet you, Sheriff. If you’ve got any questions, feel free to?”

“I’ll be fine. Been reading about your exploits in the news.” Sheriff Deacon took her hand without standing up and released it quickly, as though he’d touched something cold and wet. “I might not be as flashy, but I’ve got over twenty years on the job. I know what I’m doing.”

Stella’s irritation returned, but she resisted the urge to fire back.

There was no point in getting into a slinging match with some small-town sheriff. Not with their bags nearly packed. She fished around in her pocket, pulled out the keys to the patrol vehicle, and tossed them.

Sheriff Deacon caught the keys in one hand and grunted in affirmation.

“Okay, then. We’ll drop off our uniforms on our way out of town.” She forced a close-lipped smile. “Oh, by the way. There’s a big, sweaty gift waiting for you in the drunk tank.”

Stella and Hagen accepted Dr. Silow’s thanks for their help, promised to remain in touch, and headed out of the office.

As they drove to their cabin, Stella called Slade and put the phone on speaker. When she told them they were on their way home and would be in the office first thing Tuesday morning, the relief in his voice was clear.

“Bright and early.”

Hagen raised an eyebrow. “We’re looking forward to seeing you too, Boss. Missed the old place.”

Stella hung up. No one ever liked a travel day. But by late Monday, they’d be back in Nashville. The day after that, they’d return to the briefing room, receiving their new assignments.

She wanted to be there already.

Twenty minutes later, they pulled into the cabin they’d been renting for the last three and a half months. She’d grown fond of the quiet place in the mountains, where she and Hagen had planned to get to know each other without the distractions of work or the pressures of hunting a killer.

As Stella stuffed her things into her suitcase, Hagen took apart his macchinetta and washed the parts carefully. He was quiet as he folded his clothes, and Stella assumed he was already missing the place.

She whistled as she packed. Pennsylvania was nice, but it wasn’t home.

Nashville was waiting.

The drive across town to the Nashville FBI Resident Agency on Tuesday morning seemed to take forever. In some ways, it felt longer even than their journey down from Pennsylvania.

Rush hour traffic ground slowly down Donelson Pike as it did every weekday morning, and Stella fidgeted in the seat next to Hagen. She tapped her foot. Adjusted the heating. Wiped condensation from the window.

Everything was familiar, but she felt strange.

The last half year had been challenging and intense and life-changing. A string of tough cases had run one after another for two months. They'd tracked and eventually eliminated Joel Ramirez, her father's best friend and murderer, who'd ordered the killing of Hagen's father too.

For a couple weeks, Stella and Hagen had followed up the leads Ramirez's right-hand man, Hal McKay, had given them during interrogation, then taken a long, overdue break.

They'd left as fall settled in. They'd returned as winter began deepening. The morning air was warmer than in Claymore but still colder than Stella liked—in the high forties. The people in the streets walked with a new haste, eager to flee the cooling weather and stride into their heated offices.

Everything was different.

Even Hagen was different.

He wore a full suit and tie.

Stella had been surprised, even shocked, when he'd pulled a tie out that morning. He'd always been meticulous, but a tie was extra. He explained ties were a winter thing. Otherwise, he was always removing them in the summer months. Too hot.

Stella had realized then how briefly they'd known each other. Less than a year. Not even half a year. They'd achieved so much in that time.

And they'd fallen in love.

Completely in love.

When Stella looked at Hagen, she saw not just his square chin, his slim, muscular build, and those dark-green eyes into which she could sink forever. She also saw someone who knew her and understood her better than anyone. They'd traveled the same route. They hadn't always had the same outlook, but over time, their views of the world had merged and strengthened each other. They made each other better.

And Hagen did look smoking hot in a suit.

But it wasn't only Hagen's new look that had changed. The team had changed too. Before her first day, Stella had looked up her new colleagues and run background checks. She'd wanted to know who she was working with and whether they'd be able to help her find the man who'd killed her father.

That help had come, even if it hadn't come from the places she'd expected.

So many of those people were gone now.

Dani Jameson, who'd been kidnapped, went on maternity leave and hadn't come back.

Chloe Foster transferred, taking a promotion in Florida.

And Martin Lin, poor Martin, was dead.

Hagen drove with one hand on the steering wheel. Stella reached for his other and squeezed. He rubbed the back of her wrist with his thumb, and for a moment, all was right with the world.

They parked in the garage and made the short walk to the glass doors of the entrance.

As they headed down the corridor to the bullpen, the heating system hummed under the faint whirl of computer fans. No one else was in. They'd turned up thirty minutes early.

Stella took her seat and logged into her computer for the first time in over three months.

As she checked her messages, the sound of light footsteps came from the corridor. Stella looked up to find Mackenzie Drake, the team's cyber expert, passing by their desks on her way to her office. Happiness struck Stella like a blast of warm air.

But Mac's face was buried in her phone. It was a miracle she hadn't slammed her shin on a rogue office chair.

"Mac!"

Mac froze mid-step, jerking her head up. "Stella? Hagen?" A smile bloomed across her face as she pivoted and rushed toward them. "You're back!" She flew across the

bullpen and greeted Stella with a tight hug. “It’s so good to see you.” Straightening, she held Stella’s face, smushed her cheeks, then hugged her again before finally stepping back.

“Slade has been fretting for days about you not being here. He should’ve told us.”

“We didn’t know ourselves until the day before yesterday.” Stella rubbed her friend’s shoulder. Claymore had been good. But coming home and seeing her friends was wonderful. “How have you been?”

Hagen grinned at Mac from above the monitor on the opposite side of the desk. “Hey, Mac.”

“Oh, yeah. I guess Hagen’s back too.” Mac winked at him. “I’m kidding. We’ve missed those steamy exchanges around here. I’ve had to make do with Ander, and he’s been a lot less fun since he and Alessandra started getting all serious.”

“Those two moved fast, huh?” Stella sympathized with her friend. Mac had liked Ander, and she could see how their colleague’s long curls and muscular body held appeal. But Ander had a son he rarely saw and often mentioned. He needed someone with a similar history. Mac wasn’t it.

“Sorry, Mac. Win some, lose lots.”

Mac jabbed Stella in the ribs with her elbow. “Shut up. Yeah, Ander’s cute...but only if you’re into guys who look like Scandinavian gods with magic hammers.”

“At least your pictures would hang straight.”

“True. But at some point, Ander was bound to cut his hair, and I’d wonder what I ever saw in him.” She leaned closer to Stella and lowered her voice. “And I told you

about the guy I met at the library, right?”

There was a twinkle in Mac’s eye that Stella hadn’t seen before. She mentally crossed her fingers this relationship might go somewhere perfect for her friend. “I think you might’ve mentioned him. But I’m starting to believe there’s a lot more to know.”

“There might be.” Mac laughed and put her arm through Stella’s. “All in good time. But I want you guys to meet him.”

Stella raised her eyebrows. “Wow, meeting the family already. That’s fast.”

“Meeting friends ! My brothers can wait. A little. Come on. Let’s go get some coffee.”

Mac led her out of the office just as Ander came through the entrance. He flashed a wide, toothy grin at Stella and flicked his head so that a long, blond curl flew away from his face. Stella remembered what Mac had seen in him. She waited.

“You’re back!” His grin widened, and his arms wrapped around her. “That’s awesome. So Hagen’s here too?”

Stella pointed at the office. “He’s in there.”

Ander was close to Hagen. A short period when they’d both shown an interest in Stella had created some strain. But now Ander had started a new relationship with Alessandra Lagarde, a forensic scientist specializing in explosives, the tension had dissipated. Ander looked more relaxed and content than Stella had ever seen him.

The four of them talked in the communal office. Ander and Mac perched on corners of the desks while Hagen and Stella lounged in their office chairs as the clock above the corkboard ticked on toward nine.

Hagen wagged a pen in Ander's direction. "So...beers? I need to finish unpacking tonight, but..."

Stella winked at Mac. "He has to unfold all his shirts, then refold them before he puts them away."

"After I've ironed them." Hagen side-eyed Stella before turning the tip of his pen back toward Ander. "We've got some catching up to do."

Ander rubbed the back of his neck. "This week's kinda tough, man. I've got Murph down for the week, and Alessandra's kid's been sick the last couple of nights. If I don't get some sleep soon, I'm gonna be dozing off standing up."

Hagen swung in his chair. "No worries. We'll find a time."

Stella recognized the disappointment in Hagen's voice. He wanted a night with his friend.

Mac punched Stella's shoulder. "Well, if Ander's too busy to play with Hagen, the four of us can go out. Let's say tomorrow night. I'll square it with Werner."

A double date already. Ander and Alessandra weren't the only ones moving fast.

Stacy Lark arrived, her outfit both understated and elegant. Her family was from money, but Stacy never flaunted it. She and Stella had always gotten along, but between confronting an axe-wielding classical pianist and then being trapped in a cave network with a crazed country singer, they'd truly bonded.

Caleb Hudson was the last to arrive. The office's financial analyst gave Stella and Hagen the kind of giant hug that only someone his size—as big as a linebacker—could deliver.

As Hagen told them about their time in Pennsylvania, the walks they'd taken and the nature they'd seen, Stella's gaze shifted to the empty desk at the back of the room, across from Stella's. That was where Chloe Foster had perched like a fierce bird of prey. Her menacing presence was gone. She'd taken an SSA position in Miami, Florida.

Stella's gaze landed on Martin Lin's empty desk. The chair was pushed neatly under, the surface bare of any personal items, as though waiting for his return. An unexpected wave of grief washed over her as she remembered his quick wit, his steadfast loyalty, and how he'd died helping her seek justice.

The absence of his warm, sarcastic presence in the room was a void that no replacement could ever fill. One that chilled Stella like a cold fog.

Caleb broke the silence, and it was like he read her mind. "We've got a replacement. Came in on Friday. You'll meet her today."

Stella nodded. She didn't envy the replacement. Walking in a dead man's shoes was never comfortable.

Ander kicked Hagen's chair. "Hey, I forgot. We're in the presence of celebrities here. We should be asking you both for autographs."

"Selfies," Mac corrected him. "People don't do autographs anymore, Ander. You gotta keep up with the times."

"Don't tell me you've read those articles." Hagen didn't look amused at the reminder of how popular David Broad's pieces had become. Stella knew her partner liked to keep himself to himself. The prospect of fame did not please him at all.

Ander took out his phone. "You bet we have. You're like superheroes taking down

some big, evil menace. The articles have been flying around social media like funny cat memes.”

Hagen groaned. David Broad had followed them all the way down to Nashville. Well, at least his words had. Ander flashed them the screen of his phone. Stella recognized the story and the picture. Hagen shrugged, but she hoped Broad was still locked in a cell in the sheriff’s office. And that Sheriff Deacon had lost the keys.

As the clock reached five minutes to nine, Slade arrived. The team’s boss stopped in the doorway. He eyed the group, saw Stella and Hagen, and greeted them with the smallest of smiles.

“Welcome back. Briefing room. Five minutes.”

Hagen froze mid-step as he entered the conference room. Martin Lin's replacement was already at work, already prepared, and already in Stella's usual seat.

He managed not to curse out loud, but it was a close thing.

Special Agent Anja Farrow spotted him as soon as he walked in. Her cherry-red lips curved into a familiar smile. His heart hammered against his ribs as those chestnut eyes locked with his, the silent recognition hanging in the air between them.

What the hell was she doing here? Two thousand miles and three years separated San Francisco from Nashville, yet somehow, his brief workplace fling had materialized without warning, sitting exactly where his girlfriend would soon be.

The team didn't have assigned seats in the meeting room, but over time, everyone had picked their spot and usually stuck to it. Stella always sat opposite him, sandwiched between Mac and Chloe. And he sat next to Ander.

But the new agent was screwing with the system.

Anja studied him as he made his way around the meeting table. He avoided her gaze. "Agent Yates. So good to see you again."

Hagen pulled out his chair. He'd like to have returned the compliment, but it wasn't true. To see Anja again was not great, though also not the end of the world. But to see her sitting in his girlfriend's chair felt like a bad omen.

For a couple months, he and Anja had dated casually. She'd initiated the hook-up. He'd ended it, which she hadn't appreciated.

If Hagen had learned anything over the last few months, and he'd learned a great deal, it was that confronting the past often came with a price. Some things were better left behind.

"Anja. You're working here now?"

"Fresh in town and ready for the full tour." Her thin smile displayed more mockery than amusement.

Hagen glanced at Stella. She was still getting the lowdown on Mac's new boyfriend as she pulled up a chair next to Anja, then she and Mac introduced themselves and shook the new agent's hand.

Slade was the last in, and he closed the door behind him. He stood at the head of the table. His gaze passed from Anja to Hagen and back again. "So you two do know each other. Thought you might. For those who don't know...Mac, I think you weren't here on Friday, either, this is Special Agent Anja Farrow. She's come to us from the San Francisco office." He turned to Hagen. "You overlapped for a while, right?"

His stomach churned. "Briefly."

One corner of Anja's lips rose at Hagen's irritation. She extended her arm and lay the palm of her hand on the table. "Excited to be working with you again, Agent Yates."

Hagen breathed in slowly. Stella watched the exchange as Anja withdrew her hand and sat back in her seat. But Stella's face was soft, not stern, and the small crease next to her eye suggested she'd found Anja's flirtations funny.

He relaxed. “You too, Agent Farrow.”

“Right, that’s all the introductions we need. You can get to know each other again in your own time. Let’s get to work.”

Slade stepped aside and clicked a remote control. The screen behind him displayed an image of a whitewashed brick wall in a narrow alleyway. Hagen focused on the corpse of a young man in the middle of the picture. He sat naked, propped upright against the wall. His skin was a putrid gray, his left cheek covered with a red scar that ran down his neck and over his shoulder.

Beyond a single cut on the right side of the victim’s neck, there were no other obvious injuries. There wasn’t any blood at the scene, which told him the victim was killed in a separate location and then moved there.

On the wall above the body hung a sign, partly obscured with a swoosh of black graffiti, that warned drivers that unauthorized vehicles would be towed. A wrecking company offered a number to call if one went missing.

Slade tapped the screen.

“Our victim’s been identified as Patrick Marrion, nineteen, a student at Central Tennessee State University. A couple of bar-hoppers looking to unload their bladders in Kerrick’s Alley found him three days ago, just after one on Saturday morning. The MNPd have already informed the family.”

“I don’t envy them that.” Ander ruffled his curls, as if he could erase the whole scene from his brain.

Slade murmured something Hagen didn’t quite catch, but it sounded sympathetic. “Patrick drove a black 2007 Honda Ridgeline. We’ve already put out a BOLO on the

vehicle.”

Stella scrawled notes in her notebook. “How did this case end up on our desk?”

Slade pressed the slide button. The image zoomed in on Patrick Marrion’s long, pale neck.

“Because of me. And because of you and Hagen.”

“Us?” Stella looked as surprised as Hagen felt.

“I was having beers with Captain Ramirez from Metro last night. We go way back to the academy. He mentioned this case, gave me a couple details.” Slade kept his gaze on Stella as he spoke. “When he described how the body looked, I thought it sounded familiar. Given the similarities to your Claymore case, I was concerned we might have a situation crossing state lines. I pulled some strings to get it assigned to us. But I don’t want anyone getting tunnel vision. Odds are against a connection.”

“What are the similarities?” Stella dropped her pen and crossed her arms. Hagen bit back a smile. She’d come a long way from the newbie agent who raised her hand during briefings.

“Exsanguination.”

Hagen could’ve gone a whole lifetime without hearing that word again. “Almost completely drained?”

“That’s right. There was bruising around the victim’s ankles, suggesting the unsub strung him up prior to death?—”

“In order to bleed him out.” Stella finished.

If Slade was put out by the interruption, he didn't let on. "See? You've definitely seen this before. There was also bruising around the wrists, suggesting the victim was bound. I was reminded of those lovely articles from your extended leave."

"We caught the killer, though. This is probably something new." Hagen didn't like the idea of there being two unsubs with such a nasty modus operandi, but Maureen King wasn't hurting anyone anymore.

Slade shrugged. "Probably. But you picked up plenty of press coverage up there. Could be a copycat."

"Well, the cases are somewhat similar, what with the bruising around the ankles and the exsanguination. But I don't see any of the unusual writing we found on the victims in Pennsylvania." Hagen waved a finger in the general direction of the bare wall. "The throat's intact, and the victims we saw didn't have that precise cut on the neck."

Stella jumped in. "Were there any marks or cuts on the victim's back?"

Slade shook his head. "Forensics hasn't provided a definitive answer yet. The problem is, the victim already has a pronounced scar on his back. Any scratches they found could be new, or they might be old scars mistaken for fresh injuries. We'll know more when we get the M.E.'s report. Like I said, could be a copycat who didn't quite get your unsub's M.O. right."

Hagen didn't like this at all. "That seems like a pretty big part of the M.O. to miss, if it was a copycat. David Broad, the journalist who wrote all those articles, got into some extremely specific detail. They published the cuneiform markings on the backs of the victims."

Stella leaned forward. "Are there any indications the Nashville killer has an

accomplice?”

“Nothing definitive. But considering that the alley is open to the public, there’s no way to tell for certain.”

The Pennsylvania case involved an accomplice. A man Hagen had trusted. He’d worked with them during the investigation, and Hagen had believed he wanted to track down the killer in earnest.

Slade thought for a moment, then tapped the table. “We’re all going to have to keep an open mind. But it’s certainly out of the ordinary, and I want to make sure we don’t find any more victims like this one.”

“What about the civilians who found the scene?” Stacy’s gaze was fixed on the gray corpse. Hagen didn’t blame her. A bloodless body was a sight. Oddly translucent. “The cops questioned them?”

“They did and ruled them out. Security footage in the area has them staggering out of a bar and heading to the alley. They run out seconds later, one zipping up, the other calling the police. The discovery sobered them up pretty darned quick.”

When Slade paused, eyeing Stella, then Hagen, discomfort made Hagen want to squirm.

A copycat isn’t our fault. Dammit, Broad.

“Right, let’s get to work. Hagen, Ander, go to the forensic center and find out what the M.E. has to say. When you’re done there, head to the victim’s dorm. Maybe his roommate will point us in the right direction.”

Warmth swelled Hagen’s heart. Even if he couldn’t get beers with Ander, at least

he'd get a chance to spend some time with his friend.

Slade turned to Stella. He wasn't wasting time. "You and Stacy, talk to the victim's parents and then take another look at that alley. Forensics has been over it. But I want your eyes on the place. Anja, you're with me today. I'll give you the tour."

Hagen exhaled heavily and stood. Leave was over. He really was back at work.

Hagen paced the entrance of the Middle Tennessee Regional Forensic Center.

He hated these places. Everything about a morgue erased a victim's personality and history. The smell of formaldehyde and disinfectant. Waiting for the medical examiner in his crisp, white coat to escort them in. Finally, the sight of the corpse, cleaned up and laid out on a slab like some piece of forensic evidence.

Dammit. Why did Slade always do this to him?

The less time he spent around morgues, the happier he'd be.

He strode to the end of the hall, checked his watch, and walked right back.

Ander sat on one of the plastic chairs by the wall. He looked entirely at ease, his legs stretched, his fingers folded over the front of his belt buckle, as he described the minutiae of his relationship with Alessandra Lagarde.

They were both divorced and shared custody of their only children—him, a ten-year-old named Murphy, her, a three-year-old named Demetri—with their exes.

“Man, you should've seen Murphy and Demetri this morning. I was worried, you know? I thought Murphy would be all jealous of Demetri. He can get moody sometimes, like any kid. Figured he'd fight for my attention. But he was great. He held Demetri and helped to feed him. And Demetri was babbling away like an old drain. I'm telling you, those two are getting along like brothers. It's great, man.”

Hagen was happy for Ander. He and Alessandra hadn't been together long, but they were already settling into the domestic life that Ander clearly craved. "I'm glad it's working out for you."

"It really is, you know? It's funny. I think of all the fights Kelsey and I had before we broke up. Everything was a struggle. We argued about every little thing. But this is easy. Just smooth. It's like we both wanted the same thing at the same time and found it in each other. I couldn't be happier, man. Really."

If anyone else had spoken like that, he'd have believed they were trying to convince themselves of something. But Ander had never struggled to face the truth. He'd always known what he wanted.

Even in the kind of day-to-day drudgery that domestic life entailed—feeding the kids, shepherding them around—Ander was in his element.

Hagen and Stella had forged their bond in moments of stress. He'd seen Stella's determination, her courage, her intelligence, and found so much to admire in one beautiful package. He was lucky to have found her, luckier still that she'd found something in him.

But he didn't think either one of them was "in their element." And now they faced their real test.

Life and work together, like Ander and Alessandra, day after day.

Hagen had never let a relationship progress this far. This was a whole new challenge.

He rubbed at a spot on the floor with the toe of his shoe. "Good for you. I'm glad you're happy."

Ander grinned. “We both are, right? Stella’s a great catch. Way out of your league. Different game, really. She’s Roland-Garros, and you’re a pickleball tourney at the rec courts.”

Hagen didn’t appreciate the crack but sloughed it off. “Thanks, man.”

“What do you make of the new girl? Anja. You worked with her long in San Francisco?”

Shit. He’d known the conversation was coming, but still...

“No. A few months. Two or three, I think. She was coming in as I was going out. She’s good. She’s got a way of developing assets in the field.”

“Really?” Ander raised his brow. He clearly wanted more.

Talking about Anja as an agent was something Hagen could easily handle. “We had a case. My last one in San Fran. There were reports of a gang moving Colombian cocaine in nightclubs. We figured we’d need a good eight months to figure out who was doing what and gather evidence. Within a month, Anja had gotten three bartenders and half a dozen bouncers leaking information.”

“Oh, yeah? How’d she do that?”

“She can be...persuasive. She spoke to them, their families, dug hard into their backgrounds. Didn’t take her long to figure out each person’s weakness and decide whether they needed a carrot or a stick, a shove against the wall or an envelope filled with Benjamins. We wrapped the whole thing up in two and a half months. It was good work.”

Ander uncrossed his ankles and recrossed them. “And?”

“And what?”

“Hey, man. I’m just saying. Those googly eyes she was making at you? What was that all about?”

Hagen reached the end of the entrance hall and stopped. If Ander noticed Anja’s reaction to him, Stella certainly had. He spun on his heel. “Yeah, yeah. We had a thing. She was interested, and I was...there. Willing, I guess. She figured out my weak point.”

“What was that?”

Hagen hated how uncomfortable this entire conversation made him. He had nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to hide. Not really.

He rolled his neck. “I don’t know. She just got too close, you know? One night, I ended up talking about my dad’s murder, and I got so angry...I guess I wasn’t ready for anyone to see that side of me yet.”

“These things take time to process. You seem better now, though.” Ander’s solemn expression morphed into a knowing look. “Told Stella?”

“No.” He threw his hands up. “When? I was blindsided back there. But she’s probably figured it out. Not much gets past her.”

“No, it doesn’t. I don’t envy that conversation.” Ander chuckled. “Look at you. Always punching above your weight.”

The door opened, and Caspar Brennan waved them in. He tossed Hagen and Ander each a pair of nitrile gloves, which they caught and snapped over their fingers.

Dr. Brennan's jacket was always too white, too pressed. And the halo of blond hair around his bald head was always neatly trimmed, the small tuft that remained above his forehead never out of place. As though the corpses the M.E. dealt with all day cared how he looked.

Patrick Marrion certainly didn't.

They found him lying naked on the slab. The victim's eyes were open but sunken. His face was decorated with only the lightest of stubble, which barely reached above his jaw. The lines of his ribs showed through his thin chest, and the red mark Hagen had seen on the crime scene photos was brighter than he expected up close. An old, healed burn scar ran across the young man's cheek and covered the top of his left shoulder before disappearing down his back.

But it was the victim's pallor that stood out the most. Marrion's skin was pale, his color vanished with the blood drained from him. Even his lips had lost their luster, so that only his scar and his small, hairless nipples displayed any tone at all.

A sharp intake of breath sounded from Ander. "Jeez."

Hagen braced himself for the revulsion he usually experienced in morgues. But it didn't come. He'd recently seen two corpses in a similar state. Perhaps he adjusted better to exsanguination cases? Putrefaction and decay were delayed without blood in the body, so some of the gnarlier side effects of death were mitigated.

He approached the corpse and indicated the bottom of the victim's thighs and the edge of his buttocks. "Do you see how there's little discoloration here? Usually, you'd expect to find the blood pooled at the lowest point. He was found in a seated position, so this part of the body," he lowered his pointed finger to the hip and buttock area, "should be darker than the rest. The fact there's so little discoloration here indicates he was moved after death. Right, Doc?"

Dr. Brennan tilted his head. “Very good, Agent Yates. We’ll have you elbow-deep in cadavers any day now. Want to guess the time of death?”

Hagen shook his head. He’d leave the details to the experts.

Dr. Brennan checked his notes. “We can probably say it was sometime late Friday afternoon. The report said he was found in the early hours of Saturday morning. He hadn’t been sitting in the cold for long.”

Ander kept his distance, but Hagen drew nearer the body. In Claymore, the victims had been killed by deep slashes across their necks, the depth and savagery of the cuts opening the carotid arteries. The bleeding had been fast.

But Patrick Marrion’s neck was intact. Besides the bruising around the victim’s ankles, wrists, and neck, the only obvious wound Hagen could identify was a single cut on the right side of the victim’s neck—a straight line, no more than an inch long—which appeared to be done with precision.

“I see you’ve found our cause of death.” Dr. Brennan hovered over Hagen’s shoulder.

Ander took a step forward and stood at Hagen’s other shoulder. “That’s what killed him?” He sounded skeptical. “I was expecting something more gruesome.”

The medical examiner rocked on his heels. “Yes. That incision, as small as it seems, is deep. Goes all the way to the carotid artery.”

The M.E. placed a gloved finger at the bottom of the cut and pulled down. The skin separated easily, the end of a severed artery visible under a thin layer of fat. Still holding the cut open, Dr. Brennan toyed with the edge of the artery with the tip of his gloved finger. The tissue bounced like rubber.

Hagen forced himself to relax his jaw. Dr. Brennan always made things a bit weird.

“The carotid artery. Cut that, and you’ve had it without immediate help, gentlemen. If you can’t stop the bleeding, you’ll be unconscious in minutes and dead as a doornail shortly afterward. In two to five minutes, if you want to be precise about it.”

Ander pushed a loose curl away from his eye. “Could it have been an accident? A fight, and the blade made a lucky hit?”

Dr. Brennan released the cut. The edge of the skin slowly returned to its place, its elasticity all but gone.

“There are no other wounds. Nothing defensive. The bruising around the neck suggests the victim was asphyxiated, which might imply a minor struggle.” He paused. “At best, you might be able to say he was held down while the killer bound him at the wrists and ankles before the killer made their precise cut.”

The medical examiner was right. There was nothing on the victim’s face that suggested more than the lightest of struggles.

Hagen crossed his arms. This didn’t look anything like the Pennsylvania cases. “Why make such a strange incision?”

“It reminds me of the cuts morticians make during the embalming process.” Dr. Brennan crossed his arms too.

“Can we see his back?”

Dr. Brennan smiled. “Thought you’d want to see that. It’s something. Give me a hand here, will you?”

As Dr. Brennan placed his hands under the victim's ribs, Hagen lifted from beneath the shoulders.

The body twisted, then flopped face down on the slab. Dr. Brennan pulled out the arm trapped under Marrion's chest and straightened it next to his side.

A red scar started on the victim's left cheek and neck, cascaded over his shoulder, and covered much of his upper back, stopping just below the rib cage in a rough, curving line.

"Quite a sight, isn't it?"

Ander swallowed. "What is it?"

"An old burn, one that was completely healed. That means it happened long before the fatal attack. Must've hurt like all heck when it happened. And while it was healing too. You can see how the skin grew back tighter, more unevenly than the rest of his normal skin. You'd probably get away with less of a scar these days. Skin grafts have come a long way. But that was the best they could do then."

Hagen thought of the bodies they'd found hanging from trees in Claymore Township. Their backs had been covered in strange writing, with a message about the end of the world.

He leaned closer. There were abrasions in the scar tissues. A few small lines and cuts ran over the bumps and old scabs on the skin.

"These fresh?"

Dr. Brennan brought the light closer. "Looks like it. Someone made a few incisions on the scar. These appear to be done by a scalpel or something similar. I'd suggest the

same weapon used to make the cut on the carotid artery. But unlike that cut, these were superficial. Certainly not deadly. But again, I would look into morticians. It's not like the average Joe would think to commit murder in such a specific way. That might be a place to start."

Hagen straightened. The M.E. wasn't wrong. The exsanguination matched the last case, as well as the bruising around the ankles. But the cuts on the victim's back were inconclusive. They could be the result of Patrick Marrion's body being dragged along a rough surface.

He peeled off his gloves. "Anything else?"

Dr. Brennan shook his head. "Not at this time. If I find something, I'll be in touch."

"Right, then. Let's go meet Patrick Marrion's roommate." Ander was already halfway to the door.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:00 am

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Patrick Marrion had grown up in the Nashville neighborhood of Forest Crest, where houses were comfortable without being luxurious, spacious but not sprawling, and stood far enough apart for the loudest of domestic disputes to pass unheard. The wide expanse of grass in front of each home was neatly mowed, and stone walkways provided elegant, winding routes from the sidewalks to the front doors.

Stella pulled up in front of a neat redbrick house with white pillars on the porch. A wide chimney promised cozy winter evenings. A layer of dark moss covered the head of a small stone bear in the corner of a flower bed.

From the outside, there was no sign at all that this was a home in mourning. That behind those walls was a pain Stella had seen too often and experienced too deeply.

Stacy undid her seat belt. "Ready?"

Stella wasn't but got out of the SUV.

A man in his mid-fifties opened the door after two soft knocks. Gray fuzz decorated his heavy cheeks. His plaid shirt was untucked, and his jeans hung loosely on his legs.

Stella held up her badge. "I'm FBI Special Agent Stella Knox, and this is Special Agent Stacy Lark. Are you Andrew Marrion?"

The man squinted at both badges. "FBI?"

“Yes. We’re sorry for your loss.” Stella had said those words so many times, she’d lost count. She often wondered if the routine would strip them of their meaning. It hadn’t happened yet. “We’re investigating your son’s death. Do you mind if we ask you a few questions?”

He stepped aside. “Sure. I don’t know what came over me. I’m Andrew. Patrick’s dad. The police told us you’d be coming. Come on in.”

He showed them into the living room. A fire burned in the brick-lined grate. A Christmas tree stood in the corner, and a garland of holly took pride of place on the mantelpiece.

A ball settled at the back of Stella’s throat.

There’d be no joy in this house this year. Happiness wouldn’t come back here for a long time, and when, if ever, it arrived, the first smile would bring guilt and memories and regret.

Stella thought of her brother and wished for the millionth time he was still with her. It’d been over a decade since Jackson passed after a long battle with brain cancer.

Meghan Marrion sat on the sofa, a photo album in her lap and a woman in her early twenties beside her. According to the file, Patrick had a sister, Natalie. Stella guessed the young woman was one and the same. Dark circles rimmed both women’s eyes, the telltale signs of sleepless nights and fresh tears.

Natalie held the corner of a photo between her finger and thumb. There was a hollow emptiness in her and her mother’s movements, the kind that settled in after the initial shock had worn off and the crushing reality of loss began to take hold.

Andrew touched his wife’s shoulder as he passed through the room.

“Honey, these are the FBI agents.” He frowned. “I’m sorry. I don’t remember your names. My head’s a little...”

Stacy came to his rescue. “I’m Special Agent Stacy Lark, and this is Special Agent Stella Knox. We just wanted to ask you a few questions about Patrick, if that’s okay?”

Meghan nodded and waved toward the two-seat sofa that sat at an angle to the table. “Of course. This is our daughter, Natalie, and you can call me Meghan. Why don’t y’all have a seat? We’re just looking through photos to find something to enlarge for the funeral.”

Stacy dropped onto one end of the sofa. Stella took the other.

She’d done the album search too. Her father’s precinct in Memphis had a picture of him in his uniform. His sergeant stripes gleamed on his arm. Stella hadn’t loved the photo. His smile had been cooler and stiffer than the warm grins he always displayed at home, but he’d looked handsome, professional.

Finding a picture of her brother had been harder. He’d been so skinny at the end. They’d had to go back almost a year to find one that showed him at his best, before the ravages of the disease took him. They’d chosen a full body shot of him standing at a science fair, admiring the rocket he’d made.

Stella took out her notebook, forcing her mind from the past. “Tell us about Patrick. Did he have many friends? Did he mention anyone who was giving him trouble?”

Meghan took the photo from her daughter and put it back in its place. She turned the page. “No, nothing like that. Patrick was...he was a quiet kid. He didn’t make friends very easily. Most of the time, he was in his room, reading or doing something on his computer.”

“Playing video games on his computer?” Stacy had her own notebook open. “Do you know if he played by himself or online?”

Patrick’s father sat in the armchair at the other end of the room. It was his place, his throne. He looked like a king who’d lost his kingdom. “No, he never played video games. I’m not sure what he did on his computer. Browsed the web? Mostly, he was a reader. History books, usually. He got that from me. We were always swapping books about World War II and ancient civilizations and stuff.”

His daughter lifted her gaze from the photos. Stella was sure at any other time a mention of history would’ve produced a roll of her eyes. “You binged on the History Channel.”

“I wouldn’t say we binge-watched it.”

Tears filled Natalie’s eyes. “Dad, you and Patrick could sit there for four hours watching some show about Aztec empires or some crap.”

Andrew gave his daughter a weak smile. Those television sessions wouldn’t come again either.

Stella made a note. “History, huh? That’s what he was studying at college, correct?”

Andrew nodded.

She underlined the note. Their last case had hung on a former history teacher. But Maureen King had been a killer, not a victim, and if everyone who read books on the world wars or watched the History Channel was a suspect, they’d have to perform a lot of interviews.

David Broad had mentioned Maureen King’s job in his reports too. He’d thought a

“killer teacher” would draw audiences in, and he hadn’t been wrong.

Natalie pulled a picture out of the album. “Hey, how about this one? He looks good here.”

Her mother snatched the photo and jammed it back into its place. “Don’t be silly. It’s the wrong side. Shows all his scars. We can find better pictures than that.”

Stacy tapped her notebook with the tip of her pen. “The scars look older. They’re fully healed. How did he get them?”

Meghan was in the middle of turning a page and stopped. For a second, she sat there without moving, then she shoved the photo album into Natalie’s lap and ran, sobbing, toward the kitchen.

Andrew watched her go before following. Meghan’s cries rang out, though, despite being muffled by her husband’s chest.

Natalie cradled the album in her lap. She looked from the kitchen to Stacy. Her cheeks reddened.

Stacy shifted in her seat. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s not your fault. She’s been like this since...you know. The scars? They happened when Patrick was small, about five years old. Mom was about to deep-fry some drumsticks, and he reached for the handle of the pot. The boiling oil went over the left side of his face and down his back.”

Stella winced. “That sounds terrible.”

“Yeah, it was. Had a ton of operations. Mom blamed herself, for the accident and for

everything that followed, though it wasn't her fault. Just one of those things, really."

"Everything that followed?"

Natalie toyed with the corner of the photo album. "Patrick...he wasn't a happy kid. He was bullied all the way through school. Because of the scars. Kids suck. At some point, I think he just gave up. He rarely left the house and spent most of his time in his room."

Stacy rested her elbows on her knees. She spoke quietly over the sobbing from the kitchen. "Was he looking forward to going to college?"

"Yeah. We were too. He thought..." Her eyes welled with tears. "We all thought college would bring him out. Give him a fresh start. College kids are supposed to be grown-up, so we hoped he'd make new friends. I know Mom was sure he was going to be just fine."

"Did he make friends?"

Natalie thought before she answered. "I don't know. I don't think so. But this was only his first semester. He didn't like his roommate and was struggling to build a social circle. I just figured he needed more time."

Stella put away her notebook. Hagen and Ander would be on their way to speak to the roommate by now. She'd be interested in what they found. With no social life, the roommate was about the only lead they had into Patrick's life.

"Do you mind showing us his room?"

Natalie glanced toward the kitchen door, but her mother was still sobbing, and her father was still trying to console her. She laid the photo album aside and led them

upstairs.

There was little to see in his bedroom. Someone had moved a stationary bike into the middle of the floor, a change that probably happened when he went to college, but most of the room remained as Patrick would've left it.

A Harry Potter poster, its edges torn and corners folded, hung above the bed, where it probably had for years. The desk under the window was empty except for a glass jar that held a couple of ballpoint pens and a broken pencil. The metal bookshelves that ran across the wall were full.

Stella scanned the selection. Patrick's reading had been broad. Between books about ancient Rome, the Civil War, and the rise and fall of half a dozen empires sat science fiction novels and thick volumes of fantasy.

There was something to be said for retreating from the world. At least it had given Patrick plenty of time to read and escape before his body wound up in a filthy downtown alley.

Stella thanked Natalie for her help and followed her back to the living room.

Kerrick's Alley, where Patrick Marrion's body was found, awaited them.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:00 am

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Swinging soothed me. My legs wrapped like a pretzel around the cord of rope hanging from the steel beam overhead, and I let the momentum take me.

Swoosh.

Poor HistoryBoi1789 hadn't enjoyed the rope the same way.

I couldn't imagine my luck when I found the beams across the warehouse ceiling when I first arrived. The setup was exactly like the trees back in Claymore Township. I'd brought thick sailors' rope from home. It was similar to the rope me and Maureen had used for crazy Laurence and Deputy Mark.

HistoryBoi Patrick now joined the ranks of those previous victims. The guy was so pathetic, I'd done him a favor putting him out of his misery. He wanted a friend too desperately. Cringe.

Swoosh.

Maureen King had been my teacher. But I taught her. In the end, she was mine.

People, teachers especially, had always been impressed by me. I hadn't always had this facility with words. My parents thought I was an alien. I turned out so different from them, from how they raised me.

Swoosh.

I was one of those rare people who were as charismatic and convincing online as they were in person. Usually, people were better at one or the other.

Monty31 was my online persona.

I could've had as many names as I liked, of course. Made a new one anytime. A person could disappear just as easily in the real world as they could online. Especially if they had money, which I would have soon. The Administrator would reward me for taking out those two federal agents. My plan was coming together.

Swoosh.

I'd never go back to Claymore. I was done with that hick town. Nashville was lit. Once I got the money, I could go anywhere I wanted. I just had to finish the job first.

Then law school.

Swoosh.

Beneath me, the puddle of HistoryBoi Patrick's blood had dried now, turning dark and flaky around the edges like rust. I'd gathered most of it with a mop and bucket. But before it coagulated, I'd managed to load up my paintbrush.

After coaxing enough material onto the brush, I'd sketched out the ancient symbols Maureen and the Administrator were so obsessed with. The cuneiforms appeared like strange bird tracks across the concrete—angular lines and wedges that resembled tiny footprints marching in formation. But the wild, random flicks of blood between the carefully crafted symbols—those were my own little artistic touch.

HistoryBoi Patrick's freakish scars were a terrible canvas and had made carving impossible. So I'd compromised and left the Administrator's message on the wall.

While I was careful, the plan was for those pain in the ass agents to eventually find this place.

The sooner the better, honestly. The place was a dump. Cold, drafty wind blew everywhere. Water dripped. Something willowy clapped. The sheets of torn plastic taped to the windows, probably. And now the metallic odor of blood hung in the air, mixed with the stench of dirt and damp. The walls were bare and broken. Stains marked the floor, still sticky in places. Pigeon droppings mostly blocked the cracked pane in the roof's skylight.

And I'd be here, in the shadows, waiting to kill them. The Sig Sauer P230 I stole from my stepdad was in the pocket of my jeans, just waiting to do the job.

My phone was cleaned through multiple VPNs and .onion systems, so I was pretty sure I couldn't be tracked. At least not quickly. I'd throw out all my electronics after I'd gotten paid by the Administrator anyway.

Then I'd be long gone.

Swoosh.

I'd spent the past few days downtown, around the alley where we'd dropped Patrick's body. I'd been looking for them to make an appearance. They had yet to show.

I kicked off the wall again. But it was sort of feeble. I did it once more and got some good momentum, though a high-pitched squeaky rubbing sound began. We'd thrown the rope over one of the beams and secured the other end to a rusty iron radiator. By the looks of it, the heating element hadn't been turned on for decades.

But it was only temporary. I'd kill the agents, freeing up the Administrator to do whatever bullshit he planned to do. Maureen had believed in him, but I wasn't like

her.

I wasn't obsessed with the Administrator or anything. I was here because of the money. Plain and simple.

In the message I'd gotten a couple weeks ago, the Administrator said he was placing a bounty on the heads of those responsible for the death of his prized disciple, Maureen King. He offered one hundred thousand dollars to anyone who killed either Special Agent Stella Knox or Special Agent Hagen Yates.

The reward for their double murder was two hundred and fifty grand.

That was crazy. So much money.

That was serious cash. I thought you'd have to be crazy not to jump at a deal like that, and I was far from crazy. And I had the distinct advantage of seeing how those so-called agents worked first hand in Claymore. Very sloppy, if you asked me.

The Administrator had written the bounty to every member of the Dispatch group. But, out of everyone else on that platform, I knew he was talking to me. The way he'd phrased the message...he knew about me. He knew I was the only one with the stones to do it, the only one who would actually see it through. Everyone else on that damn list...they were losers, pretenders.

Swoosh.

I'd always sensed from an early age that I wasn't like other people. But my feelings were confirmed when my little brother died. I was eleven. Donny was four and kind of a brat. Anyway, he'd been playing in the street, rolling around on his tricycle, when a gleaming black Mercedes came around the curve and hit him.

My mom was so sad. She couldn't stop crying for months. And dad was so angry. He couldn't stop drinking and yelling and pounding things, not that this was any real kind of departure from his usual behavior. He left for good not long after Donny's death.

I didn't know why they were so emotional. They hadn't even been there when it happened. I was there. I'd watched the whole incident.

And hadn't felt a thing.

Everyone at school was really nice to me after my kid brother turned into roadkill. They looked at me with those sad puppy dog eyes. I realized they wanted me to have the same eyes. So I put them on, like I would a sweater in winter.

But the whole time I kept thinking, Don't you all remember how annoying the kid was ?

There was no way I could've known Donny's death was about to change my life.

But a few weeks after it, a fancy lawyer from Philadelphia showed up. I still remembered his business card. Simon Gallagher, Esq.

Mr. Gallagher wore a suit, and his hair was slicked back really cool, and he smelled awesome. Like the forest or something. He didn't look like anyone in Claymore, that was for sure. I couldn't believe he was in our trailer.

There they were, my mom, my dad, and this Gallagher guy, sitting around the kitchen table. I'd been sent to my room, but I snuck out and listened as I peeked around the wall.

Gallagher represented the guy who was driving the Mercedes that killed Donny. The

upshot was that, since the driver was going the speed limit, and since he wasn't drinking, then no one was really at fault in this situation. "It was simply an unfortunate circumstance." That was what he said.

Therefore, there would be no settlement. My parents would get nothing.

You should've seen my dad when he heard that. He freaked out, threatening to punch the guy into next week.

But you should've seen Gallagher. As he delivered the news, there was a look of pleasure in his eyes. It was subtle but there. A kind of gleam of excitement.

In that moment, I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up.

A lawyer.

The entire experience changed me. From then on, my efforts were focused on this one, singular goal. And two hundred and fifty grand would go a long way to making that happen.

Swoosh.

Hagen had met a thousand guys like Patrick Marrion's roommate. Or at least, it felt like that.

In the three years he'd spent as an officer with the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department, barely a week went by without arresting at least one college kid for possession, public drunkenness, driving while intoxicated, minor in possession, or even violent behavior.

He'd haul them in. They'd call their dads, and within half an hour, a lawyer with the same tailor his father used would slide a briefcase onto the table of the interrogation room. He'd explain why keeping the kid for a second longer would end Hagen's career and produce a lawsuit big enough to bankrupt the police department.

Jake Tripp was sprawled across his bed. A half-eaten burrito rested on a plate by his pillow. He only needed to turn his head to grab a bite hands-free. But that would've meant taking his eyes off the screen of his Nintendo Switch.

He'd been holding the device when he'd shouted to Hagen that the door was open. Even when they'd flashed their badges and told him they wanted to ask him questions about his deceased roommate, he neither sat up nor put the device down.

The Switch beeped. Tripp made a small fist-bump.

They'd only been in the room for about a minute, but Hagen's anger at this punk was rising almost to a breaking point.

The way Ander rested a shoulder against the door of the dorm room suggested he, too, was in familiar territory. Ander hadn't been a cop. But his graduate degree meant he'd spent plenty of time on college campuses and far too many evenings in student dormitories.

A CTSU Pelicans pennant was pinned to the wall above his bed. Two dirty t-shirts, three unmatched socks, a sweater, a pair of jeans with the boxers still inside, and three pairs of expensive-looking sneakers were scattered around the floor. The air smelled of weed and unwashed clothes.

The bed on Patrick's side of the room had been made. Sloppily, so that the top of the blanket was crooked, and the pillowcase surely needed to be changed, but at least it had been made. There were no clothes on the floor, and the books on the bedside cabinet made a neat pile. Jake Tripp's bedside cabinet held two empty cans of Red Bull and a packet of rolling papers.

Another beep bleated from Tipp's game console like an annoying sheep. He winced and jammed a button on his device. Hagen had a strong urge to take the machine from his hand and hurl it through the window.

Instead, he reminded himself to breathe. "So, Jake, what can you tell me about Patrick?"

His gaze didn't leave the screen as he shrugged. "Not much. We weren't friends or nothing. What do you want to know?"

"You know what he was studying?"

Tripp shrugged again. The move seemed to be his standard response. Teachers must've found it infuriating.

“Seriously? You’ve been his roommate for...what? Three months now? And he didn’t tell you what he was studying? You didn’t think to ask?”

Jake shrugged a third time.

Ander pushed into the room. He stood on Tripp’s dirty clothes. “Hello? Can you hear me? Can you put that down, please?”

Once again, Tripp didn’t answer. Something on the screen had caught his attention and held it.

Ander reached over the bed and yanked the Switch out of Tripp’s hands. “That’s more than enough of this.”

Hagen pleaded silently for Ander to open the eighth-floor window and send the thing flying over the sidewalk to smash into the middle of the street.

Tripp finally met their eyes.

Hagen got up into the punk’s face. “We’re not playing around here, Jake. This is a murder investigation. If you want this thing back, you’d better focus and answer our questions. Otherwise, we’ll be having this conversation in a more official setting.”

Tripp glared but didn’t move. “This is bullshit, man.”

“You want to know bullshit? Your roommate is dead, and you don’t seem to give two fucks about it. You know what that looks like to us? Looks like maybe you didn’t like your roommate. Looks like maybe you might have reason to hurt your roommate. Do you want us to believe that you would hurt your murdered roommate?”

The two of them locked eyes, and Tripp blinked first. “All right, fine. What do you

want to know?”

Hagen took a deep breath. “What was he studying?”

Tripp shrugged yet again. “I dunno. History, I think. We didn’t talk much. I’m out a lot. He wasn’t. We didn’t see much of each other. And what I saw of him was too much, you ask me.”

“You didn’t like him?”

“Wouldn’t say I didn’t like him. Nothing to like or not like, you know. Just sort of a nothing person.”

That was too much. Hagen fumed. “You better change your attitude, kid. You don’t speak ill of the dead. Didn’t your mother teach you any manners?”

Tripp rolled his eyes. “If he wasn’t lying there with some history book, he was usually on his phone or something. He was boring, man. A gold-plated geek.”

Hagen turned and took a seat on the edge of Patrick’s bed. From his position, all he could see was Jake Tripp and his stuff and his mess. Tripp left little space for a roommate to make his own.

“Who were his friends?”

The shrug returned. “No idea. Honestly, man. Don’t think he had any. Not in the real world anyway.” He chuckled.

Ander kicked the pile of clothes from under his feet. “What does that mean?”

“Just that no one ever came here, man. The only people I ever saw him talking to

were, like, on his phone or online.”

Hagen’s interest rose. “So he did talk to people. You hear what he said?”

“Naw, he didn’t talk to anyone. He just texted. Like on some messaging app or something.”

Ander opened the drawer of the bedside cabinet. There were more pens, a small bottle of ibuprofen, and a short stack of plain paper. He shook his head and looked at Hagen. “Nothing of any interest.”

Hagen peered at Jake. “Where are his phone and computer?”

Another beep blared out. This time from Tripp’s person. The punk pulled his phone from his pocket and started texting.

Hagen could hardly believe it. “Where are the phone and computer?”

“What? Whose phone and computer?”

Hagen clenched his fists to stop himself from smacking Tripp across the head. But, once again, he remembered to breathe.

“Patrick’s phone and computer. Although if you want to give us yours, as well, we’d be happy to take them.”

Tripp’s head jerked up. “You’re not taking my stuff. I’ll call my dad. You can’t do that.”

Hagen leaned against the closet door, not even needing to get up from the bed to do so. No matter the money, dorm rooms still always managed to be tiny. Tripp was

right, of course, they couldn't take his computer and phone, not without a better reason than Jake Tripp being a world-class douche. But at least they had his attention.

“You said Patrick was always on his computer and his phone. Where are they?”

The screen beeped again. “How the heck would I know?”

Ander eyed Hagen then glared at Tripp. “We’re going to go through Patrick’s stuff now.”

Tripp lowered his phone. “Just don’t touch anything of mine. You can’t do that.”

Hagen and Ander searched Patrick’s bedside table and desk. They looked through his sheets and under his mattress and bed. They rifled through his closet and searched the small backpack that hung behind the door that Tripp identified as Patrick’s.

But the phone and the computer weren’t there.

Tripp glanced at them, then back down at his screen, his burrito still half-eaten. “The cops already searched there, you know.”

Not for the first time, Hagen wished there was a law against being a dickhead so they could haul this kid in. “You mentioned Patrick was active online. Do you know who he was talking to? What platforms? If it was someone local?”

Tripp shook his head, a welcome change from a shrug. He waved a finger in the air. “Oh, there was one thing. He got amped recently. Some friend of his had moved to the city. They were going to meet up. I think it was the day he was found, you know?” He lowered his phone for the first time. “Maybe that was where he went. Huh.”

When Ander met Hagen's gaze, he looked like he was also aching to pummel answers out of Tripp. "What friend?"

"You didn't think to open with this information, Jake?" Hagen was ready to send Jake himself out the eighth-floor window.

There was that signature shrug again.

"Patrick didn't mention a name?"

"Don't think so. I dunno. Maybe. I just tuned the guy out most of the time, you know?"

"You know where the friend lived?"

"Uh-uh."

"How about where he moved from?" Ander stepped closer, shoulder to shoulder with Hagen now.

Shrug.

"Jake, who was this friend?"

Another shrug.

Hagen had enough. He plucked the phone out of the kid's hand. "I'll ask you again, who was this friend?"

"I don't know, man. He didn't say, and I didn't ask. All I know is he was yapping about meeting some friend who'd just moved to town and how he was gonna show

him around and all that crap. Dude, I figured he was lying. Like, who'd be friends with Patrick?" He held out his hand. "Now give it back."

Hagen tossed the phone on the bed, while Ander dropped the Switch. It fell through Tripp's hands, bounced off his belly, and clattered to the floor. Only the dirty sweater by the bed saved the screen from a nasty crunch.

"You shithead cop."

"If I see you again, you'll learn what a shithead cop really is."

As they headed out of the dorm, shutting the door firmly, Hagen considered that their trip hadn't been entirely in vain. Patrick Marrion had a friend, after all. Now they needed to find him.

They were walking down the hall when Hagen heard a "psst" from behind him. He turned and saw a young man of South Asian heritage in pajamas, standing in the doorway of his dorm room.

"Are you guys cops?"

Hagen took out his badge and showed it to him. "Shithead FBI cops according to the occupant of the room behind us. What's up?"

The young man looked up and down the empty hallway. "Yeah, I saw you talking to Jake Tripp. Between you and me, I hate that guy. He's a dick."

Hagen was taking a liking to this clearly intelligent college student. This kid was going places. "Yes, we were asking about Patrick Marrion. Did you know him?"

The young man shook his head. "No. Well, I mean, yeah, we met. But I didn't know

him. Really sad, though. No one deserves that.”

It didn’t seem like the student was looking for grisly details of the murder. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Rohan Dhar.”

“Why do you hate Jake Tripp?”

The student smiled. “You mean, besides the obvious?”

Hagen smiled in return. “That’s right.”

Rohan looked up and down the hall again, the very picture of paranoid. “He’s a crook, you know? Like, a thief.”

Hagen’s interest was piqued. He took his notebook out of his pocket. “Why do you say that?”

“Well, he tried to steal from me.”

“What do you mean? How did he try?”

“Like, a month into the semester, I had a little party in my dorm. And Jake was there. He just showed up. Like, I didn’t invite him or anything. Anyway, the party ended, and as I was cleaning up, I realized my tablet was missing.”

Hagen was taking notes. “And why do you think it was Jake?”

“Well, at first, I didn’t. I thought I’d just lost it or something. But I went around asking the people who were there, including Jake. He gives me some shit about how I

should be more careful with my things. Starts giving me some bull about being responsible.”

Ander snorted.

“Right?” Rohan rolled his eyes. All three of them were on the same page about Tripp. “And he goes on and says he’s made sure the tablet’s in a safe place. All I need to get it back is to pay a responsibility tax.”

What the hell? Heat rose up Hagen’s neck, and he resisted pulling on his collar. He also resisted the urge to go break down Tripp’s door. “What’d you do?”

“Demanded it back. He said for two hundred dollars I could have it back. I told him to fuck himself and that I was calling campus police.” Rohan’s jaw clenched. Hagen imagined that confrontation had been quite heated.

“Did you? Call campus police?”

Rohan blew out a deep breath. “No. Jake said if I told, I would find my tablet in the school’s fountain and there’d be no way to prove anything to anyone. I ignored him and went to call, but my friend told me not to do it. Jake had taken his laptop, and he’d called the campus police. The cops didn’t find anything in Jake’s room...and the laptop keys were found in the back of my friend’s toilet.”

“He’s stealing people’s valuables and holding them hostage.” This squared with Hagen’s impression of Jake Tripp.

Rohan nodded. “I was really pissed. I paid. He left it on my bed somehow. Apparently, he does it when he’s strapped for cash. Sometimes he’ll sell stuff I’m pretty sure is stolen on eBay or Craigslist. Everyone knows it. We all know his freaking username. We just don’t want our stuff destroyed.”

Now they were getting somewhere. “What’s his username?”

“It’s trippinballz12. Like, you can’t make this shit up.” Rohan spelled Jake’s username for him.

Hagen noted this in his notebook. “We’ll get somebody to monitor this account. Thanks for your help. How can we get in touch with you?”

After Rohan gave him his number, Hagen only had one thing to add. “And Rohan?”

“Yes?”

Hagen held out his hand. “In the meantime, let’s just keep this conversation to ourselves. No need to let Jake know, for now.”

Rohan seemed deeply relieved. “You got it.”

Stella put her hand over her nose and tried to breathe through her mouth. It helped, but not by much. Lowering her hand, she stepped away from the alcove where Patrick Marrion's body had been found.

The smell—a combination of old urine, decomposing garbage, and something sharp and acrid she couldn't identify—stung the back of her throat.

Now she could taste it, which seemed worse.

Kerrick's Alley was in the center of town, a few blocks from the Sheraton and a short walk from the Tennessee State Capitol. The wind added a whiff of the nearby Cumberland River to the toxic odor.

Piles of garbage lined both sides of the alley. Dumpsters stood with their flaps open in surrender. Green slime oozed out of deep puddles in the potholed concrete, spreading their slimy fingers up the wall. If police tape wasn't still attached to the rail guarding an outlet pipe from careless drivers, Stella doubted she'd have found the place at all.

Stacy crouched in front of the spot where Marrion's body had been propped. She pulled on a nitrile glove, lifted a sheet of damp cardboard that stood against the wall, sniffed one end, and let it drop. The cardboard landed with a soft squelch.

Stella was impressed at Stacy's attention to detail. Digging around in dumpsters certainly wasn't the most pleasant or glamorous aspect of their job. She knew that

from personal experience. But nothing got in the way of a thorough investigation.

Her mind cast back to the summer, the last time she found herself in a similar situation, when she was investigating the murder of Martin Lin's sister. Her heart twinged with sadness for her late colleague.

Still, she had a job to do, and wallowing in her grief wouldn't help anybody, least of all the family of Patrick Marrion. "Good vintage?"

"No." Stacy stood up and stepped away. "Recent, I'd say. No more than a day or two. Looks like this public bathroom returned to service as soon as the police tape was removed."

"Nice. Not what you were looking for? Because forensics has been all over this place."

"I was hoping they'd missed something. The pictures had no blood. Not a drop. That's strange, isn't it? At least, when you compare it to what happened up north."

"Mm."

The crime scenes in Claymore Township had been full of blood, the bodies bled out and left at the crime scenes, as though the blood itself was part of the killer's tableau. Without the gore, the killing would've lost much of its meaning.

But Stacy was right. The lack of blood here was yet another difference between this unsub's M.O. and that of the Claymore killer.

Stella examined the whitewashed wall. The CSI team hadn't missed any drops of blood spattered between the mold. There weren't even any scratches suggesting forensics had scraped off paint and brickwork to conduct an analysis.

“So he was definitely killed elsewhere.”

Stacy nodded. “Uh-huh. And the body was dumped here out of the way.”

Stella frowned. Their theory that this might be the work of a copycat was losing traction. A lack of blood at the scene. The fact that the victim wasn’t found strung up in a tree. A lack of cuneiform. A second location. It was all so different from the Claymore killer.

There was only one real similarity—albeit a major one—the fact that Patrick Marrion had been completely exsanguinated, after having been strung up like a slaughtered cow. The scratches on the victim’s back might be another similarity. But they still didn’t know if those were made intentionally.

“But we’re not really out of the way. This is the middle of the city. Bring a car up here, and you could drop a body without anyone noticing. But people come through here. Someone was going to find that poor young man eventually. And sooner rather than later.”

“It does smell here, though.” Stacy waved one flap of her coat. “The stench of the garbage would hide the smell of the body and keep regular looky-loos away.”

“People would still see it. They dump garbage. They empty their bladders. Not sure what the M.E. told Hagen and Ander about the time of death, but I can’t imagine the body sat out here more than a few hours before being found.” Stella paced away from the wall.

Something about the scene didn’t add up.

“Usually, when someone dumps a body, they put it somewhere it won’t be found. Or at least won’t be found until they’re a safe distance away.”

“Or dumps the body in a spot that would get rid of trace evidence.” Stacy pointed east. “The Cumberland River is just a few blocks from here. Why not there?”

“Exactly. And there’s no shortage of hiding places outside the city, where a corpse could lie for months before anyone found it. My sense is that you only transport a body here, to an alley in the middle of Nashville, when you don’t want to get caught dumping it but do want the victim found.”

Stacy breathed in slowly. She seemed to regret her choice immediately and coughed, beating her chest with one hand. “So the unsub’s sending a message.”

“Looks that way. I just wish I knew what it meant. And that he’d just sent an email with bullet points instead.” Stella wanted to twist the gold stud in her ear, but her nitrile gloves had been through some things this morning. She kept her hands by her side. “Well, let’s think through the steps of getting a corpse here. What do you need?”

“A vehicle.” Stacy held up one gloved finger. “Even light bodies are heavy.”

“So we need to personally review the footage out on the street and anything pointed to this alley to see if we can find a vehicle.”

“You’d need to cover the body somehow, don’t you think? This area is still pretty trafficked. Someone would notice you hauling a naked corpse around.”

“Maybe he wasn’t naked when he was transported?”

Stacy waved a hand around the garbage-strewn area. “I’ve seen a lot of things around here, but not one set of discarded clothes. The unsub could’ve taken the clothes with them though.”

“Or they used...garbage bags? Rolled him in carpet or blankets?” Stella scanned the

hopelessly contaminated area. “We’ll never find fibers here. We should double-check the M.E.’s report to see if he found any kind of material.”

Stacy held up two gloved fingers, then they both almost gagged at the sight of something slimy on her middle finger. “So far we need transportation and some way to temporarily cover the body.”

Stella bit her lip as she pondered her options as a hypothetical body-dumper. “As a killer, I wouldn’t want to leave trace evidence, like DNA or fingerprints. So I’d probably wear gloves.”

“But wouldn’t you take those with you too? I mean, if you were going to take the corpse’s clothes?” Stacy pulled off her be-slimed glove and tossed it into the open dumpster.

They both froze.

“Unless...” They both glanced at the dumpster. “Unless the glove got gross, and I just discarded it.”

Stella shook her head. “He wouldn’t put it in this, though. Too close. Too risky.”

Stacy nodded and turned in a circle. “Where?”

“When was the trash taken?” Stacy pulled a fresh pair of gloves from her pocket.

“It doesn’t get picked up until tomorrow. I checked.” Stella climbed up and peered into the dumpster, just to be sure. It was a mess of plastic bags, beer bottles, sandwich wrappers, and loose trash.

Nothing stood out.

No way the gloves would be here. Forensic teams were thorough. If they'd missed something like that, they'd never hear the end of it.

Stella turned toward the next dumpster down at the other end of the alley. "Let's try that one."

Stacy nodded. "Makes more sense. If he dumped them, he wouldn't risk putting them right next to the body."

They approached the second dumpster. Stacy pulled the lid open while Stella peered inside.

The pile was less disturbed. A couple of bags had torn, but for the most part, the trash was settled, undisturbed.

Then—

"There."

Stacy pointed toward a mound of black bags. Between two of them, a small piece of blue latex was exposed.

"No shit!" Stella's exclamation echoed in the alley, but she didn't care. She pulled an evidence bag out of her pocket.

With Stacy holding her belt to keep her steady, she sat on the edge of the dumpster and leaned forward. She placed one blue glove in one evidence bag and the second one in another.

"Let's not get excited." Stella tamped down on her excitement even as she sealed the bags. "This might not go anywhere."

Once again, Stacy yanked off her gloves and tossed them in the dumpster. “Just let me ride this high, Stella. Getting fingerprints from the interior of the gloves would be such a gotcha. True detective work.”

She washed her hands with cinnamon-scented hand sanitizer before pushing them into the pockets of her coat. Her long fawn-colored trench likely cost more than most of Stella’s wardrobe. It might’ve even cost more than some of the items Hagen possessed.

“Let’s get out of here.” Stella tucked the evidence bags in her coat pocket. “Maybe we can find our potential vehicle on local surveillance footage. I’m feeling lucky.”

Stella headed toward River Street, eager to put the site and the stench behind her. A pile of carpet cuttings and stained blankets rustled as she passed them.

She jumped back. Her hand flew to her gun. The blanket on top of the pile fell, revealing a face dark with dirt, a mess of gray- and-black hair, and a scraggly, unkempt beard that burst out in matted curls.

The man snarled. “Whaddaya want?”

Stella stepped away. Her shoe landed on something wet and slimy, and she slipped.

Stacy caught her elbow. She took Stella’s weight and lifted her up. “We’re FBI, sir, and we have a few questions. How are you doing today?”

The man looked at them suspiciously and said nothing.

Stella was undeterred by his nonresponse to Stacy’s question. Maybe their investigative luck had just given them a witness, but she needed to build some sort of rapport. “Can we get you anything?”

The man narrowed his eyes at Stacy and then turned to Stella. “I can take care of myself. Don’t need no charity.”

Maybe he didn’t want any charity. But he certainly looked like he needed it.

“I’m going to grab some granola bars and a couple bottles of water. Let me take those bags to the SUV.” After Stella handed off the evidence bags, Stacy trotted off.

Stella refocused her attention on the man. “This where you sleep?”

He pulled his blanket toward him, gripping it with one hand, as if he thought Stella might take it. His left eye twitched. “What’s it to you? I sleep where I like.”

“Is that right? Were you sleeping here on Friday night?”

“Maybe I was, maybe I wasn’t.” He spoke fast, as if even his words were something he didn’t want to give away easily.

Stacy trotted back and crouched next to Stella, who caught the corner of her colleague’s trench coat before it touched the ground. Stacy took it from her with a grateful smile and held out the goodies. “What’s your name, sir?”

The man eyed Stacy carefully. He took a swig from a beer can. “Fett is what they call me.”

Stella frowned. “Fett? What’s your full name?”

“Fett. That’s all I am now. Fett.”

His eye twitched again.

“Fett, we need to know if you were here on Friday night. If you saw anything unusual or out of the ordinary.”

“Wasn’t here. Saw nothing. Heard nothing. Know nothing. That’s me. Now, leave me alone. I got nothing.”

Stella pulled her lips into a thin line. Fett seemed like a hard nut to crack. “Do you sleep here most nights?”

Fett grunted and nodded.

Stella pushed forward. “And how about other people. Anyone else stay in this alley? Any regulars?”

This time, Fett shook his head. “I leave well enough alone. Like I said, I don’t know nothing.”

Stella attempted a smile. “Okay, I’m going to assume you were here Friday night. What time do you usually get to sleep?”

For the first time, Fett grinned. “Hell, lady, I don’t know. I’ve got no bedtime.”

“But what time did you get to sleep on Friday night?”

The grin was still on Fett’s face. “Ma’am, I can’t remember what happened yesterday. Now, if you want to know what happened five years ago or twenty years ago, I could talk your ear off. But last Friday? Hell, I got no idea.”

Stella pulled her phone out of her pocket and loaded up a photograph of Patrick Marrion from when he was still alive. “Do you recognize this man?”

Fett's grin faded. "I don't know. White people all look the same to me."

She arched an eyebrow at his pale skin beyond the dirt and put her phone away. It seemed like they weren't getting anywhere with Fett. They weren't even getting his name. And she wasn't sure if he wasn't being cooperative because he was talking to the law or because he saw something and didn't want to say.

Or because he'd done something.

"Sir, I need to know if you?—"

"They're watching." Fett lifted a finger and swiveled his eyes from side to side. "They think I can't see, but I know they're there."

Stacy pulled on Stella's elbow.

Stella stood.

Stacy led her down the alley and spoke quietly. "I don't think we're getting anything out of this guy. Even if he told us something, we couldn't trust it." She shook her head. "There are just too many people like this, left to cope alone on the streets."

Stella didn't reply. She'd seen people like this receiving treatment recently, up in Claymore Township. But at least they weren't sleeping on the streets.

Something else bothered her now. Fett had said they were being watched. Stella knew that kind of paranoia wasn't unusual, but she'd felt it, too, a strange coldness on the back of her neck that made the hairs stand up. Maybe he had seen something.

She turned to ask him who was watching them, but Fett was already on his feet, holding his bundle of blankets in one hand. He stumbled toward Commerce Street,

pulling his coat tightly around him. Stella let him go.

The beer can stood by the wall. Stella pulled on a glove and dropped it into an evidence bag. Maybe the forensic lab could tell them who Fett was—right along with whoever had left their blue latex gloves behind.

Maybe they were one and the same.

Hagen sat in the meeting room with his team members, waiting for Slade to arrive for an end-of-day debriefing. The day's investigation had left him mentally drained, and the persistent image of Patrick Marrion's bloodless body kept replaying in his mind. He drummed his fingers on the table, ready to share what they'd found and move the case forward before another victim turned up.

Slade strode through the door seconds later, his tie loosened and suit jacket bearing the wrinkles of a long day spent behind his desk. Deep shadows beneath his eyes suggested he'd been reviewing case files all day. Despite his obvious fatigue, he carried himself with purposeful energy.

As he sat down, he got straight to the point. "Where are we?"

Hagen spoke first. "Dr. Brennan confirmed exsanguination as the cause of death. The fatal wound was a clean incision on the right side of the victim's neck. He noted bruising around the ankles and neck. The latter could indicate asphyxiation, but given the lack of deep tissue damage, Dr. Brennan thinks it may have been post-mortem, likely from the positioning of the body."

"How long was the victim outside?"

"No more than a few hours before it was found." Hagen leaned forward. "But here's the interesting part...Dr. Brennan said the cut itself looks like the work of a professional, someone with experience handling bodies. He suggested we take a hard look at morticians."

Slade gave the smallest of nods. “That sounds promising. Let’s hold that thought for now. Stella, you and Stacy visited the site where the victim’s body was discovered. What did you find?”

The two agents took turns sharing their information. Since the women sat across from each other, the other team members bounced their glances between them like a tennis match.

“The body was found in a stinking alley in the center of town. Just far enough out of the way to drop a corpse without attracting immediate attention. But not so far that the body could lie for long without being discovered. Our theory is that whoever did this wanted us to find the victim and find him soon.”

Stacy’s nose crinkled. She looked like she was reliving the moment too. “There was no blood at the scene. However, we did find a pair of discarded latex gloves. Blue. We bagged those, and I dropped them with forensics when we got back.”

“The gloves might not lead anywhere, but as we worked the scene, the discard location would be consistent with someone throwing away evidence.” Stella marked something in her notebook.

Stacy filled the small gap. “Forensics said they didn’t take any scrapings from the alley wall. The site was clean.” She wrinkled her nose again. “If you count filthy as clean.”

Ball to Stella. “We did find an unhoused individual living in the alley. We’re running some of his DNA, see if anything comes back.”

Slade tapped the table twice. “Okay, sounds good.” He aimed his next question at Hagen and Ander. “How about his roommate? Any intel from him?”

Ander grinned wryly. “First off, that kid is a piece of work. But I suppose that’s neither here nor there. But he did mention that Marrion had a friend who recently arrived in town. Marrion was going to visit him and show him around the day he was murdered.”

Slade straightened. He looked like he’d just found a twenty-dollar bill in the pocket of an old pair of jeans.

“Great. Who’s the friend?”

“We don’t know. It seems like Marrion and his friend had never met in real life. They met online.”

“Okay, so we need Marrion’s computer and his phone. Any luck there?”

“There was no laptop or phone in the room that we could locate.” Hagen shifted his weight. “But we did run into a Rohan Dhar who lives on the same floor as Jake Tripp and Patrick Marrion. He told us Tripp has a bad habit of holding technology hostage.” He went on to describe Tripp’s M.O.

“Could be that Tripp was holding Patrick’s technology hostage.” Ander twirled a pen in one hand. “Could be Patrick took it with him and the tech is at the murder site. Or the killer could have disposed of it. But we should keep an eye on his roomie’s eBay and Craigslist accounts.”

“That’s interesting. Did you get a username?” Mac spoke up from the opposite side of the table.

Hagen rustled through his notebook, though he remembered the handle. “Yeah. It’s ‘trippinballz12.’”

Slade's eyebrows went straight up on his face. "That kid is a piece of work. Mac, save us for crying out loud. Can you find Marrion's things?"

Mac nodded, but she seemed a little uncertain. "I tried locating the device, but the last ping came from the dorm building sometime Friday morning. You didn't find the phone or laptop in his room?"

"We looked everywhere," Ander confirmed.

Slade nodded. "Okay, Mac, do what you can to monitor that username. Maybe we'll catch him selling Marrion's equipment. And be sure to keep checking Marrion's phone activity or lack thereof. Now, Stella, what about his family? Did they mention any places he frequented? Any friends, like perhaps this mysterious person online?"

Stella cast her gaze downward. "His family seemed to think he wasn't a gamer and didn't spend a lot of time online, which doesn't track with the rest of their info that he kept to himself. Struggled to make friends."

"Really? That takes effort, especially at that age. Not like he was a middle-aged guy with a family and didn't have a chance to get out much."

Slade had three teenage daughters and never joined the team at any of their occasional post-work social events. Hagen figured he should invite him next time. Slade spread his fingers over the top of the table. "So we still need to find where the victim was killed. Ideas?"

The room fell silent. The heating vent hummed. A gust blew past the building, just audible through the double-glazed window panes.

Stella remembered the wind in the trees in Claymore Township. That sound had been so much gentler, a whisper that eased her into sleep every night. Or it did until she'd

come to associate it with the creak of a rope and blood on the snow.

Blood.

She lifted her head.

“What about the blood? Bleeding someone out makes a huge mess. We’ve seen it. How would someone hide that in the city?”

“I don’t think it’s that hard.” Anja’s forehead accorded into a series of furrows, as though the effort of such a thought had shrunk her brain. “Funeral homes just pour blood into the sewage system. The killer could’ve just washed it down a drain. Forensics would find traces, but once the blood has mixed with the city’s wastewater, there’s no reason anyone would know.”

Stella dropped back into her seat and whispered under her breath, “Morticians...”

Blood flowing through city drains. A river of gore under the sidewalks. It was a horrible thought. Hagen blinked to get the image out of his head.

Stella sat upright in her seat. She pointed at the screen behind Slade. “Can you bring up the picture of the victim again?”

Slade took a remote control from his pocket and pushed a button. The screen took them back to the dirty downtown alley. Patrick Marrion sat by the wall, head lolling, elbow propped on a rail.

Stella pointed at the cut on the victim’s neck. “When my brother died, we spoke to a couple of funeral homes. One of the morticians explained how they’d preserve bodies and why we wouldn’t see their work. He told us how they’d cut the carotid artery and internal jugular vein, pump out the blood, and replace it with something like

formaldehyde. Once that's done, they sutured everything off and use...what did he call it...a trocar to remove fluid from organs."

Why in the hell would a mortician tell a family member something so horrible?

Instead of asking, Hagen focused on the case. "That would line up with why Dr. Brennan said we should be interested in morticians. A mortician could be very precise. They wouldn't need to slash a throat?—"

"Because they'd know exactly where to do the most damage," Stella finished.

Slade straightened his shoulders. He looked like someone had just taken an overloaded backpack from his back after a hike up a steep hill.

"Right, I want you matching the names of registered morticians with criminal records, connections to Central Tennessee State, or connections with dirty downtown alleys. Anything that gives us a link to the victim. Could be our guy. Go statewide if you have to. Our victim was seeing someone from out of town, remember?"

"And we could be looking for a killer and their accomplice. Both don't need to be out-of-towners." Hagen looked at Stella, and she seemed to be on the same page.

It was hard work stringing up a body.

"We very well could be." Slade gathered his papers and frowned when they didn't move. "What are you all waiting for? Go."

As he was collecting his things, Hagen considered how the body had looked so different compared to the victims in Pennsylvania. The small cut on the neck was nothing like the wild slashes that killed Laurence Gill, Mark Tully, and Sheriff King.

The strange writing was absent, too, unless the abrasions on Patrick Marrion's scarred back were caused by more than a scrape against a brick wall. Right now, the only possible link between this murder and the victims in Claymore Township was that, in every case, the corpses had been completely exsanguinated. It was a weak link.

Stella's report of her visit to the Marrion family only reinforced their impression of the victim as a lonely young man who spent most of his time in books and online. He had few friends but no enemies either.

Stella slid into her coat, and they left.

On the way out, they passed Mac's office, and the door was open. Anja sat next to the cyber expert, who was showing their newest team member how her one-woman department worked. Stella wished them a good evening as they passed. Mac waved from the top of her monitor and Anja called after them. "Bye, Stella. Bye, Hagen."

Hagen hunched his shoulders. Anja had emphasized his name just a little more than Stella's.

Once outside, they drove out of the parking garage.

The resident agency receded in the rearview mirror. Their first day at work after their leave was fading behind them, and dinner lay ahead. He'd cook Korean again. He always had time for Korean.

Stella stretched her legs in the passenger seat. "So...anything you want to tell me about the newest member of our team?"

Hagen stiffened. He adjusted his grip on the steering wheel but kept his eyes on the road.

He knew what she was asking. There was no way anyone as observant as Stella would have missed the awkwardness of him seeing Anja this morning. “Anja?”

“Yes. Anja.”

Hagen considered how to answer.

“Do you want to tell me about her?” Stella pressed.

The only way out was through. “We dated for a couple months when we were stationed in San Francisco. We worked a drug-trafficking case together and got...close. The relationship lasted two or three months and ended when I transferred here.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he realized Stella was trying not to smile. His tension eased. She knew. And she knew, too, that Anja Farrow from San Francisco was no threat to her. “You had a thing with her, huh?”

He relaxed into his seat. “Yeah, yeah. We had a thing. Briefly. Very briefly. Really not my type.”

“But enough of your type to...” She huffed. “Have a thing .”

“Well, I...”

Damn, he loved the sound of Stella’s laughter.

He relaxed. “You know, one day, one of your old mistakes will come bubbling into our life, and I’m going to roast the heck out of you. Consider yourself warned.”

Stella laughed louder. “I don’t make mistakes.”

“Is that right?”

She linked her fingers through his. “You better hope so.”

Hagen did hope so. The twist in his gut told him he hoped so very much.

They pulled up outside the town house. From the other side of the door, Bubs barked, welcoming them home. Hagen watched as his dog jumped on Stella, bouncing on his remaining back leg to lick her face. This was home.

Stella pushed Bubs down. “What do you think about ordering pizza tonight?”

Managing not to groan, but barely, Hagen shut the door behind him.

Bubs ran back to his spot on the sofa with no more than a sniff in his general direction.

Hagen had meant to make tteokbokki . He had the black bean sauce all planned out. He could almost taste the kimchi he’d have on the side.

Stella flopped onto the sofa and brought out her phone. “Yeah, pizza. I’m hungry, I’m tired, and I don’t want to wait.” The screen already displayed the website of a local pizza chain. “And I definitely don’t want to spend the night washing dishes after you’ve cooked. I want to order pizza and eat from the box.”

“But I could just?—”

“Order pizza.” Stella lifted her phone and added mushrooms to the toppings. “Do anything, and you just might be making a mistake. Another one.”

“Right.”

Everything had a price. For the return of an old flame, mushroom-topped pizza instead of Korean rice cakes was pretty cheap.

Hagen dropped onto the sofa next to her and told her to put black olives on his half.

He was ready for the day to die.

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11

Otto Walker donned his lab coat, snapped on his blue latex gloves, and looked down at the first corpse of the day.

He didn't know the man's name, didn't know anything about him. He wasn't old, Otto could see that. So many of the dead that passed in front of him were little more than loose skin on ancient bones. The men bald or almost bald. The women with short, white hair as stiff as a broom's bristles.

This man wasn't like that.

Otto doubted the deceased had made it past his mid-fifties. He'd been overweight when he was alive. The man's belly rose from the middle of the embalming table like the top of a giant muffin.

A bank would've suited this guy. Otto could imagine him in a shirt and tie, buttons straining at the holes, rejecting someone's loan application. Too risky, he'd have thought, before turning down the request.

And here he was...rejected by life.

There were no signs of any wounds or injuries, none of the accidental damage that so scarred a middle-aged body and took such skill to hide. Whatever killed this guy had been internal.

A heart attack, probably. Or a stroke.

Something was wrong with the flow of his blood.

Otto held up a scalpel, his forefinger resting on the back of the blade. The handle sat comfortably across his palm.

Start near the windpipe. Run your finger down the groove of the neck until you reach the spot.

He hesitated. Sweat pooled inside the rubber glove. This happened every time, despite all his training as an apprentice mortician. Nervous excitement was a side effect of loving one's job.

Otto always found his own carotid arteries with ease. Uncovering the artery in someone else, someone who didn't have a pulse, was only a little harder.

He found the spot and went for it.

Placing the scalpel's tip on the right side of the cadaver's neck, he drew a short line. A tiny amount of blood welled up. He pressed a fingertip to the skin, testing its resistance. The scalpel had barely sliced through the epidermis, so he tried again, applying more pressure this time. Otto dug through the skin.

He tried again, pressing harder this time. The scalpel slid deeper, parting layers of fat and fascia.

There they were. The carotid artery and the jugular vein, pale blue under the embalming room's fluorescent lights. A thrill curled through him as he made his first incision into the carotid artery.

The blood that seeped out was thicker and richer than he'd seen before. Dark, sluggish, like oil from a broken machine. He pried the edges of the wound open

wider, exposing the frayed ends of the severed artery.

He reached for the arterial tube, a length of smooth plastic attached to the embalming pump. With a steady hand, Otto inserted the tube into the artery, securing it in place.

With that done, he turned his attention to the jugular vein. A fresh incision. Another tube, this one for drainage. He twisted it in deep, forcing the opening wider until he was sure nothing would clot too soon.

Pleased with his efforts, he adjusted the pressure dial on the embalming machine.

A moment later, preserving fluid surged through the artery, forcing blood out through the drainage tube. It pulsed in sluggish waves, snaking through the transparent plastic until it emptied into a grate in the floor.

Otto leaned back on his stool, still clutching the scalpel.

This was the part he liked best. He could sit here for hours, just watching.

Once, that blood had been life itself—oxygen, nutrients, thought, movement, being. A whole existence, carried through veins, feeding the brain, sustaining the heart.

And now?

It was garbage.

Soon, a biohazard truck would come to collect the waste, carting it off like any other discarded thing. But Otto liked this moment, before it was taken away, before it was nothing but another forgotten remnant of the dead.

Life was so fragile. Here today, down the drain tomorrow.

Few people got to see the transformation, but he did. Otto's hands shook, and he set the scalpel down before he hurt himself. He held them in his lap in case Chris came down and saw his excitement.

Blood continued to flow, dripping past the grate. There was nothing to do now except wait and watch.

The dead had always fascinated him. By their color, their stiffness, their complete inability to act or react. Life happened around them, and they just lay there, decaying slowly while the source of their life flowed away.

Processing corpses from decay to preservation should've been easy. Otto had thought it would be. But he always struggled.

And the last time he did this...

He shuddered. His stomach roiled as though he'd just chugged a bottle of vinegar.

Otto had pushed Friday night out of his mind, tried not to think about it. Every time he recalled the touch of the young man's skin, remembered how the kid struggled, he wanted to throw up.

Everything about that night had been wrong.

"The sacrifice would be a volunteer."

That was what he'd been told. The sacrifice would be someone who wanted to be redeemed, or someone mortally ill with nothing to lose and only redemption to gain.

But the guy hadn't acted like he had nothing to lose.

And the body was so young. So warm. So...alive. And the groan the man made as the blood poured out of him...Otto had never heard that before. He'd expected something, a gentle moan of relief perhaps as his life was drained out. But that man had moaned in pain. He hadn't wanted to go.

Nausea roiled through Otto's guts. To bleed someone while they were still alive was too awful.

He couldn't do it again. He thought he could.

Surely, he'd done enough now. There was no need to help anymore.

His contribution was done.

Watching blood drip into the drain, Otto brought out his phone. He peeled off one glove, and with trembling fingers, typed his message.

I'm out.

The reply came before he'd even put the phone away.

There is no out.

A chill passed through him. He'd known backing out wouldn't go down well. But fear hit him from one side as guilt struck him from the other. He couldn't drain a living body again. It was wrong. He'd done it once, but never again. He just couldn't.

I'm sorry.

His phone buzzed.

Go home. Now. I'll meet you there. We can discuss.

Otto's fear grew. It was like a black shadow hanging over him, a dark beast with sharp teeth and claws.

In or out, that was the rule. And he'd been in, except now, he wanted out. Surely, that wasn't too hard to understand.

He replied quickly.

I can't. I'm at work.

Again, the reply came instantly.

Home.

More typing.

Now!

The chill that passed through Otto was colder than anything he'd ever felt. Sweat rose on his forehead despite the cold air in that basement. He knew that tone, and he knew he couldn't resist.

He could hear his boss, Chris, roaming around upstairs. A service was about to start shortly.

Chris would be up there in his black suit and his black tie and his long, sad face, greeting the mourners and showing them to their seats. He did it so well. Otto envied him. How someone managed to pretend to show so much concern about the death of someone they'd never known was beyond him.

If he ever did graduate from embalmer to mortician here at the funeral parlor, he doubted he'd be any better than a theater usher. He'd smile too wide, talk too loud. It'd be hard to stay in character. Chris was always so much more sensitive. Probably why he opened the funeral home in the first place. And Chris would understand if he just wasn't feeling well.

Otto turned back to the body bleeding out on the mortician's table. He'd finish up, then get going.

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12

Alone in the warehouse, my staging ground, I stared at my cell phone while white-hot anger swept through my insides.

Who does he think he is, bailing on me like this?

I read his text again and thought my skull would explode. But I took a deep breath. Now wasn't the time to lose my head.

One thing was for sure. I had to get to Otto, and do it now, because he had to die.

As soon as possible.

There wasn't any telling what he'd do. He might even go to the Feds.

But first, I had to pack up anything that might lead law enforcement to my person should Otto rat on me. Luckily, I traveled light. It only took about five minutes to grab my shit and toss it in my backpack. I didn't need to clean the warehouse. First, it would take too long. But second, even if Otto did tell the Feds my location, it wasn't as if they could track my DNA. I didn't have a record. I wasn't in their system.

If I ever needed to use my saliva or cum or blood or whatever in my soon-to-be legal career, I'd simply falsify it. I'd learned there were always willing helpers around.

But again, better safe than sorry.

Fuck you, Otto Walker.

“I’m out?” I scoffed at the ridiculous message. “You can’t get out...and continue to breathe.”

At the bottom of the stairs was a landing with two exits to the building. I could take a right through the metal double doors and immediately find myself outside in the empty loading dock ringed by abandoned warehouses. Or I could take a sharp left around the metal handrail and continue down another flight of rusty metal stairs to the underground parking lot.

It was important to have multiple points of egress. I’d read that somewhere.

If all else failed, there were also the sewers.

My truck was parked out of sight of drones or any overhead surveillance monitoring the lot. Well, it wasn’t exactly my truck , but I wasn’t being chased, so I took a left down the stairs. And there she was, safe and sound, just as I’d left her. And right next to her was Patrick’s Honda Ridgeline, gathering dust.

I drew a big smiley face in the dirt on the driver’s window. In the wrong light, someone might think Patrick was still in there, just waiting to step out from behind the wheel.

Chuckling, I got into my Tacoma. I started her up before plotting a route to Otto’s apartment across town in Miro Meadows. The GPS on my phone said it was about a fifteen-minute drive from the warehouse in East Bank to his place. Tossing the thing on the seat next to me, I put the truck in reverse, backed up in an elegant curve, and accelerated off, across the parking lot and up the ramp to the loading dock, which fed out to the street.

It wasn't good to be out in public in a stolen truck, so I needed to keep my head. I'd drive the speed limit. No need to get pulled over by some overeager traffic monkey.

As I went up the on-ramp, I scowled at the traffic on I-24. I merged in. Once in a lane, I looked over at my phone on the passenger seat and had to suppress my rage once more.

Chill.

The traffic moved steadily. I stayed in the right lane.

I considered how I'd gotten here.

Mrs. King was in my thrall when she died. There was no other way to put it.

She wanted it.

I let her, at first. She was the one who first made the moves on me. I ran with it. Like how she ran with all of that "Administrator" BS noise. It was so obvious he was screwing with everybody. Why did no one else see that but me?

But it made sense she wanted me. I was really strong. And tall, like her. And I was great at sports. Football was my thing. Not even lying. I was great at debate too.

Maureen ran the debate team. We got close after the third meeting. That was when she first went down on me.

She was bored, I think.

I was just a gutter kid. From the trash. But smart as fuck, and she thought that was hot. She knew what she was doing. We started doing it everywhere after that.

Dammit. I missed her.

Gripping the wheel, I pushed away the image of her riding me, needing to focus on what had to be done right now. I had a goal, and a pesky problem keeping me from attaining it.

The exit was coming up, and I still hadn't thought of a revised plan, or even an immediate one for Otto.

Think.

Suddenly, I wanted to get out of Nashville, but I needed the money.

Kill Otto...and go full on Maureen with it. Add all that crazy shit. The Administrator would love it.

Get Knox and Yates on the scent.

That morning, Stella walked into the meeting room with Hagen to find that everyone had already taken their seats. And to discover their new team member, Anja Farrow, was, once again, sitting in hers.

She didn't mind. In fact, the change of location gave her some relief. The seat was directly opposite Hagen's, and the two of them didn't need to be staring at each other all day.

Stella moved farther up the table, sliding past Anja, who scooted her chair no more than an inch to make room.

Anja's history with Hagen didn't bother her either.

In Claymore Township, they'd had time to talk through their pasts—her occasional, failed attempts at relationships and his steady run of brief flings—and as they'd talked, they'd both realized how far they'd come and how much they'd changed. She was certain she'd finally found what she needed. Whoever Hagen had been once, he wasn't anymore.

Anja might've had a fling with Hagen, but she hadn't had a fling with this Hagen. With Stella's Hagen.

Slade entered with a smile larger than she'd seen in a long time. He slapped a file folder down on the table, and Stella's heart beat a little faster. Slade in such a good mood meant only one thing—there was a break in the case.

“Stella. Stacy.” Slade glanced back and forth between them. “Congratulations. Your dumpster-diving has brought in a solid lead.”

It was all Stella could do not to launch herself out of her seat and grab the file folder. Judging by the way Stacy was practically vibrating in her chair, her colleague felt the same.

“Talk!” Stacy wasn’t one to boss the boss, and everyone laughed.

“Forensics managed to recover three partial prints from the interior of the gloves. They’ve identified a man named Otto Walker.” Slade gave them a sly smile. “Any guesses as to his occupation?”

“A mortician?” Stella couldn’t stop the hope rising in her voice.

Before Slade could answer, a shout rolled down the corridor from Mac’s office. “Got him!”

Heads shifted toward the door. Ander pushed out of his seat first. Soon, everyone was crowding into Mac’s office, where she sat smugly in her chair, arms folded behind her head.

Stella took a spot beside the door. Slade’s arrival pushed her farther into the room. “What did you get?”

“Sooo...” Mac seemed intent on drawing out this moment of victory.

Between Slade and Mac, Stella was going to smack someone. “Sooo what? Spit it out already.”

Mac grinned, still holding on to her winning moment. “I’m trying to identify a

mortician with a record or a connection to the victim or a...a love of spilling blood.”

“A classic problem,” Hagen quipped.

Slade shot him a quelling look.

“Initially, I produced a list of almost four hundred morticians registered in the state of Nashville. I checked the records and locations, ruling out those who died without de-registering and building lists of possibles, maybes, and unlikelies. My list shrank to fifty, a step forward, but still far too many. Then I remembered the path of least resistance was always a numbers game, so I went back to the footage by the alley.”

Stella was definitely going to whack her friend if she didn’t spit it out. “And?”

Mac’s smile grew bigger as she lowered her arms and tapped on the keyboard. “I checked the traffic cameras near the site where the body was found on Friday evening. There aren’t any cameras in the alley, as you know, but some cars turned into the alley, one of which was this Nissan Sentra.”

“And...”

Mac turned the monitor. On the screen was a green Nissan Sentra, its license plate clear in the frame. “This is the car registered to?—”

“Otto Walker,” Stella finished for her.

The air went out of Mac’s sails. “How’d you...?”

Slade tossed a folder onto her desk. “Tell us what you know, Mac.”

“The car belongs to a guy named Otto Walker.” She shot Stella the stink eye. “The

picture was taken around the corner from the alley at 9:27 that evening.”

Slade opened his file folder and showed Mac and the team what he had. Otto seemed to be a good-looking man in his early twenties. “Otto Walker, twenty-four years old. A mortician. Three years ago, he was locked up for six months on an assault charge. And four years before that, he was sent to a youth detention center for animal cruelty.”

“You’re kidding.” Mac jotted down a note. “What did he do?”

“The report was pretty light on details. Looks like he was torturing a squirrel.”

“Jeez, what a sicko.”

Slade looked ready to burst. “And what’ve you got for me?”

Mac held out a piece of paper. “This is where he works, and here’s his home address.”

Slade took the note and inspected it. He passed the paper with Otto Walker’s information to Anja, who stood next to him. “Call his workplace. See if he’s there. Time for a chat.”

Anja glanced at Mac’s writing. She pulled out her phone. “Where’d he study?”

Mac zoomed her fingers over her keyboard. “Hapton College. Never heard of it.”

“That’s because you don’t want to handle dead bodies.”

Mac inclined her head in agreement, and Anja dialed.

“Good morning. I’m calling from Hapton College.”

Anja’s voice had changed. Gone was the new FBI agent, uncertain about her new workplace and keen to make an impression. In her place was a college administrator, older and used to ignoring excuses from students.

“We’re following up on our former students. Otto Walker said he was employed at your funeral home. We’re presenting him with an award, but the information we have on file seems to be outdated.”

Stella wanted to shake Anja to get her to hurry up. She was ready to go get this guy.

“Oh, so he was at work this morning.” Anja’s eyes widened a bit. “But he’s gone home sick? How long ago was that? Around ten this morning? Right, thank you. Yes, I’ll take his number...” She grabbed a pen from Mac’s holder and jotted down his home number on the note. “Thank you.” She hung up.

Slade took the note she handed back to him.

“He should be home. Looks like we might have ourselves an easy one.”

Otto Walker's apartment complex was in Miro Meadows, southeast of the city. Hagen could see how the place might appeal to anyone who was just passing through. Nothing about the complex felt particularly homey, though.

Each building was either two or three stories. The railing on the second floor looked like the barriers that low-security prisons used to stop inmates throwing themselves, or others, to the ground below. Some of the apartments had white balconies the size of coffins. The gray apartment doors—accessible via the outdoor walkways—were plain, differentiated from one another only by silver numbers that had dulled over time.

The place looked more like a motel.

Hagen crossed the lot, buttoning his suit jacket against the cold and over his bullet-proof vest. Stella strode alongside him. They made for one of the two sets of stairs that led from the parking lot to the apartments, one at each end of the landing.

The rest of the team waited in two black SUVs at the end of the lot. Slade and Anja were in one vehicle. Stacy and Ander sat in the other. Slade had assigned Hagen and Stella the job of reconnoitering the place and trying to get Walker to talk.

They didn't have a warrant, but all signs pointed to him being the guy who killed Patrick Marrion. So Slade wanted the team on standby should things get interesting.

Otto's green 2015 Nissan Sentra sat in the parking lot.

A figure approached, coming down the stairs leading to the second floor. The man was middle-aged and casually dressed in sweatpants and a hoodie. His shoulders were bent, his hands buried in his pockets.

He glared at Hagen from under his hood, examined Stella, then turned his attention back to Hagen. “If you’re selling life insurance, man, you’re in the wrong place. Ain’t no one here got a life worth shit.”

Hagen slowed. “What makes you think I’m selling insurance?”

The man didn’t break stride. He glanced back, hands still in his pockets.

“The suit, man. Anyone in a suit like that around here in the middle of a Wednesday morning, they’re either selling insurance or peddling the good news. And you don’t look like someone who’s heard any good news recently.”

He marched away. Hagen watched him go. In his earpiece, someone chuckled. Ander probably. They climbed the stairs. Stella leaned close to him.

“Knew that suit reminded me of something.”

Hagen ignored her. He liked this suit.

They reached the second floor, walking as though they had a place to go, and that place was number sixteen, the apartment in the middle of the floor. Hagen adjusted his pace and landed his foot with more care, dampening his steps.

They stopped in front of Otto Walker’s apartment door. The blinds were down, and no light escaped through the slats.

Hagen listened carefully. No sound came from the apartment. No music or television.

A faint smell of fried onions rose from one of the units downstairs, but Walker's was dead quiet. Besides his car in the parking lot, nothing signaled he was there at all. Hagen tensed his jaw.

Walker had to be home. Lying in bed, sick, trying to sleep.

Hagen knocked, hard.

An older woman emerged from the apartment next door. The pink slippers on her feet had seen better days, and it seemed so had she. She stood half in the doorway, half out, watching them with one eye.

"Do you know your neighbor, ma'am?" Hagen smiled to catch more bees.

"I do, but you'll have to pound harder. He was playing some horror movie so loud, I imagine he's deaf by now."

"What do you mean, a movie?"

"Some Halloween thingy, bloodcurdling screams, filthy language. Went on and on until about twenty or thirty minutes ago. Damn kids got no respect. I thought Otto was different. I really did. But he doesn't even know what holiday's coming up. So like I said, pound harder. He'd be deaf by now."

Stella ushered the woman back inside. "Thank you, ma'am. We'll take it from here." Grim, she lifted her collar and spoke into the mic pinned there. "We may have a situation up here. We need everyone. Now."

At the end of the parking lot, the doors of the SUVs opened and closed. The rest of the team wore bright-blue jackets with FBI emblazoned in yellow letters. They padded up the stairs to take positions outside Walker's apartment.

Ander held the battering ram.

Hagen drew his weapon and nodded at Stella. It was time. He beat his fist twice on the door. "Otto Walker. This is the FBI. Open up."

Silence.

Hagen increased his volume. "Otto Walker. This is the FBI. We're coming in."

Still no response. He looked at Stella, and he could tell she, too, had a strong sense about what they were going to walk in on.

After Hagen tried the knob and found it locked, he stepped aside. This was it.

Otto could be in there, waiting to strike. Or they could burst into an empty apartment and know they'd wasted a morning. Then they'd have to prepare for a search conducted mostly on screens and through data alerts. Or they could be...too late.

He nodded at Ander. "Break it in."

The battering ram needed only one swing. A second later, Hagen kicked the door open and entered the apartment, his weapon at low ready.

He stopped when he saw it. A few steps were all he'd taken. The rest of the team piled in behind, but he was out in front.

Inside was carnage. A madhouse of blood.

A young man was strewn over the sofa in the middle of the room. His legs flopped over the back of it, bent at the knees, and his head hung off the front with his bloody hair grazing the carpet. His eyes were open, and his throat had been cut from ear to

ear, like the victims in Claymore Township.

The walls were covered in marks, which he recognized as Akkadian cuneiform, the same lines and dots carved into the Claymore Township victims' backs and scrawled on the walls of the sheriff's shed. They were written in blood, clearly, which also covered the floor, darkening the carpet and filling the room with a heavy, metallic smell.

There was no question of who this was.

They wouldn't be searching for the location data of Otto Walker's phone and ATM withdrawals. They'd found him.

And if he was involved in the murder of Patrick Marrion, as they suspected, he hadn't been working alone.

This wouldn't be a simple case after all.

Hours later, Stella still couldn't take her attention off the writing on the wall.

Once again, she was reminded that the marks of Akkadian cuneiform in the previous case had looked like bird feet or badly drawn fish. The short lines and dots and triangles were the sort of thing a giant chicken might've left behind after walking across the floor of a slaughterhouse.

There had to be a better way of getting across a message. Standing outside a Walmart with a placard and a pile of fliers would have been a lot more effective.

Disappointment soaked into Stella like a puddle-splash from a passing truck. She thought she'd seen the end of this stuff. Certainly, she'd hoped she'd seen the last slashed throat and the last blood-soaked floor. And yet, here she was again, so soon after the victims in Claymore Township, investigating a crime that looked eerily similar.

On the bright side, at least she was no longer standing shin-deep in snow.

There were some differences between this scene and the scenes in Claymore Tow. Unlike those murders, there were clear signs of a struggle at Otto's apartment. In the living room, chairs were overturned, lamps smashed to pieces on the floor. In the kitchen, shards of broken glass and ceramic peppered countertops. Drawers hung open, including one filled with sharp knives used for cooking and other miscellany.

Considering the depth and brutal nature of the cut on Otto's neck, Stella suspected the

killer had used a serrated kitchen knife. In fact, calling it a cut wasn't quite right. Rather, his head was almost sawed clean off.

The crime scene photographer took a position in front of the wall and snapped a picture. As the flash flooded the room, the sharp light forced Stella's eyes closed. The gore was still there when she reopened them, though.

Stella waved a finger at the marks. "Make sure you get clear shots of all that stuff. And send copies straight to me. I want someone working on them right away."

The photographer checked the screen on the camera and gave her a thumbs-up. They were never the chattiest, crime scene photographers.

An MNPD officer strode out of the bedroom holding an evidence bag containing a laptop. As he swung the bag, the laptop bumped against the wall.

Stella winced. "Be careful with that. And get it straight to Agent Mackenzie Drake. Did you find a cell phone?"

The officer hugged the computer to his chest and shook his head. "Wasn't on the victim either."

Stella let him go. A missing cell phone was unusual. And very annoying.

But the day was almost over. The photographer was taking his last shots, and the victim was on his way to the forensic center to join Patrick Marrion. A couple of forensic techs were carting the sofa out to the parking lot, while a third ran a box cutter around the edge of the carpet.

They were almost done, and by the time they were finished, there'd be little left of this place.

Not that there'd ever been much.

The bedroom contained a twin bed and a small pile of laundry. These items filled most of the space. The living room had held a two-seat sofa, a cabinet with a television, and a single sideboard with a lamp.

That lamp, its shade ruined by a single spray of blood, was now also sitting in the forensic box truck, together with the cabinet and the laptop.

Otto's apartment was basic. Smaller even than the studio Stella had once lived in a lifetime ago.

The forensic tech tugged on the edge of the carpet, which came away from the floor with a loud rip. He swore quietly. Blood had soaked into the floorboards, and they'd need to take those as well.

"Mind your backs."

Anja moved out of the doorway, stepping in front of Stella as one of the forensic techs returned from the parking lot. Despite the cold air, sweat dotted his forehead, the combined result of his Tyvek suit and the effort of moving a small sofa.

The rest of the team had already left, Stacy to report to Slade, and Hagen and Ander to join the police to inform Otto Walker's next of kin. Stella and Anja stayed to oversee the site, direct the techs, and make sure the photographer got clear shots of the marks on the wall.

They'd need those shots.

Stella would have to contact the expert on the Akkadian cuneiform they'd used in the Claymore Township cases to find out if the marks were the same. Maybe a difference

in the style or the handwriting or the meaning could yield a clue. Some of the marks did look different, but Stella wasn't sure whether those changes were made intentionally, or if they were the result of bad copying from the photographs in one of David Broad's articles. A forensic document examiner might help as well.

Someone—say a copycat—might've just seen this stuff online or read a description and not known what they were doing as they marked up Otto's wall with his blood.

That didn't feel like the most likely scenario, however.

There were very few people who knew what cuneiform meant, and far fewer of them were killers. In fact, for Stella, there had only ever been one person who fit that description—Maureen King.

But she was dead.

Her husband and coconspirator, Sheriff Douglas King, fit that description as well.

But he was also dead.

There was another aspect of Otto Walker's murder that troubled her—the fact that his throat had been cut with the same kind of violence as had been afflicted on the victims in Claymore Township.

Whoever killed Otto Walker did not share the same level of technical and anatomical skill as the killer of Patrick Marrion—most likely Otto himself.

All the signs led back to Claymore Township. But again, therein lay the issue. They'd solved that case.

Still, Stella needed to contact Claymore Township's new sheriff. She looked at the

time. It was almost half past five. She hoped he was still in. Especially since his time zone was an hour ahead of Nashville's.

She stepped outside to make the call. On the landing, she took a deep breath of the crisp late-afternoon air. There was something dirty in the atmosphere of a crime scene. A hidden stain always seemed to cling to the walls and stick to the fittings, even after the place had been stripped.

Stella looked up the number and phoned Pennsylvania.

After a few rings, a gruff voice sounded on the other end of the line. "Sheriff Deacon. Speak."

"Hi, Sheriff, it's Special Agent Stella Knox."

"Yeah, how can I forget? The celebrity."

That wasn't worth responding to. "I just wanted to give you a heads-up. We've got another murder down here in Nashville."

Deacon actually chuckled. "I'm sure there's lots of murder in Nashville."

This was going to be like pulling teeth. "I'm standing at a crime scene right now with that strange writing, the cuneiform, painted all over the walls. The same stuff that was on the victims in Claymore Township."

"So what? It's probably a copycat. That writing's been in all the papers."

"Very true. But we need to cover our bases here. I'm concerned we might've overlooked something."

There was a big sigh on the other end of the line. “What do you want?”

“I need you to take another look at Maureen King.”

“And what am I looking for?”

“Anyone who might’ve shared the same interests. Anyone she might have spoken to online or in person. Anyone she might have met in a grocery store. We’re looking to see if she had an accomplice besides her husband. See if Maureen was close to someone who’s not currently in town.”

There was another deep exhale. “So, basically, a fishing expedition.”

“If you want to call it that, sure. Anyway, let me know if you find anything.”

After Stella hung up, she poked her head back inside and flagged down Anja. “Let’s go talk to the neighbors.”

The boxy ERT truck stood open in the parking lot at the bottom of the stairs. A neighbor with bad eyes, who didn’t look too closely at the furniture inside, might be forgiven for thinking Otto was moving on to a better living situation.

Stella doubted that was true. If he’d been involved in the murder of Patrick Marrion, Otto’s soul wasn’t anywhere good this evening.

The cold breeze blowing along the outdoor hallway cleaned her lungs.

Anja knocked on the door of number fifteen. “I’m Special Agent Anja Farrow. This is Special Agent Stella Knox. We’re from the FBI.” Her voice was soft, caring.

“I’m Lydia O’Donnell.” The older woman Stella and Hagen had spoken to earlier

looked Anja up and down. “So? Is he deaf?” Tiny and skinny as a broomstick, Lydia rested both hands on the doorframe, the toes of her faded pink slippers poking over the edge of the apartment threshold.

“I’m afraid he’s dead, ma’am. Not deaf.” Stella braced herself for the woman’s reaction.

Anja stepped in to take Lydia’s arm when she swayed a bit. Although she was a good six inches taller than the elderly woman, Anja seemed to shrink in height so they were almost talking eye to eye. When she closed the space between them, the woman didn’t pull back.

“How are you holding up with all this going on? You’ve been very brave.”

Lydia poked her head around the doorpost. A forensic tech headed down the stairs, a rolled-up carpet over one shoulder. “It wasn’t a movie?”

Anja patted her hand. “It wasn’t a movie. It’s very tragic. Did you see or hear anything unusual today? Maybe around eleven this morning?”

The old woman blinked. “Yes, I told that one.” She pointed to Stella. “I heard a horror movie playing. I banged on the walls, but it went on and on. After ten minutes of banging, it stopped, though, just before I was about to call the super.”

“Did you see if Otto Walker had a visitor this morning? Before the...altercation?”

“I’m sorry, darlin’.” Her voice wavered. “You’ll have to speak up. My hearing isn’t what it used to be.”

Anja pointed over her shoulder. “Why don’t we go inside? Sit you down.”

When Lydia nodded, Anja took her elbow and guided her into the living room. After the chaos and destruction in Otto's unit, Lydia's apartment looked as ordered as a model home. Or at least a model home in a retirement community.

A glass-fronted cabinet took up much of one wall, its shelves lined with decorative plates and brass knickknacks. A cane rested against the side of one of the room's two armchairs. Their backs were protected with white doilies, and they faced a small television mounted on an antique cabinet. The varnish on the wooden coffee table had long lost its shine, but a pile of coasters next to a remote control stood ready to protect what was left.

Stella watched as Anja helped Lydia into her seat. "I'm sorry, did you know Otto Walker well?"

"What was that, hun?"

"Did you know Otto well?"

"Otto? No, not really. He was a lovely young man, though. He used to help me with the shopping sometimes."

"Did he? That's good of him."

"Oh, yes. He'd see me struggling up the stairs, and he'd come down and carry the bags. Even put everything away for me. That's why I couldn't believe about the movie playing so loud. I guess...it wasn't a program after all. So sad what's happened to him. Just terrible." She started shivering.

"It really is." Anja patted her hand again. Hagen hadn't been kidding. Even from this short conversation, it was clear to Stella that Anja was a skilled interviewer. "So did you and Otto talk much? Did he ever have any friends over?" She placed a nearby

afghan over the woman's shoulders.

“Friends? No, I don't think so. He was a quiet young man. I know he used to go to church. Saint Aloysius's, I think. He mentioned once that he volunteered at the soup kitchen there, up in Idlebrook Can't think of the name. The priest runs a little homeless shelter next to the church and feeds the poor. He was a good boy. I'm sorry he's gone.” Lydia sighed. “Such a terrible thing. I don't know what the world's coming to.”

Anja rose. She'd already had business cards prepared, and she left one on the table next to a teacup in a saucer. “Thank you very much, Lydia. You've been a big help. If you remember anything or if there's anything you need, you just give me a call, okay?”

Lydia smiled up at her. “I sure will, dear. You can see yourself out, can't you?”

They could.

They learned nothing more from Otto Walker's other neighbors. The residents either weren't home or didn't know him. One slammed the door in her face when Stella identified herself as FBI. Another resident, standing in the cold in shorts and a stained undershirt, wanted all the details about Walker's death—how he died and who'd done it—but contributed nothing useful.

His curiosity roused Stella's suspicions, though, and she could see herself coming back to this apartment complex one day.

By the time they'd knocked on the last door, the forensic techs had sealed off Otto's apartment and were climbing into their box truck.

Stella waved them down as they prepared to leave. “Make sure you get the computer

straight to Agent Mackenzie Drake, okay?”

“Uh-huh.” The tech wound up the window and drove out of the lot.

If they were lucky, the computer would be sitting on Mac’s desk first thing in the morning. If they were unlucky, Mac would have to make calls, nag, and threaten to go down to the lab and snatch it.

They climbed into the remaining SUV. Stella took the wheel. “You were good in there, Anja. Had that old dear eating out of your hands. You’ve got a way with people.”

Anja smiled. “You just gotta figure out what they want and give it to them. Before they ask. Ideally, before they even know they want it.”

“What do you think Lydia O’Donnell wanted?”

Anja was silent for a moment. “When I told her to go back inside, I saw she lived alone. Now, what do old people who live alone always want? Company. Someone to sit with them for a while, hold their hand. Listen to them.” She folded her arms and lifted her chin. “Give them that, even for five minutes, and they’ll tell you everything.”

Stella didn’t reply. There was a degree of self-satisfaction in Anja’s response that bothered her.

“So how long have you and Hagen been together?”

That question came out of nowhere. Stella almost hit the brakes. She maintained her speed as they turned onto Briley Parkway. “Not long. Couple of months or so.”

“Got it.” Anja nodded knowingly. “Must be a record for him. Good for you.”

“Yeah. Good for me.”

They drove on in silence. The journey back to headquarters would take less than fifteen minutes, but each minute was starting to feel like an hour.

Anja broke the silence. “So you guys got plans for the night?”

Stella remembered they were supposed to meet Mac and her new boyfriend at a restaurant. But the sight of Otto Walker upside down on a sofa had pushed the thought of food completely out of her mind.

Her dad used to come back from work full of jokes and smiles. He’d wolf down a giant plate of home-cooked food, help himself to extra mashed potatoes, then wash it all down with a couple of cold beers as though he’d spent the day tiling a roof. Stella had no idea how he did it.

“Supposed to be going out for dinner.” The smell of wet carpet and blood drifted back to Stella. “Though I can’t say I’m really in the mood.”

Construction workers strolled out of the building site next to the Woodycrest Shopping Forum, their fluorescent vests glowing in the streetlamps around the unfinished office building. A sign on the wire fence by the entrance instructed anyone that entered to be wearing a hard hat at all times.

Seeing as they didn't have hard hats of their own, Hagen and Ander remained outside the workplace of Otto Walker's uncle. They were there to perform the most difficult part of their job—inform the next of kin that a relative had died. A few minutes ago, they'd asked another construction worker to ask Phil Walker to please come see them.

An approaching construction worker eyed them with suspicion as he tromped through the gates of the wire fence.

“Phil Walker? I'm Special Agent Hagen Yates. This is Special Agent Ander Bennett. We're with the FBI.”

The man took off his white hard hat. He had an untidy patch of salt-and-pepper hair that started halfway across his scalp. The streetlamp threw a silver pitch over the top of his forehead. “I'm Phil. What's this about?”

Hagen looked at him with all the dignity he could muster. The best thing to do was to tell it straight. “Your nephew, Otto...he's dead. He was found murdered in his apartment this morning.”

Phil dropped the hard hat to the ground. The top was scarred with black marks, the edges chipped. This was a guy who'd sought responsibility and was used to holding it. That responsibility sat heavily on him now, like he'd just seen a building crumble at his feet. "Fuck."

"We're sorry for your loss."

After a few moments, Phil shook his head and stood up straight. "That kid never had any luck."

"We just need to ask you a few questions about your nephew."

"Go ahead."

Ander brought out his notebook. "Did Otto mention anyone who was bothering him recently? Display any unusual behavior?"

Phil pulled a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. "Otto was a...look, he was...troubled. He was a weird kid. Had a tough life."

He lit a cigarette and took a long draw. The nicotine seemed to relax him. He placed both hands on his belt and stretched his legs. The heels of his boots sank into soft dirt.

Hagen pushed his hands into his pockets. "How did you come to look after him?"

"My brother. He died when Otto was five. Cancer. His mom passed a couple of years later. Same thing. See what I mean? Shitty luck." Phil took another drag. The tip of the cigarette glowed an angry red. "Sometimes, life just picks someone and decides...that's it. It's gonna beat the crap out of them. Left jab, right jab."

Hagen rested a foot on top of a stack of girders by the fence. "So you became his

guardian?”

“Wasn’t easy. I never married, never met the right girl, so they made me jump through more hoops than an Olympic gymnast to keep him out of foster care. Tried to do the best for him, poor kid, but losing his parents at that age. Does something, you know?”

“Uh-huh.” Hagen had been a teenager when he lost his dad. That had done something. He couldn’t imagine what losing both parents before the age of ten might’ve changed in him. “How did the loss affect Otto?”

“I dunno. He was a dark kid. Always prodding at dead birds and roadkill and shit with a stick or something. I think he showed more interest in dead animals than live ones. Sometimes, he’d ask me what his parents were doing in Heaven, whether I thought they were happy. What was I supposed to tell him, huh?”

Ander lowered his notebook. “That they were happy? And looking down on him?”

“Yeah, I did all that. Didn’t help much. I don’t think he believed me.”

Hagen attempted to refocus the conversation. “Do you know why he left work early today?”

Phil shrugged. “First time I’m hearing about it. Last time I spoke to him was Thursday evening. Last week. He was supposed to come over Friday night, but he said he had plans and couldn’t make it. Told him that was fine. The guys were going out for drinks, so I joined them instead.”

“You know where he went?”

“Didn’t say. I was just glad he was getting out, you know?”

“Because he didn’t have a big social life?”

Phil flicked ash into the dirt. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. He wasn’t very outgoing. It was too bad, you know. He was good-looking. Spitting image of my brother. I’d see the way the girls looked at him. But five minutes of conversation, and they’d be tapping on their phones and side-eyeing the exits. I hate to say it, but the kid was a downer. I think he spent most of his time online.”

Hagen glanced at Ander. They’d heard that before. Patrick. Otto. Both had struggled socially, found a life online, and had that life ended in the most brutal way. That said, it wasn’t quite the same, since it was still very possible that Otto Walker killed Patrick Marrion, or at least was involved in that murder, one way or another.

In any event, Hagen was starting to think they’d find the answers they needed on the internet, not at crime scenes and building sites.

The thought irritated him. If he’d wanted to spend his life in front of a screen, he’d have picked a specialty like Mac’s.

Phil’s thoughts were still with his nephew, though. He toyed with the end of the cigarette butt. “You know, I tried to get him interested in music when he was a teenager. Like some old stuff. I thought he might like Black Sabbath. But he never really got into it.” He scratched his cheek. “There was one thing that helped, though.”

“What was that?”

“Church.”

Hagen stared at him. “Seriously?”

Ander picked up the thread. “I mean...don’t get us wrong. We got nothing against

going to church. It just didn't sound like he was heading in that direction."

Phil took another drag. "Surprised me too. I took him to a service once when he was about seventeen, and he liked it. Started going to church regularly. I'm not religious myself, but the church seemed to give Otto the outlet he was looking for."

Ander smiled. "Must've made you happy."

"It did." Phil sighed. He took a last drag on his cigarette and stubbed it out against the top of the girder before shoving the butt into his pocket. "I mean, Otto was still very shy. Even in the church, he didn't mix well with others. But he had a direction and some stability. I figured he was finally coming out of his shell. He even got a job at a funeral parlor. The priest there introduced him to the director who agreed to give him work if he went to mortuary school."

"Sounds like a job he'd like. You didn't worry he'd like it too much? Keep him focused on death instead of on building a new life?"

"Nah." Phil took out his cigarette packet again. He removed another cigarette, changed his mind, and put it back. "I thought being around other people suffering from grief might've helped him, you know? Maybe he'd learn to cope with his own grief at last."

Ander held his pen at the ready. "Was Otto still going to this church regularly?"

Phil nodded. "As far as I know."

"And what's the name of the church? And the priest who was helping him?"

"Saint Aloysius. It's up in Idlebrook, a neighborhood north of downtown. The priest's name is Ted Barlow." Phil changed his mind about the cigarette again and

stuck it into the corner of his mouth. He lit the end with a cheap plastic lighter. When he exhaled, the smoke hung in front of his face. “Guess I was wrong. Failed him. I just...I just don’t understand why anyone would’ve hurt him.”

He dropped his head into his hands. His shoulders shook.

Hagen stepped back to give Phil space to cry.

Footsteps shifted the dirt behind him. A heavyset man still wearing his fluorescent vest and hard hat walked up to them, took Phil’s elbow, and raised him upright. “You guys are done here, right?”

Hagen nodded. The worker wrapped an arm around Phil’s waist.

“Come on, pal. The guys are waiting.”

Hagen watched them go. He was glad Phil wouldn’t be alone tonight.

And he was happy he wasn’t going home to an empty house either.

As soon as Stella returned home, she'd sat in the living room and sent pictures of the writing on the wall to the cuneiform expert and the forensic document examiner.

Before getting ready to go out with Mac and her new boyfriend, Stella picked up the last plate from the sink. Bits of omelet stuck to the surface, the remnants of the morning's breakfast still lingering.

She thought of rinsing it. That was what Hagen would've done and expected her to do. Clean the plates before putting them in the dishwasher.

What a waste of time.

When she'd lived in a studio, Stella hadn't even owned a dishwasher. She ate from takeout boxes and frozen food packets.

Hagen, though, had a dishwasher. A gleaming German thing that was far too big for one person. And as he usually cooked, he expected her to do the loading.

From upstairs came the sound of Hagen's shower as he got ready for their double date.

Stella prodded the bit of dried egg with a fork. It wasn't coming off.

Her fish tank stood on the counter beside the window. Her goldfish drifted up the tank, his mouth opening and closing as though he had something to say.

“What do you think, Scoot? Scrape or load?”

The fish turned tail and fled to hide under the bridge in the corner of the tank.

“Load it, you say? Yeah, I agree.”

She dropped the plate into the lower rack, slammed the door, and ran a cycle. What Hagen didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him.

Upstairs, Hagen was still showering. A scent of his expensive tea tree oil shampoo leaked through the door. His aftershave would follow soon, that strange mix of cloves and cinnamon and nutmeg he thought so manly and irresistible.

He wasn’t completely wrong.

She opened the closet. Hagen had been able to spare less than half the space of one of his two wardrobes. His jackets and pants spread across the rack, crowding her small selection of skirts, her three dresses—one of which she hadn’t worn since her sophomore year at college—and her ten blouses.

Hagen didn’t just own more clothes than her, they were also better quality. His suits were fitted by his father’s tailor. She picked up her stuff from chain stores, grabbing anything from the rack that didn’t look terrible.

Stella had never understood how shopping could be therapy. For her, shopping was an activity that could make her need therapy.

She ran a finger over the shoulders of his jackets, stroked the fold of his cotton shirts arranged by tone from dark to light, and opened his tie drawer. Each was as carefully rolled as a pastry.

There was something compulsive but weirdly satisfying about pulling open the drawer and seeing all those patterns so neatly arranged. Twenty ties filled the five-by-four drawer grids, and Stella had a sneaking suspicion Hagen had thrown out some old ties to ensure he had the exact number to match the space available.

She hadn't even known he wore ties. She'd assumed he did, but yesterday morning was the first time she'd ever seen him pick one out and put it on. The thought frightened her. Maybe he had more secrets waiting to be discovered.

Perhaps—and she shuddered at the idea—he sometimes wore suspenders instead of a belt. Or a bow tie. He couldn't possibly own an ascot, could he?

The water in the bathroom stopped. Hagen's whistling grew louder, though not more tuneful. Stella pulled out a tie decorated with little yellow butterflies. It must've been a gift from one of his sisters, a Christmas joke for the guy who spent too much time in front of his mirror. There was no way Hagen would've chosen that for himself.

“Hey, Hagen. I've picked you out a tie to wear tonight.”

He called to her through the door. “I think I'll go tieless. More casual. But whatever you choose, that's what I'll wear for work tomorrow.”

Stella smiled. Maybe she could find one with teddy bears.

“You nearly ready?”

Stella grabbed a long, figure-hugging knitted dress—one she'd owned since college—and threw it onto the bed. As she changed, she shouted through the bathroom door. “So what did you learn from the victim's uncle?”

The whistling stopped. “Not much. He was orphaned when he was young. His uncle

raised him. He was insular, had few friends. But he went to church, and he had a pretty good job working as a mortician. People will always need morticians.”

“Don’t we know it.”

Stella pulled on the dress. It still fit. Maybe she hadn’t changed that much. Standing in front of the mirror behind the closet door, she tugged the roll-neck collar beneath her chin and dragged the dress down tighter.

The maroon color had faded a little, but it was good enough. She closed the closet door. “He sounds pretty similar to the first victim. Friendless. Isolated. Online too much.”

They were supposed to be getting ready for dinner, to meet friends and talk about...something else. Anything but work.

And yet here they were, talking work. Her father had been much better at keeping his two worlds separate, and Stella assumed her mother having a different career helped.

The bathroom door opened, bringing a cloud of steam and the scent of Floris Santal. Hagen’s wet hair was slicked back, his towel wrapped around his waist, his muscular chest bare.

He stopped when he saw her and ran his gaze along her dress.

Her face warmed. That was a look she gave him in Claymore Township, in the blissful time since they’d taken down Joel Ramirez. Before all the craziness started.

He smiled. “You look beautiful.”

“You too. But you should probably get dressed.” She laid a hand on his hard chest.

“Or not.”

Mac had booked the table for nine that evening. Stella and Hagen arrived at the restaurant in Rutledge Hill right on time to find that she was running late, and the table wouldn't be ready for at least another ten minutes.

They took seats at the bar. Hagen examined the drinks menu while Stella surveyed the venue.

The restaurant was fancy but not stuffy. Tables weren't hidden under white tablecloths, and there were no candles burning behind romantic red glass intended to produce intimacy. But the napkins were made of cloth not paper. Menus were hidden in leather folders, and the wine list ran for several pages and included varietals Stella had never drunk from countries she didn't know produced wine.

Nothing here was like the places she and Mac visited when they'd first spent evenings together in Nashville.

In those weeks, they'd drunk cocktails in dive bars just dark enough to give couples at the next table the privacy they needed. They'd eaten in cafés and pizza parlors. The fanciest place they'd visited was a club owned by a friend of Stacy's. They'd been there once for the opening and hadn't returned. Too many unpleasant associations.

This place was serious and grown-up. And normal.

It was the kind of restaurant normal couples with normal friends frequented.

At one table, two middle-aged couples dug into their shrimp and quail and swordfish and some pasta dish. The men were well-dressed in button-down shirts and neatly trimmed beards. The women wore ironed blouses and had coiffures that had to have cost large sums of money and taken a serious chunk of time out of their day.

Servers passed between the tables in black pants and white shirts. They held wine bottles from the bottom, wiped the rim before they poured, and ensured glasses remained filled throughout the meal. Everything was ordered and neat. All activity took place according to rules and norms that no one who booked a table in that restaurant would ever consider breaking.

The place was only twenty minutes from the bloody scene Stella left a couple of hours ago but a million miles away.

“I’m going to order a bourbon while we wait.” Hagen lowered the drinks menu. “You want your dirty martini?”

“Sure.”

Hagen called the bartender over and placed the order.

He looked so comfortable sitting there at that bar. He’d picked out a silk shirt, dark blue, and wore it with the top two buttons left open despite the cold outside. A sharp crease ran down the legs of his pants, and he’d even changed his shoes. His Italian leather Oxfords gleamed as he perched them on the brass rail.

In this palace of a restaurant, he fit in so naturally and looked gorgeous. If Stella hadn’t known him, if she’d been sitting at that bar when he’d walked in, she wouldn’t have been able to take her eyes off him. She might’ve assumed that someone who took that much care in his appearance spent too long in front of a mirror. But the time had been well spent.

She tugged at the front of her knit dress. A thread had come loose on her hip, leaving a small hole in the wool. She tried to push it back and hoped Hagen wouldn't notice.

Their drinks arrived. Hagen lifted his glass. The ice clinked. He sipped. She raised hers, and he looked into her eyes.

"You really are beautiful."

It was just what she needed to hear.

Whatever doubts she'd harbored as they'd sat at that bar melted. She might not have fit into that restaurant the way Hagen did, but she fit with Hagen, and that was all that mattered.

Her hand on his thigh, she leaned across the gap between the barstools and kissed him. The ice that had touched his lip was cold on hers, but the taste of bourbon warmed her.

"So sorry we're late." Mac's voice came from behind them. "I see you've started on the drinks. That's cheating."

Mac was still tugging at the belt of her coat. She greeted Stella with a hug, though only a few hours had passed since they'd last seen each other.

"And this is Werner." She turned to the man beside her. "Werner, this is Stella and Hagen."

Werner's handshake was firm without being overly hard.

Stella liked what she saw.

Mac's boyfriend was tall and slim, with a friendly smile and two curtains of dark hair that flopped over his forehead. His jacket was tweed and a long way from being new. Another year, and Werner'd be ready to sew on the elbow patches that the jacket seemed to demand.

As Hagen released his hand, the bartender informed them their table was ready. Stella and Hagen carried their drinks through.

Mac took Werner's arm as they walked. He touched her hand briefly, the kind of move that happened without thought. Less than a month they'd been together, little more than two weeks, and already they were developing an intimacy that Stella and Hagen had taken months to understand. There was trust there, and openness.

Stella hoped Mac was right to hand over that trust so fast.

They sat and opened the menus. Starters included glazed pig's ears, foie gras with fresh-baked sourdough, and steak tartare. Stella tried not to grimace as she flipped through the pages, searching for something with a cheese she recognized.

After a minute, Hagen folded his menu and laid it aside. No matter how complex the offers, he could always find something. And assume everyone else could too.

"So, Werner, you're an anthropology professor."

Werner cleared his throat. "Hoping to be, with a particular focus on archaeology. Though I'm still finishing my PhD, so I'm not technically a professor yet. I do, however, have the pleasure of boring undergraduates to death with my lectures."

"You won't be boring them." Mac squinted at the menu. "This is weird stuff, isn't it? Don't they have a tomato soup? You can just tell everyone about those knives and arrowheads and things they found at Link Farm. I didn't know anything about it."

Werner smiled uneasily. Stella had the sense that he'd told people about the knives and arrowheads they found at Link Farm before and seen eyes glaze over.

The server arrived, and they placed their order. Hagen opted for the pig ears to start, and Werner chose the beef tartare. Mac's careful questioning uncovered the possibility of an off- menu French onion soup, and Stella joined her. She opted for fish for the main course. It looked like the safest choice.

Hagen collected the menus and handed them to the grateful server. "It's kind of ironic, no? You focus on old cutting technology, Werner, while Mac has to stay on the cutting edge of technology."

Werner grinned. He had a bright, toothy smile that transformed his face instantly from serious academic to warm student, full of life and fun and playfulness. It took half a decade from his features and brought a glow to Mac's face too.

"I guess we complement each other. And one day, some archeologist will dig Mac's phone out of a mound and marvel at the primitiveness of even her workplace's technology."

Mac smiled at the server as she placed the soup down. "I marvel at the primitiveness of my workplace's technology every time I turn on the printer. You'd be amazed at how behind the Bureau can be."

Stella smiled and examined her own soup. A hunk of bread floated in the middle of the bowl. The cheese on top was decorated with strange blue lines. She prodded the floater with her spoon.

"We owe you thanks, Werner. That expert you found us, Guy Lacross, was really helpful. Just had to contact him again."

Werner dug into his beef tartare. He looked comfortable eating raw meat.

“Mac mentioned you’d have to do that. That’s remarkable. I imagine seeing cuneiform in a crime scene once is bizarre enough. But twice?”

Hagen nodded. His pig’s ear was hidden in a lettuce wrap so that it looked nothing like an ear. Stella was glad.

“Surprised us too.”

“Is there anything you can tell me about the typography? Are you sure it’s from the same tablet? Or even the same era?”

Hagen glanced at Stella. He shrugged. “No idea.”

“You know, cuneiform was used by different civilizations. Akkadian, Sumerian, even Hittite. It’s really quite remarkable. Hieroglyphs get all the attention. But they were only used by the Egyptians. Cuneiform, which is less well known, spread across entire civilizations.”

Stella thought back to the bloody marks on the walls, something she’d rather not be doing while eating. “Well, without looking at the images side by side, I think they looked the same.”

“Really? In what way?”

Stella wasn’t sure how to describe the patterns of blood on the walls of Otto Walker’s apartment and those they found in Claymore Township. She wasn’t even sure if the comparisons were relevant. The forensic document examiner might tell them someone was bad at copying. Either way, again, it wasn’t the most appetizing dinner conversation.

“It’s hard to say exactly. It’s almost as if it was the same symbols but with different handwriting.” Stella sipped her soup. It was better than she expected. She tried not to think about the blue lines, but they added a welcome sharpness to the onion’s sweetness. “Is this stuff not your field too?”

Werner shook his head. A curtain of hair fell in front of one eye. He flicked it away. “Much too old for me. The stuff I excavate is no more than a thousand years old.”

“Practically yesterday.” Mac pushed her empty soup bowl to the side. Her appetite hadn’t changed since Stella had been away.

“Actually, the best place to excavate, if you will, is only about a hundred and fifty years old. There’s stuff in the basement of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the other great museums of the world, that no one remembers is even there. There’s a whole horde of ancient material that we have in collections around the world that have not even been translated yet. You could write an entire doctorate on this.”

Stella mentioned, regretfully, that she’d never visited The Met, and Werner recommended the best works to see and explained how to avoid the lines. The conversation moved on.

The main course was both tastier and stranger than Stella had expected, and the rest of their dinner topic revolved mainly around the cuisine.

Guilt settled into her chest as they pulled out of the parking lot.

The conversation and the evening had been too smooth and comfortable. Too normal and enjoyable. She wasn’t sure they should be able to live that easily after all the things they’d seen that day.

And all the things they'd face tomorrow.

In the morning, Hagen felt for Slade as his boss rested his fingertips on the meeting room table. A weariness hung on his face and dragged his chin toward his chest.

Each new victim seemed to add to a weight on his back.

Hagen had never seen himself leading a team of FBI agents. He'd always assumed that once he'd dealt with Ramirez, he'd be arrested. Or killed as he fled the scene, if not by the police, then by one of the men who killed his father. The best he could expect would be to fade away, disappear with a new identity.

Now he had a future. Ever since Ramirez's death, he could imagine a life filled with promotion and advancement. A career. He hadn't thought about it in detail. But, during their sabbatical in Pennsylvania, the first notions started popping up in his head.

The sight of Slade each morning as the body count rose hadn't killed the shoots of that new idea. But it did show him the cost.

Slade's weary eyes landed on him. "Hagen. Fill us in. How does the second victim compare to the victims you found in Pennsylvania?"

Hagen took a deep breath. "Put simply, this victim appears to have been killed in almost exactly the same way as the victims in Claymore. The similarities are clear enough. Deep slash across the throat. Massive loss of blood. The cuneiform writing on the wall. Stella sent pictures last night to the cuneiform expert we used on the last

case and to a forensic document examiner.”

“The main difference in terms of the writing itself,” Stella elaborated, “is that the marks in Otto Walker’s apartment were on the wall, painted by what appears to be a paintbrush, and not carved on his back like the victims in Pennsylvania.”

“Thank heaven for small favors.” Anja shuddered with a delicate shiver.

“That said, we did find writing on the wall at one of the victims in Claymore Township.”

“The sheriff, right?” Slade had apparently pored through the Claymore Township reports.

Stella nodded. “But the difference in how Otto Walker and Patrick Marrion were killed is remarkable. Marrion was bled by a small, precise cut to the carotid artery, not a slash to the throat. There was no writing located near him...except for the possible attempt to scratch into his back. But we’re not certain about that.”

“Considering all the evidence we have supporting Walker killing Marrion, it makes sense. Walker wouldn’t give his own carotid a neat little cut, would he?” Sarcasm didn’t really suit Slade. The SSA rubbed the scar above his temple and changed angles. “Don’t suppose you’ve heard back from either of your experts yet, have you?”

“I heard back from the forensic document examiner. The marks in Otto Walker’s apartment were created by different hands than the victims in Claymore Township. Which stands to reason, considering Maureen King, who made the markings in Claymore, is deceased.”

“Great. We have a lot of dead murderers. Not much use at all.”

Ander rocked back in his chair. “You said Patrick Marrion had no writing at all anywhere near him. I don’t think we should dismiss the scratches across his burns. Those abrasions might’ve been a writing attempt that failed.”

Slade glared at Ander’s rocked-back chair. Ander set the front legs back on the floor.

“Wouldn’t the unsub have written on the alley wall if they couldn’t cut their message into Marrion’s back?” Stacy waved a finger, as though the alley stretched out in front of her, and she only needed to point at the brickwork.

Stella shook her head. “Not necessarily. The alley was where the body was found. Not where he was killed.”

“So Patrick Marrion was the only victim not left at the place he was murdered?” Eagerness swept over Anja’s face, as if she needed the details.

Stacy tapped her pen on the table. “Yes. And we know that. So maybe, after struggling with the victim’s scar tissue, the unsub wrote his message at the murder scene instead. Like Maureen King did in the shed when she killed her husband. And that message is still out there somewhere.”

Stella tugged at the golden stud in her ear. “Right. Stacy and I speculated that our perpetrator left Marrion out in public as a message. What if our guy was trying to get our attention?”

“Otto Walker probably killed Marrion.” Next to Hagen, Ander circled the word funeral in his notebook. “What kind of attention would he want?”

“Well, Walker had the ideal kill location, didn’t he?” Stacy straightened in her chair. “If he killed Marrion at the funeral home, it’s not like he could leave Marrion’s corpse there. So he’d have to dump him. We should go there and see if there’s

security footage.”

“I think we need to remember that someone killed Walker. And the most likely option when we consider that angle is an accomplice covering their tracks.” Stella released the stud in a gesture of frustration. “Or some combination of both.”

The room went silent while the agents contemplated their options.

Slade lifted his chin. His face was flushed. “Looks like we’ve got some angles to investigate. But I think it’s clear with the cuneiform marks in the Walker case that there’s a connection with Pennsylvania.”

Hagen’s frustration rose. “No. It can’t be the same killer. Maureen King is dead. We saw her die. And Douglas King, the sheriff, her husband and accomplice, was murdered as well. There can’t be a killer from Pennsylvania.”

Stella lowered her hand slowly from her ear. Hagen’s heart sank. She’d thought of something. And he wasn’t going to like it.

Slade had seen it too. “What’s on your mind, Stella?”

She blinked and hesitated before she spoke. “Maureen King certainly killed Laurence Gill. But we could’ve been wrong about Sheriff King’s involvement.”

“How?” All Hagen’s attention focused on Stella.

“Do you remember the sheriff’s reaction at the sight of Deputy Mark Tully’s body? We were with him. He was devastated. And do you remember how shocked we were when we realized he was helping Maureen? When he shot at us? We couldn’t believe it. Maybe we were right not to.”

“But...he shot at us.”

“Maybe he was just trying to protect his wife. Maybe he hadn’t known she’d killed Tully. I’m certain he didn’t expect her to kill him. And she did kill him. Her own husband. Would she have done that if he were her accomplice?”

Hagen thought about the awful situation for a moment. Maureen had murdered her victims in a strange attempt to save them. She was one of the only killers he’d ever met who murdered people she liked. “She might have done it to save him. Maureen King was not in her right head.”

Stella frowned. “But I don’t think that changes the equation when you consider her first murders. We know Maureen King had an accomplice for those. There were two sets of boots at the crime scenes. But there’s another reason.”

“What do you mean?”

Stella dropped back into her chair. Her gaze fell on Hagen, and in that look, she seemed to deliver an apology.

“Maureen wasn’t good at tying knots. I saw her in the kitchen trying to tie herbs and failing. But the victims were tied from trees. She must’ve had help stringing up the bodies.” She sighed. “If her accomplice wasn’t the sheriff, then there very well could be a murderer running free. And they could be here to send us a message.”

Hagen took a deep breath. Anger rose in his chest. It’d been a while since he’d felt that old familiar sensation. He wasn’t mad at Stella. He was angry that they’d left their work unfinished. They’d left a murderer free, and now, the killer had followed them. If they’d done their job properly?—

Slade broke his thought. “Did you collect DNA from the scenes in Pennsylvania?”

Stella nodded. “We did, but the evidence was pretty contaminated because of the snowstorm and our lack of access to forensic resources. We didn’t have anything by the time we left, and I doubt the results will be much use when we do get them.”

“There is something though.” Hagen felt itchy, like he needed to do something. “Maureen King fell down a rabbit hole after she joined some Dispatch group prophesying the end of the world. That’s where the cuneiform comes from. We could try to get into the group. Maybe they’re still around.”

“Patrick Marrion met his ‘friend’ online. Maybe that was on Dispatch too?” Stella threw the idea out. “That was the only social app on Maureen King’s phone.”

Ander was still rocking on his chair, though he kept leveling out before Slade could catch him. If the morning’s revelations had surprised him, he didn’t show it. “Did either of you join the group?”

Hagen crossed his arms, as if physical pressure would stop the heat burning through his rib cage. “Once we cracked that case, when we thought we’d cracked it, we didn’t think we needed to join. Mac, can you get us in?”

Mac was sitting at the end of the table. She spun her phone gently between her fingers.

“Unlikely. Even if we could identify the group, it would take ages to get cooperation from the Dispatch administrators. You’d need to wrangle an invitation.”

“I’ll handle that.” Anja raised her hand. “Should be a good place to find sources.”

Slade rubbed his hands together. “Okay, we’ve got two victims to investigate, and that’s on top of the three you found on your little break. I do not want more. Let’s find the link between the victims. What connects them, if anything, besides a killer?”

He nodded at Hagen. “I want you and Ander to focus on Otto Walker. Check his workplace. Go visit that church he volunteered at in Idlebrook. Stella?—”

Stella’s phone pinged. She lifted the device and touched the screen. “Sorry, it’s Guy Lacross, that cuneiform expert. He says...” She paused and read, her thumb sliding along the glass. “The writing on the wall says, ‘only blood will redeem the world and redemption is coming soon.’”

Hagen was ready to leave. He’d heard that before, though he’d hoped he’d never have to hear it again. “Sounds familiar.”

“We’d better get moving.” Slade pointed at Stella. “You and Stacy dig into Patrick Marrion. Mac sent me a report stating that trippinballz12 has placed a laptop on Craigslist. Might be Marrion’s.”

Stella nodded. “I’ll get with Mac and set up a meeting time with him. We can pretend we’re buyers.”

“Why don’t you just beat his door down?” Ander stopped rocking on his chair. “We could probably get a warrant.”

Slade rose from his seat. “We’ll get a warrant anyway. But going in with a buyer ruse will keep Mr. Trippinballz from getting skittish and throwing the laptop in a lake or something. We need to know the identity of the new friend in town that Patrick Marrion was visiting, and our best bet is a computer or his phone.”

Hagen closed the button of his jacket and tugged on his cuffs. A somber black sign jammed into the grass verge declared in gold letters that they'd reached the Murray Funeral Home, a standalone one-story building on the same block as an office-furniture store and a yoga studio.

This was where Otto Walker was building a career. It was his last stop before he'd returned home and had his throat cut and his corpse mutilated.

Hagen and Ander strolled up a narrow path that led to the open door. In the entrance, an easel held a picture of an old woman. She wore a blue silk scarf over a lime blouse, her white hair neatly blown out and the lines on her face delicately smoothed using digital effects.

That family was gathered in a chapel to the left. A middle-aged woman sat sobbing in the front row. Older people milled around touching each other's elbows—grateful, Hagen assumed, the funeral wasn't theirs. Children ran between the seats, ignoring whispered calls for them to sit back down. Everyone wore black.

The receptionist, a young woman with a blond ponytail and a tight black blazer that sat too high on her black skirt, greeted them with a closed-mouth smile. She waved a silent invitation for them to join the mourners.

Ander reached for his ID and introduced himself.

The pain of Hagen's father's funeral came back. He'd been old enough to understand

but too young to be ready. The burial had passed in a daze, an event that happened around him not with him. He'd stood by the grave in front of his mother. Her hand had lain on his shoulder. His hand had held his sister Brianna's.

Though the priest had read something, Hagen didn't know what. All he could remember were the solemn tones and how the book softly closed at the end before they all walked slowly and silently back to their cars waiting at the entrance.

The difference between the constant ache he carried and the more manageable pain he believed others felt at the passing of a loved one was because of the way his father died.

The difference mattered.

His father hadn't passed away of old age or died in some random accident or been taken by an illness that had no explanation. A decision had killed him. Someone had decided to take his father, to bring that pain into Hagen's life.

That choice had added years of burning rage to Hagen's loss.

Ramirez was dead now. He'd paid for his decision. And though the anger had abated, the ache was still there. It would remain for each of the mourners in that room too.

"Hagen?" Ander had moved to the stairs at the end of the hall. "The owner's downstairs."

Hagen gave one last glance at the chapel before following Ander. A heavy door at the bottom of the steps opened into a room that smelled of formaldehyde and disinfectant.

In the middle of the room stood a steel table on which a man's body lay naked, face

up. He'd been old when he died. His head was mostly bald, but the hair that covered his chest and his stick-thin arms and legs was white. His jaw was open so that he looked surprised at being disturbed, though not bothered enough to do anything about it.

Two tubes were connected to his body on the right side of his neck. One was filling the decedent with embalming fluid, while the other sent blood down the drain in the floor.

"I'm sorry, but you can't come in here."

A man in a lab coat rose from a chair at the end of the table. He was in his late forties, with a long chin and tidy black hair combed to a straight side parting. The tips of his blue latex gloves were loose on his fingers.

Hagen tore his gaze from the corpse and flashed his badge. "We're from the FBI. I'm Special Agent Hagen Yates. This is Special Agent Ander Bennett. You're Chris Murray?"

The man nodded. "Yes, but?—"

"We need to ask you a few questions about your former employee. Otto Walker."

"Otto." Murray's long face seemed to grow longer. Whether it was a trick of the room's bright light or something in the movement of the mortician's head, Hagen wasn't sure. But the mention of the deceased brought a new solemnity to Murray's eyes. "Yes, of course. That's perfectly fine."

His words came out slowly, as though reluctant to fall from his mouth and die in the air.

Murray left the pump humming by the table and took a cotton sheet from a shelf above a sink. He laid the sheet over the deceased, adjusting the edge so that it lined up neatly beneath the entry of the tube.

The attempt to cover the man's nakedness impressed Hagen. The deceased couldn't possibly mind, but Murray did. Even in death, he wanted to protect his client's modesty.

"We can step outside if you want."

"I can't leave the decedent." He paused, as though expecting the body to tell him it was perfectly fine. He wasn't going anywhere. The deceased said nothing. "Not in the middle of a procedure."

Ander pushed his hands into his pockets. Hagen couldn't blame him. The room was uncomfortably cold.

"This won't take long. Can you tell us when Otto started working for you?"

"It's so awful." Murray returned to his seat. "He started here about...oh, two and a half years ago, maybe three. He just helped out at first. But he started mortician school, finished his training about eight months ago, and I took him on full time. It was Father Ted's idea."

"Father Ted?" They knew who he was but wanted to hear what Murray had to say.

"Father Ted Barlow. Over at Saint Aloysius up in Idlebrook." Murray frowned. He seemed to search for a memory, recalling something long gone. "He asked if I had space for an apprentice. It's really not easy to find staff, not in this business. I told Father Ted I was happy to take Otto on, if he was interested." When he checked the pump's pressure gauge, he seemed satisfied.

“Was he?” Hagen stepped back as the pipe twitched. “Interested, I mean?”

“I think so. Yes.” The mortician took a deep breath. “A lot of people...they struggle with this work. They think they’re going to be okay. But at the first sight of a dead body, they...well, they faint or turn pale. It’s not an easy job. But Otto didn’t flinch. Not at all. He stood over the decedent, respectfully, and listened to the instructions. And he asked questions.”

“About?”

“Well, that’s a good question in itself.” Murray turned off the pump. The hum died away. He reached for the tube sending embalming fluid into the dead man’s artery but changed his mind. “Once, he wanted to know how I was sure the deceased was dead. I’ve never been asked that before.”

Ander rested an elbow on the stainless steel counter that ran around the room. “What did you tell him?”

“Honestly? I don’t recall. Some wisecrack about trusting the death certificate, I think. That was probably it.”

Hagen eyed the end of the tube in the artery, the cut on the man’s neck. Murray would probably remove it when they left the room and then sew up the opening. Dressed, no one would know the old man had been opened and bled.

“Was Otto a good learner?”

“He was...” Murray sighed. He folded his hands in his lap. His plastic apron crinkled. “Otto was an eager student, and he flourished. Like I said, this isn’t an easy job. There are a lot of chemicals to study, some biology, and more than a little practical hands-on craftwork. But he was sharp. He had an instinct for the carotid artery, for

example, and he never struggled with a trocar.”

“A trocar?”

Stella had mentioned a trocar when she spoke about her experience after her brother Jonathan died. Here was a chance for an illustration.

“It’s a kind of...here.” Murray reached behind him and took what looked like a long steel needle from the counter. “This is a trocar. Three cutting edges in a single tube. We insert the tip below the navel and use it to remove gases and fluids from internal organs.” He lifted his chin toward his client. “I won’t show you.”

Hagen had rarely felt more grateful. “And Otto was comfortable using that? What else was he skilled at?”

“All of it.”

“Right.”

Hagen pulled out his phone and brought up the picture of the alley where Patrick Marrion was found. Widening his fingers, Hagen zoomed in until all that was visible was the cut above the victim’s clavicle. He showed Murray the screen.

“What do you make of this?”

Murray put the trocar back, pulled off a glove, and took the phone.

“It looks like the cut we make for arterial embalming. It’s what I’m doing here. See? I make a cut so I can reach the jugular vein and the carotid artery.” The mortician showed Hagen a cut identical to the one on Patrick Marrion. But after pulling on a fresh glove, Murray took it a step further. “I put the embalming pump here.”

“That’s the carotid?” Hagen didn’t really need to ask. He had learned a lot about this particular anatomy from Dr. Brennan.

“Correct!” Murray sounded like a proud teacher. “And the drain tube goes here. That’s the jugular.” He demonstrated, setting the tube in place. “And voilà”

For a moment, Hagen thought the mortician was going to turn the pump on. He was not prepared for that.

Murray saw his discomfort. “Don’t worry. I won’t turn it on right now. Wouldn’t want to hurt your shoes.”

Hagen would definitely not be okay with any bodily fluid hitting his Italian loafers. He shifted the conversation a bit. “Do you think this could be Otto’s work?”

When he held his phone out again, Murray politely did not touch the screen with his gloved hands, especially after his demonstration. Who knew what the man had touched today.

“Could be. Honestly. It looks like the kind of cut any skilled mortician would make. Otto would’ve been able to do this comfortably.” He stopped and looked closer, suddenly realizing what Hagen was suggesting. “Look, I can’t say for sure.”

Hagen put the phone back into his pocket. “If you were to perform these cuts on a living person, what would happen?”

The mortician looked taken aback. “Well, that person would die, and quickly too. Within two to five minutes. All the blood would be pumped out of them. They’d be completely exsanguinated, as we say.”

Hagen and Ander shared a look. It seemed like Otto had used his knowledge, but

certainly not in the way it was intended.

Ander tapped a fingernail over the counter's steel top. The sound echoed through the room. Murray's basement was as clean and cutoff as a forensics lab.

"Do you know if Otto had any friends? Or anyone he mentioned in particular he was close to?"

"Friends? I don't know. I assume he did. Otto didn't talk about his personal life. Honestly, he didn't talk much at all. That's why I thought he might have a future as an embalmer. This isn't a job for extroverts."

"Nothing at all?"

"I knew he had an uncle he was close to. And like I said, I know he and Father Ted had a good relationship. But he never mentioned anyone his own age. I once tried to ask him if he had a partner, and he literally laughed. I remember what he said, since it struck me as sad. 'Who'd want to go out with me?' I was surprised by that, since he was a good-looking fellow. But, no, my sense was that he didn't have much of a social life."

Ander tried to smile but couldn't seem to get any feeling behind it. "He didn't mention anyone visiting from out of town? A friend he hadn't seen for a while, maybe? Or someone he met online?"

Shaking his head, Murray pushed a button on the pump. The hum returned. The pipe shook. A smell of preserving fluid filled the room and burned the back of Hagen's throat.

Murray held the tube in place, jammed into the dead man's artery. "No, nothing like that."

Hagen cut in. “How about in the days up until he died? Did you notice any change in his demeanor?”

Murray cocked his head. “Actually, now that you mention it, he did seem sort of jumpy Monday morning.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I didn’t think it was anything at the time. But I came down here mid-morning. I’d forgotten my pen. And, I don’t know, I must’ve spooked him or something, as he upset a tray full of tools. They scattered all over the floor. Then he snapped at me, saying I shouldn’t sneak up on him like that.”

“And that was unusual?”

Murray nodded. “Very much so. I mean, I guess he might have been spooked because he thought I was upstairs, since there was a service going on. For the most part, he was a very cool customer. I can’t remember a time when he snapped at me like that before. Maybe a little bit when he first started working. And then, of course, he went home early on Wednesday. He’d never done that before. But I’m sorry, I do need to get back to it now.”

Hagen pulled out a card.

Murray looked up, his fingers still guiding the embalming fluid. “It’s terrible what happened to Otto. I still haven’t told the rest of the staff. I don’t know how to break it to them. I’ll tell them at the end of the day, I think.”

Hagen was surprised. “They’re not used to being around loss?”

“Not their own.”

He drew his lips into a thin line. Hagen didn't envy him breaking the news.

They made their way out. The door of the chapel was closed. From the other side of the wall came a man's deep voice and the sound of quiet sobbing.

Otto Walker had killed Patrick Marrion. Hagen was confident of that. The mark on Marrion's neck was an embalming cut. He'd used his knowledge to bleed out his victim.

Now the question was—who killed Otto Walker?

Not for the first time, Stella was impressed by the speed and effectiveness of Mac's skill set. After only a couple of hours, Mac had secured them a meeting with trippinballz12, aka Jake Tripp. Stella and Stacy were to pose as buyers for a new item Tripp had posted to his Craigslist account, a Microsoft Surface Laptop, only a couple years old.

They submitted a search warrant affidavit for the laptop and received it quickly. This request was bolstered when they'd confirmed with Marrion's mother over the phone that the laptop on Tripp's account was the same make as the one she'd bought for Marrion. She'd kept the receipt.

After they parked at Central Tennessee State University, Stacy pushed open the door of the Ford Residential Complex and waited for Stella. Though Stella was eager to confront this Tripp person, she needed to keep her cool and wait until he displayed the stolen goods before they let him know their real reason for being there.

The dorms were almost empty in the middle of the morning. A group of young women stood by the bank of mailboxes, talking, their books hugged to their chests. A couple of students sat by the wall, headphones on their ears, their laptops perched on their knees. The stickers on the backs of their covers bounced as they typed.

Stacy had a steely look in her eye. "I can't imagine some teenage thief isn't going to crack when we start interrogating him. He'll break like a porcelain egg."

Stella smiled, then tried hard not to. Threats didn't suit Stacy. Stella had seen her

calm and unruffled in even the most dangerous situations, lost in a cave and undercover with a killer. Anger wasn't her thing.

"That is, if he's just a thief. He might be much worse."

For this undercover operation, they were dressed as college students.

Stacy had wound her long hair into a messy bun, which she fixed with a clip on top of her head. She wore jeans and a CTSU sweatshirt. For the final touch, she'd stuck a coin in a vending machine from which she bought a packet of gum. Chewing with her mouth open and her head cocked to one side, she lost about a decade.

For a moment, Stella was back at college. Her freshman year. Eager to grab the world and find out what it contained but also uncertain and full of doubts. It wasn't a place she wanted to return.

The elevator doors slid closed behind them.

"Just remember that you're Nicky and I'm Abigail."

Stacy popped her gum. "I feel like a Nicky."

"You look like a Nicky, Nicky."

"Not sure I like being a Nicky though. Let's get this over with."

They emerged in front of what had once been Patrick Marrion's room. The sign above the fire exit glowed at the end of the corridor. A heavy bass thumped from one of the rooms.

Stella knocked.

The voice that answered was deep and loud. “Yo. Come through.”

Stacy rolled her eyes. She looked even more like a Nicky now.

Stella pushed open the door.

Jake Tripp lay on his bed. His legs were crossed. One sock had a big hole in the heel. A friend sprawled on what had once been Patrick Marrion’s bed, and the floor was covered in unwashed clothes, snack wrappers, and empty cans of coke.

A fog of marijuana smoke hung in the air, and the top of a bottle of vodka poked out from under the bed. The heating vent hummed as it blew warm air into the room despite the open window.

“Ladies. Sick.” Tripp pushed himself up in bed. He tossed an empty can at his friend. “Hey, Kev, you order a couple of girls online? Man, you can get anything delivered these days.”

Kev sniggered. He picked a blunt from the edge of a glass ash tray and took a long drag, held it for a second, then blew in the direction of the window. The wind pushed the smoke back into the room.

Stacy leaned against the doorpost. She made a small bubble with her gum and let it pop loudly. “Hear you boys got a laptop for sale.”

Tripp licked his lips. “You’re the ones I’m supposed to meet, huh? I bet we can work something out. Maybe I can cut a few bucks off the price. If you and your friend help out me and my friend.” He made a show of scanning their bodies. “If you know what I mean.”

It’d been a while since anyone had spoken to Stella like that. She got an urge to push

past Stacy, grab Tripp by the front of his dirty t-shirt, and throw his face against the wall while she applied cuffs.

Stacy didn't react. "Nicky. That's Abigail. We're upstairs."

"Uh-huh. Nice to meet you. Might even say," he bobbed his eyebrows, "very nice."

Stella barely held back a groan. Did girls actually fall for this?

Stacy popped her gum again. "So you got one or not?"

"I got something." Tripp grinned and grabbed his crotch. "And it's all for you, darling."

Stella breathed in slowly. Her irritation was growing. This creep was really trying her patience.

His friend held out the joint to Stella. "Why you so quiet, huh? You want some of this?"

Stella thought about embracing her inner Chloe Foster and breaking both bros' noses.

Stacy flicked a thumb in Stella's direction. "She's just a little shy."

"Is that right?" Tripp licked his lips. "I could bring her out of her shell." His gaze shifted from Stacy to Stella and back again. "Bring you both out."

Against every instinct in her body, Stella played along. "That could be fun. But do you think we could see the laptop first?"

Tripp shrugged. "Sure, why not?"

He roused himself enough to stand on the bed and reach for the vent in the ceiling. Stella noticed the vent cover was held by just two screws. Their heads were painted white, but most of the paint had been scratched away. She doubted the local cops had opened that during their preliminary search.

Tripp reached in and extracted the laptop and an Android smartphone before dropping back to his previous position on the bed. He winked. “Come and get ’em.”

That was it. Stella had had enough. There was enough contraband in that room to land Tripp in more trouble than he knew what to do with.

Stella pulled out her badge. “FBI. Stay where you are.”

Tripp’s gaze locked on the badge. He froze for half a second—then bolted.

What the hell was he thinking? That he could just barrel through two federal agents?

He barely made it two steps.

Stella sidestepped, caught his wrist, and twisted his arm up. A sharp yank sent him face-first into the mattress, his breath punching out in a muffled grunt.

Kev slid off Patrick Marrion’s bed, flicked the blunt out the window, and lifted his hands, edging toward the door.

“I was just visiting. I was never here. Nothing to do with me. I don’t even know who this guy is.”

Stacy pointed at the bed. “Sit.”

He sat.

She tugged the clip out of her hair and shook out her bun, then spat the gum into the empty trash can. The freshman vanished. In her place returned the badass cop, a federal agent with nifty cat-eye makeup, but an agent, nonetheless.

Stella pushed harder on Tripp's back. His face squished into the pillow. Holding his wrists with one hand, she applied the handcuffs and yanked him around.

She braced herself. Sometimes, after Stella snapped on a pair of handcuffs, a suspect, especially if he was young and had been arrested before, would make a crude comment. A tell-tale smirk would come over his face, which told Stella where his train of thought was leading. Usually, a hard shove into a patrol car soon wiped the smile away.

Tripp's face was white. He tried to push himself up the bed, away from Stella, as though she were about to beat him within an inch of his life. The fear on Tripp's face told her someone had done that to him in the past, someone close to him. Someone at home.

Stella softened, at first. And then she remembered how Tripp had treated his roommate and how he'd spoken to her and Stacy.

She stepped closer, one hand on the gun tucked into the back of her belt.

"You know that vodka bottle under the bed? That's a Class A misdemeanor punishable by about a year in jail and a twenty-five-hundred dollar fine. Possession of marijuana? That's a year and another fine of up to twenty-five-hundred dollars. Plus another year. Two years and five thousand bucks so far." She loomed over him. "And if you killed your poor roommate...well, that's the needle."

"No, no. What are you...?" Tripp kicked at the floor with his socked feet. He shifted up the bed. The back of his head banged against the wall. "I don't know what

happened to Patrick. I didn't kill him. Why do you think I killed him?"

Stella planted her fists on her hips, towering over the terrified young man. "Here's what we're going to do. Between your underage drinking, your consumption of illegal drugs, and these stolen electronics, we have cause to search your room. So we're going to tear this place apart. You're going to sit there, and you're going to watch. Anything you want to tell us before we begin?"

Tripp shook his head. "No, nothing. There's nothing here. I didn't kill Patrick. I didn't like him but...but I...I...I didn't kill him . You won't find anything here. There's nothing here."

Stacy opened a closet door. She dragged armfuls of clothes onto the floor. "You sure about that? We won't find more computers? More phones? Maybe something with blood on it? A murder weapon, even?"

"I...no."

Stella pointed to the laptop. "You want to explain that, Tripp? That belong to Patrick?"

Tripp had managed to slide farther up the wall so that he was sitting more comfortably, in the kind of low slouch that came so naturally to teenagers. "All right. Fuck. Yes, it's his. Jesus."

"Perfect. We get to add interfering with a federal investigation to the list." Stella narrowed her eyes. "What did you do to him, Tripp?"

Tripp shook his arms, still handcuffed behind his back. "I stole his stuff. Sure. But I didn't kill him. I swear."

She needed to nail down his alibi. “Where were you last Friday night, around midnight?”

He looked nonplussed. “I don’t know. Dang. Getting fucked-up, probably.”

Kev’s hand shot up, like he was in a classroom and he was positive he knew the answer.

Stacy nodded at him. “Yes. Speak.”

Kev lowered his hand. “We were at Pi Phi...they were having a party. We were there all night.”

Recognition and relief crossed Tripp’s face. “Oh, yeah...we were there all night. Shit, tons of people saw us there.”

A strong sense of disappointment filled Stella. “Do you have any evidence that can confirm this?”

Tripp nodded in the direction of his cell phone. “Do you mind?”

She picked it up. “What’s the code?”

“Can’t I just look through it myself?”

“No chance.”

He shook his head. “Damn.” Then he gave her a string of numbers.

She tapped the numbers in, and the screen unlocked.

He flicked his head at her. "Check my messages. I bet you I was texting someone on Friday night."

She navigated to the messages app and scrolled down. There, she found one from a certain "Manny da Plug" from just after midnight on Saturday morning. She showed it to him.

His face reddened. "Yeah, check that one out."

The texts revealed an address and some numbers.

Tripp spoke before she realized what she was looking at. "That's my dealer. I was picking up then. But look at the address I gave...that's the fraternity."

Stella typed the address into her own cell phone. Sure enough, it was adjacent to the university and belonged to a fraternity. They'd have to interview some of its members. But Tripp's first alibi seemed to check out.

There was still the question of the second victim. "What about Otto Walker? What do you know about him?"

Tripp looked at Kev with a confused expression. "Nothing. I don't know anybody named Otto. Sort of a gay name, right? I definitely don't know any Otto Walker."

He could be bluffing, though with each moment that passed, Stella's suspicion that Tripp was involved in the murders diminished. Still, she pressed forward. "How about yesterday morning? Between nine and noon?"

Tripp's forehead scrunched as he stared at the bed. Then he looked up at her hopefully. "I was in class. I swear. Between nine thirty and noon yesterday. I was in my psych lab. You can talk to my professor. She'll back me up for sure."

“We certainly will. Name?”

He gave it.

Stella caught Stacy’s eye. If Tripp’s alibis checked out, he was guilty of no more than being a class A jerk. Well, that and theft, underage drinking, and possession of a controlled substance. But none of those were worth the effort.

Stacy dropped the laptop and the phone into an evidence bag. “What do you think?”

Stella glared at Tripp. They had no evidence to show Tripp had killed Patrick. She could scare him even more by taking him in and letting him sweat it out in an interview room, but they had bigger things to worry about.

Plus, they had what they came for. “Turn around.”

Tripp shifted on the bed. Stella grabbed his shoulder and removed the handcuffs. He rubbed his wrists and scowled as though he’d just endured hours of torture.

Stella fished the half-empty bottle of vodka from under the bed. “We’ll confiscate this and let you off this time. You’ve been warned.”

Stacy grabbed the bag of weed and accompanying paraphernalia.

Stella leaned close to Tripp.

He retreated to the corner of the bed.

“And if we find you’ve been withholding information from us again, Tripp, I will make sure that your next dorm room is a Nashville jail cell and your next roommate will be a two-hundred-fifty-pound biker who eats little boys like you for breakfast.”

Tripp turned white.

They left him there on the bed and made their way back to the elevator.

The entrance of the student dorms was busier than it had been on the way in. A block of classes must've recently ended, and students were returning for an early lunch, a midday study, or more likely, some late-morning gossip with friends.

"Why wouldn't Patrick have taken his phone with him?" Stacy dabbed at her eye makeup. "Who does that?"

Stella opened the door to head outside. "Who knows. Maybe his idiot roommate stole it before he took his last drive. Anyway, we have the thing now. We just need Mac to crack it."

Mac dug an adapter out of her desk drawer and searched for the power socket on Marrion's Microsoft Surface Laptop.

"What do think are the odds we won't need a password?"

Stella shrugged. "Doesn't every computer need a password to log in?"

"Sure. But you can change the settings on a PC so you only have to enter your password after you shut the thing down or after updates."

Mac opened the screen and rubbed her hands together. She looked like a kid who'd just received a locked box and a long-handled screwdriver. This was a puzzle and a prize rolled into one technological package. All Mac had to do was crack it open.

She hit the power button. Sure enough, the laptop required a password.

Stacy swung in the chair next to Stella. "Can't you hack it?"

"Sure. I'll replicate a brute force attack to gain access. Basically, it's trial and error. I use a program to generate thousands of passwords, initially based on information we know about Marrion, like his date of birth, names of family members, that sort of thing. It's a tried-and-true method, but, as you might imagine, that could take days."

Stella huffed. They didn't have days to spare.

Mac's disposition remained sunny. "In the meantime, there's nothing stopping us from guessing. For this guy, I might try some favorite historical figures. What do you think? Napoleon or Washington?"

Stella shook her head. She wished she knew.

Mac typed. Winced. Rubbed her chin. "Hmm. No dice. Fun, though."

Stella didn't always appreciate Mac's idea of fun and neither did Stacy, judging by the sour expression on her face.

Mac tried again. She held her hand above the Enter key and gave it a punch. She grinned. "I can't believe it. We're in. Julius Caesar was his man."

Stella was impressed. "It was his birthday? How'd you guess that?"

"The lock screen image is his bust. Let's see what we got."

She lowered her head and typed quickly. Clicked, typed, and clicked again. Stella wondered whether she should just leave Mac alone.

She nudged Stacy and pushed herself out of her chair. Mac raised her finger. Stella dropped back and waited.

After a few minutes, Mac sucked in one cheek and pushed the computer to the side.

"Okay, so a quick look suggests...there's nothing here. Browser history is all Netflix, history factoids, and homework. The kid didn't even watch porn. No encrypted files and nothing secure. His email account is mostly spam and messages from college. At least he read them. I'll take a deeper dive later, but if the contents of this machine represent his personality, I can see why he had no friends."

“That’s low, Mac.” Stacy pushed the phone across the table. “What about this?”

Mac took the device. It was an Android, not the latest model and not the most expensive version in the year it came out. The case was plain, the screen protector cracked and bubbled. Mac turned it on.

The lock screen displayed a bust of a Roman emperor, though Stella couldn’t tell whether she was looking at Julius Caesar or Nero without his fiddle. Mac bit her lower lip.

“I’ll put in a call to Marrion’s family to see if they knew his password. But if not, we’ll need a court order to hack it. I can see there’s a notification from Dispatch...which is interesting. Especially as your last case hung on a Dispatch group. But if I start plugging passwords in and get them wrong, it could wipe everything. I’ll need to be careful.”

“So there’s nothing you can do with it?”

“I didn’t say that. The good news is that it’s an old model. If he hasn’t kept up with his security updates, there should be some vulnerabilities I can exploit.” Mac opened a drawer and picked out a cable. “I’ll let you know when I’ve got something.”

That was their cue to leave. Mac had her own office because, when she got her teeth into something, she didn’t like to be disturbed. All they could do now was wait for her shout of triumph from down the corridor.

They returned to the bullpen. Anja was staring at her monitor while Hagen was watching Ander pace with a phone to his ear.

Hagen pointed at Ander and mouthed to Stella, Alessandra .

Stella took her seat and tried to ignore the conversation taking place in front of her. The office was a strange place for Ander to talk to his partner. If he wanted privacy, the break room was empty. And Alessandra's workspace was in the same building.

Ander hung up. "That was Alessandra."

Stella feigned surprise. "Really? That's nice. How is she?"

"She..." He stopped and eyed Stella. "She's fine. Oh, the lab called with preliminary DNA results from that beer can you picked up. The one from the homeless guy in the alley."

"What did the results say?"

"There's a name. Delafayette Gerwen."

Stacy dragged her keyboard closer and typed quickly. "Fett. Got him. Oh, yeah, it's him all right. Hasn't changed much. And he's got a record."

Stella rolled her chair to Stacy's desk. The face in the mug shot was that of the white male she'd seen emerge from under filthy blankets in the alley. He was younger and much paler with the crust of dirt gone. His beard was thin and black without the white tinges. No lines on his face yet. And his hair was short, not clumped and unwashed. But it was him. Same eyes, same nose, same square face and wide cheekbones.

His record showed his conviction. Second-degree murder, for which he'd received a sentence of twenty years. He'd been released three years ago.

Stella blinked. She'd hoped when she'd picked up the bottle that they'd get lucky. Finding a convicted killer at a crime scene was about as much luck as any investigator could hope for.

“A murderer. That’s handy. I think we’d better have a talk with Delafayette.” Stacy scrolled down the screen.

“No fixed abode. No Wi-Fi would make it hard to make friends online,” Stella pointed out.

“There are libraries.” Stacy didn’t seem perturbed by the long shot odds. “Last picked up in the town of Lebanon three weeks ago. I’ll put out a BOLO, but let’s face it, a guy like that could be hard to track down. He’ll probably turn up at one of the shelters or homeless camps at some point, but until then, he could be anywhere.”

Stella wasn’t convinced Delafayette was worth their time, convicted murderer or not. “Other than his record, what reason do we have to believe this Delafayette guy was involved?” She reached over Stacy’s shoulder and scrolled down to the police report. “A fight in a bar that resulted in a stabbing, and...yeah, everything on his rap sheet is dime-a-dozen stuff. A long way from the kind of crime we’re looking at.”

“Yeah, but he’s a killer.” Anja swung on her chair. “People don’t change. Once a killer, always a killer.”

Hagen twirled his chair. “You sure? You really think people don’t change?”

“The best predictor of future behavior is...” Anja prompted.

“Past behavior,” Stacy finished, but she didn’t look happy about it.

Stella rolled back to Hagen’s side. “Maybe, but there’s still no reason to believe this ex-killer is our current unsub.”

“Apart from his presence at a body-dump site, you mean?”

Stella didn't like Anja's attitude. She also didn't like that she had a point. "Fair enough. But if he dumped Patrick Marrion there, why did he stay in the alley too?"

"Not exactly a criminal mastermind?" Ander leaned against the table. With his hands gripping the edge and his mid-length curls hanging over his collar, he looked like an osprey observing the world from a treetop. "What about Tripp? If the roommate's a thief, maybe he's also a murderer."

Stella shook her head. "Kid's a creep. But he's got alibis for both murders, and they check out. He's in the clear."

Ander looked thoughtful. "What about the other victim? Otto Walker. I don't think we should rule out his boss. He could've made those cuts on the first victim too. And then killed his employee?"

Stella waited for Hagen to respond. She hadn't met Otto's boss, but she trusted Hagen's instincts.

"Possible." Hagen inclined his head. "There was something off about him. Might be the job, though. I mean, wouldn't he have killed Walker in the same manner as Marrion? One murder is precision perfect, the other a complete hack job? Doesn't track behaviorally. We still haven't found Marrion's friend. We need to find that guy ASAP."

Stacy stretched her back. "Mac's working on his phone now. The friend's number must be in there somewhere."

Mac's magic was their most promising hope. Stella wished her bestie would hurry it up.

"What about the church the mortician mentioned?" Anja seemed relieved to have

something more valuable to contribute than her view of killers who never changed. “What was the name of the priest? Father Ted? Otto Walker used to spend time there, right?”

Hagen wagged his finger. “Yes. His uncle mentioned that too. Otto used to volunteer at a soup kitchen and shelter next to the church.”

Stella eyed Stacy, who returned her look with a short nod. “We’ll check it out.”

“Check what out?” Slade stood in the doorway with his phone in his hand. “You got something?”

“Not really. Maybe. We’re going to check out the soup kitchen where Otto Walker volunteered in Idlebrook. Maybe someone there knows something.”

“Good. Have we heard back from the sheriff who replaced you in Pennsylvania? We need to rule out all of Maureen King’s past associates.”

Stella shook her head. “Not yet. I’ve got a feeling the guy’s dragging his heels a bit. Seemed like the type.”

“I’d check in on him.” Slade lifted his phone. “But listen up, everybody. We might have something here. That strange writing, the cuneiform, has appeared in the alley where Marrion’s body was found. I just got off the phone with some of the locals. They found it about an hour ago.”

Stella’s head jerked up. “What do you mean?”

“What I said. Someone painted a bunch of cuneiform in the alley. Forensics is heading over there. But I want Hagen and Ander to meet them. Maybe you’ll find some new hard evidence, like the gloves.”

Hagen tossed his pen onto the table and reached for his coat. “Sure it’s not someone screwing with us?”

“Yeah. A killer is screwing with us. No one has linked Patrick Marrion to the cuneiform in the press. It’s not common knowledge.”

A strange feeling filled Stella’s gut. She couldn’t place it, but her instinct was telling her something was very off. Why paint the cuneiform message so long after the body was removed? She couldn’t think of a good reason.

Hagen’s hand landed on Stella’s shoulder as he passed her. She held it for a second and stopped him. “Hey, keep an eye out for Delafayette while you’re there. We want to speak to him.”

“Sure, send me his picture.”

“Will do.” She squeezed his hand before letting go. “Hey...” She still couldn’t form the right words.

“Hm?”

“Be safe.”

23

It had been a long day.

A long, frustrating day.

It should've ended hours ago, right outside Patrick Marrion's dorm, with Agent Knox lying dead on the pavement.

I'd had the perfect plan—a gun and a clean escape route. All I had to do was pull the trigger and put a bullet in both Knox and her little friend's heads and walk away.

I'd planned every detail, every step. The route back to the warehouse was mapped in my head, so perfectly thought out that I barely needed to think at all. After Knox, Yates would be next. Half the bounty would already be mine by then, and I could take my time with him. No rush. No pressure. Just fun.

I had pictured it in my mind a thousand times. Maybe I'd carve him up, see if he bled slow. Maybe I'd find out what kind of sounds he made when he begged.

But first, Knox.

I'd been parked across the street, waiting. The FBI arrived just as I expected, but Yates wasn't with her. Instead, some other woman had shown up alongside her. That wasn't part of the plan, but it didn't matter. I could adjust. I could be flexible.

They walked into the dorm, leaving me in the Tacoma, my fingers resting on the grip

of my gun. I knew what would happen next. They'd come out the same way they'd walked in. I'd slide out of the truck, blend in with the students, and hit Knox in the back as I passed her.

Simple. Clean. A tap to the spine, a second to the skull. She wouldn't even have time to process.

Before the other woman could respond, I'd take her down too.

And just like that, I'd be one step closer to collecting my payday.

It started unfolding just as I imagined...

The pair stepped out of the building, chatting and completely ignorant of my presence. I'd slipped out of the truck, stuffing the gun in my pocket, and approached them. Knox was standing at the bottom of the steps, unscrewing the cap of a bottle and tipping it over, pouring vodka onto the grass like it wasn't worth drinking.

That made me laugh a little. All this time chasing her, and here she was, wasting good alcohol.

I took another step closer, my fingers tightening on the grip. One more step.

I was right there.

I could already feel the warmth of her blood on my hands?—

Then the doors burst open, and the sidewalk became a river of bodies as a crowd of students flooded out of the surrounding buildings, moving in waves, talking, laughing, blocking my shot before I could even react.

Too many people.

Too many eyes.

The moment was gone. Vanished.

I'd kept moving, walking straight past her, shoving my shoulder against hers just to feel it. Warmth.

She didn't even notice me. That was almost better than shooting her.

Almost.

But it didn't matter. I had a new plan.

After that failure, I'd gone back to the warehouse and collected what was left of Patrick Marrion's blood. By now, it had turned thick, half solid in places, gelatinous in others. It didn't flow anymore, but that didn't matter. I'd fix it.

I cut the bottom off a plastic water bottle and scooped up as much of the dark, coagulated mess as I could. I then added water, stirred it, watched the old blood swirl back into something usable. It was dirty, murky, not quite as vibrant as it once had been, but it would do.

Next, I grabbed a paintbrush from my workbench and drove straight to the alley where we'd dumped Patrick.

I'd circled the block twice, checking for law enforcement. It was late, and the place was quiet. No cops. No bystanders. Nothing but darkness and the occasional glint of headlights reflecting off wet pavement.

Perfect.

I backed the truck into the alley, cut the engine, and grabbed my supplies. The stench of rotting garbage hit me hard. Rancid meat. Dirty diapers. The festering stench of a city's filth piled high. It burned in my throat, but I ignored it.

I wasn't here for comfort.

Dipping my brush into the blood, I started painting. The symbols came naturally, each stroke precise, careful, methodical.

There was no way the FBI wouldn't come running when they saw this.

The alley wasn't like a normal alley with only two exits—this one had four. It connected to a pedestrian shopping mall, meaning I had multiple escape routes. When Otto and I picked this place to dump Patrick, that had been the deciding factor.

Otto had been useful then. Before he turned spineless.

I shook my head, jaw tightening. I should've known he'd crack. He got what he wanted, though. He wasn't caught. Not by law enforcement anyway.

After putting the paintbrush and my makeshift paint can in the bed of the truck, I wiped my hands on my jeans. Using a burner phone, I called 911 and changed my voice as I described the horrible thing I found.

When the dispatcher told me help was on the way, I crouched behind the nearest dumpster, pretending to be a drunk. Local cops would likely come first, but the Feds would be called in soon after that. Cold bit through my jacket, but my heart raced.

It wasn't just from anticipation.

It was from earlier—that shoulder bump with Knox, the heat of her body against mine. She hadn't even noticed me. Hadn't even looked.

But soon, she would.

I shifted my weight, careful not to step in anything wet or put my hand in anything slimy. The stink of garbage burned in my nostrils, but I forced myself to breathe evenly, to settle into place.

Sacrifice.

Not the kind the Administrator preached about. Not the nonsense he spewed in cryptic messages and holy proclamations. The real kind. The kind that meant giving something up to get something better.

I'd sit in this alley, crouched in filth, freezing my ass off, but it would be worth it. Because Knox or Yates would come.

It didn't matter which.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my gun, weighing it in my palm.

Knives were better. More intimate. More personal. You could feel the skin break, watch the blood flow, listen to them beg.

Guns were too mechanical. No fun at all. But they got the job done.

An SUV pulled up at the end of the alley, its headlights flaring against the walls.

I ducked lower behind the dumpster, gun ready.

Showtime.

The day was growing late as Hagen and Ander pulled into the south side of Kerrick's Alley from River Street in downtown Nashville. The long shadow cast by the tall buildings on either side dropped the narrow lane into cold dimness. Hagen parked the Ford Explorer about twenty yards into the alley, behind a flatbed that had stopped in front of a No Parking sign. He shivered as he slammed the door behind him.

Ander followed, zipping up his coat. "Getting chilly now."

"Yeah, wouldn't want to be out on the streets tonight. Not in weather like this."

"Freeze to death."

There was little wind in the alley, and Hagen's breath hung in front of his face as he took in his surroundings. It was a good place for a body dump, with lots of ways in and out. Whoever chose this spot picked well.

The arcade itself, a popular shopping street open only to pedestrian traffic, was about ten yards away.

Whoever dropped Patrick Marrion's body here could've escaped in either direction. Or they could continue down Kerrick's Alley, cut across the arcade to the north side, and flee out where the alley stopped at Commerce Street.

Kerrick's Alley was a narrow lane filled with dirty brickwork, graffiti, peeling plaster, broken tarmac, and a line of overflowing dumpsters. It was the back end of

Commerce, the part that no one was supposed to see.

They certainly weren't supposed to smell it. The acrid scent of rot and urine and garbage burned the back of Hagen's throat.

Ander hunched his shoulders and walked up to the wall, just past the first set of dumpsters, four of them placed close together against the brickwork of the alley.

Hagen followed suit and took in the freshly painted cuneiform on the wall.

The ancient script looked much the same as it had on the walls of Otto Walker's apartment, except that it was larger. Brownish paint, which Hagen suspected was actually blood, covered the space. To a casual observer, it looked like creative graffiti. The marks themselves were neater than those at Otto Walker's apartment.

Here, the marks appeared colder, more calculated. Like their perpetrator had time.

"A message."

"To us? Or to someone else?"

"I think to us."

Ander crouched in front of the wall. "If this is the killer, what do you think he's trying to say?"

"If it is him, then I don't think he's trying to say anything. He's calling. Shouting for the FBI. He wants attention."

Ander rose in one smooth movement. His hands remained in his coat pockets. "Then I guess his message did get through. We're here, aren't we?"

“We are.” Hagen took a deep breath and looked around him. “But why? I don’t see anything here. No footprints, no trail of paint or blood leading us to whoever did this. I think we’d better just tape this off until forensics arrives.”

“Works for me.”

“Let’s see if that Delafayette dude is around. Maybe we can still get something out of this trip.”

“The soup kitchen has alibied him. Slept there Friday night after dinner, never left until morning. But you never know.”

They kept moving down the alley past the first set of dumpsters. Hagen let Ander prod the piles of garbage placed directly on the concrete with his own shoes. For his part, he was in no mood to get his Oxfords filthy as well.

A mound of cardboard next to another line of dumpsters about halfway down the alley near where the arcade cut through Kerrick’s Alley looked promising. Something rustled as Hagen drew near, and he moved his hand toward the gun under his armpit.

He grabbed the top sheet of damp, unfolded box and pulled.

A rat screeched.

The creature leaped out, scampered across Hagen’s designer shoes, and raced across the arcade and down the alley toward Commerce Street.

“Dammit. That’s disgusting.” He checked his shoe. There was no sign of rat droppings or other filth on the upper. He searched his pockets for something to wipe his shoe and found nothing. There were tissues in the SUV, at least.

Ander rocked on his heels. “That’s good. It’s pretty. And it’s nice that you’re making friends. I should bring you here more often.”

“Let’s call the locals to secure the site until forensics arrives. I don’t think anyone’s here.” He headed back the way they’d come, past the first line of dumpsters, and toward the SUV.

Ander opened the passenger door. Hagen started to climb in, but something caught his eye.

Across the alley, past the arcade, a row of dumpsters lined the pavement. Beyond them, just visible over the rusted lids, sat a white vehicle. Tall. An SUV? No. More likely a truck.

He shut the door, eyes narrowing as he stepped away for a better look.

Hagen’s senses sharpened as a hood rose from behind the dumpster. Then a shoulder. An arm.

A gun.

“Ander, down!”

Hagen raced for cover behind the dumpster closest to their SUV and drew his weapon. A shot echoed through the alley. A short metallic screech told him the bullet had hit the top of the Ford.

Hagen aimed down the alley. The dumpster had been pushed sideways. It blocked the street and obscured his vision. He couldn’t see shit.

“Ander, you good?”

“Fine.” Ander’s voice came from the other side of the car. “Calling it in...shots fired. South side of Kerrick’s Alley. In pursuit of suspect.”

“Cover me.”

From the corner of his eye, Hagen saw Ander rise. He’d drawn his weapon and aimed in the direction of the shot.

Hagen advanced. He lined up the sights down the muzzle.

Nothing moved.

He crept forward. A car couldn’t drive through the arcade to the north side of the alley. He had to trust Ander had his back and would shoot if he saw anything Hagen missed.

It was likely they were out of danger. He’d heard the attacker’s vehicle drive off and couldn’t see the top of the white vehicle anymore.

Hagen reached the arcade. The commercial, pedestrian-only lane was empty. The shops were open. But the shoppers were either scarce at this time of day or the gunfire had scared them away.

Still, there was no movement behind the dumpster where he’d seen the hoodie.

Hagen moved on. He kept the gun trained on the dumpster’s black lid. His mouth was dry. He’d been in this situation far too many times, closing in on a shooter with an itchy trigger finger. The approach never got easier.

The dumpster was just five yards away now. He adjusted his grip. He’d give a warning, and if the shooter made a move—and was still there—he’d fire.

“FBI. Come out with your hands up.”

Nothing.

Hagen braced before taking off in a sprint, thumping toward Commerce Street, puddles splashing as he passed. Reaching the dumpster, he shoved it hard with a foot. The dumpster rolled out of the way and smacked into the wall.

No one was there. There was no sign of the white vehicle either.

Sirens approached, and soon, blue-and-red lights bounced off the storefronts and the alley walls. Police cars arrived. Two officers leaped out of a cruiser, guns drawn.

Hagen lifted his hands. “FBI. Don’t shoot.”

Slade arrived ten minutes later with Anja. While she stayed with the officers to search the area, Slade examined the damage to the roof of the Explorer. A long silver streak slashed through the paint.

“Bullet must’ve come in at a low angle and then bounced off. Lord knows where it went.” Slade pointed at the passenger door. “You were there?”

Ander nodded. His face was pale. “Just about to get in.”

“So the shooter missed you by what...ten inches? From thirty yards. Big guy like you. No pro, is he?”

Slade’s sarcastic comment helped calm Hagen down a bit. In spite of himself, he laughed. But Ander was still rather pale.

Hagen refused to show Slade his lingering worry. “We should put out a BOLO for a

blind man with a gun. His service dog should give him away.”

“A man? You saw him?”

“No. A hood, an arm, a gun. The top of a white vehicle. That’s all. Must’ve fled as soon as he got a shot off. I mean, he’s probably more of a knife guy.”

That got a tiny smile out of Ander. His color was returning.

Anja joined them. She held an evidence bag. At the bottom of the bag lay a single brass shell.

“A three-eighty. It’s all we found.”

Slade rubbed his temple. “All right. Let’s get back to the office. See what we can scramble up from security footage.”

Stella set her phone on the hood of their SUV parked outside the soup kitchen where Otto Walker had volunteered. Her hand trembled slightly as she withdrew it, adrenaline still coursing through her veins.

Calls like this were the nightmare haunting every law enforcement family, the one her mother had lived through when her father was killed. Someday, her phone would ring, and a voice from the office—Slade or whoever her supervisor was at the time—would speak in that unmistakable low, carefully measured tone. “There’s been a shooting, and...”

The rest would dissolve into white noise, words falling into her brain unprocessed, unnecessary. The hole in her chest would tell her everything she needed to know before the sentence was even finished.

This time, Hagen was safe. The bullet missed him. But the cold, hollow feeling that had swept through her body when she first answered the call lingered like a ghost.

Hagen had called her himself. A single shot had hit no one. He was fine. So was Ander. Police were scouring the scene, and they were heading back to the office with security footage. He’d be home in time for dinner and a hug.

Now Stella understood how her mother felt every time her father pulled on his uniform and headed to work. Barbara Knox Rotenburg, too, had to have lived in fear of that phone call. Hell, she must continue to live in fear of that call because of Stella herself. The dread must’ve been a constant nagging concern at the back of her mind.

But her mother didn't know the half of it. Stella knew the danger of responding to a callout or knocking on the door of a suspect. She knew all that. She'd felt it. And she knew the dangers Hagen faced each day, because she faced them too.

And that insider knowledge made the concern more solid, more real.

"You okay?" Stacy stared at her over the hood of the vehicle.

"Yep. Sorry." Stella picked up her phone again. "That was Hagen. They were in the alley where the body was dumped. Someone shot at them."

Stacy's eyes widened. "They're okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Missed. Slade is there, and the police. Looks like the shooter got away, but they're going to collect footage from security cameras now. They'll go over them in the morning."

"Right. Might not be related." Stacy didn't sound convinced.

"Possible, I guess. But Kerrick's Alley isn't exactly some hot spot for gun violence. I think the killer was setting a trap. He must've painted that cuneiform on the walls. Knew we'd respond and sat there, waiting."

A chill ran down Stella's back. Someone was pulling them around, putting them in position. Manipulating them. Exerting control over them.

The chill gave way to a hot rage. They were going to catch this killer, and they were going to do it now. They'd show him what control really meant. When they threw him into a cell and locked the door, he'd understand.

They needed to move faster.

She headed toward the soup kitchen. “Let’s go see what we can learn about Walker.”

They pulled open the door, and a wave of overheated air hit them, as thick and hot as gravy. It brought a rich smell of heavy stock and a clatter of pans and crockery.

The kitchen at the psychiatric hospital in Claymore Township carried a similar smell and noises, the atmosphere of a place that was more interested in filling bellies, and comfort foods were easy to prepare. There would be no menus there and few choices. Just food, served hot and free.

A long table had been laid out at one end of the room. A line of men—and the diners were mostly men—slouched forward, trays in hand. Behind the table, a couple of middle-aged women wearing hairnets and plastic gloves ladled out soup from a large pot. They spooned a dish of rice, sausage, and vegetables onto plates and waved the guests down, so they could help themselves to hunks of bread and a carrot cake topped with a thick layer of cream.

Stella was sure Hagen would’ve been horrified by the fare on offer, but the smell made her hungry.

A priest stood by the wall near the long table, talking to a man in a dirty, stained trench coat. Three overstuffed shopping bags hung in each of the man’s hands.

Father Ted had sandy hair, combed untidily from a side-parting. He was clean-shaven with pale, smooth skin, and was tall and thin so that when he spoke to the homeless man, he had to bend his back a little.

As Stella drew nearer, she could hear what he was saying. “Just head through this door, Enrique, and ask for Mariella. She’ll set you up with a bed for the night, okay?”

Enrique nodded vigorously and waited for the priest to open the door. His own hands

were too full to do anything but hold his worldly possessions.

Stella brought out her ID and introduced them. “Do you have time to answer a few questions?”

“Of course.” Father Ted glanced at the badge, but his attention was on Enrique making his way down the passage toward the shelter. “Just turn left at the end. You got it.” He waved and lowered his voice. “We only have twelve beds. More than two thousand unhoused men and women in this city. And twelve beds. Wild. Come.”

He led them to a smaller table in the corner of the room and waited for them to sit. Stella’s chair legs scraped as she pulled her seat out.

“Coffee? Soup? I think it’s a casserole for dinner today. We’re dependent on donors for the menu. Whatever supermarkets and restaurants are willing to share. I think it’s chicken. Might not be.”

Stella brought out her notebook. “We’re good, thanks. I think your diners need it more than we do.”

Father Ted grinned widely. The tips of his teeth were slightly brown, the result of too much coffee and, Stella assumed, a long-running nicotine habit.

“There’s enough to go around. We don’t run out here. There’s always something we can offer. But these guys really pack it away. I’ve met teenage athletes who couldn’t finish off what these people can pile on a plate.”

Stacy looked over at the long table. “They seem to enjoy it. You get regulars here?”

“Some. When people become regular, we try to get them permanent help. So it’s mostly newcomers. We’ve become a first stop for people arriving in town. People

running away and trying not to be found. It's important to put out a welcome mat for the city's newest arrivals, however poor they are." Father Ted pressed his palms on the table. "So how can I help you?"

"Otto Walker. I understand he volunteered here." For Stella, it was strange to see so many people in need and to know that a man who'd bled a man to death once volunteered to help them. She was reminded of Maureen King and her desire to "save" her victims.

"Oh, Otto. Of course." Father Ted pushed back a lock of sandy hair. He'd been confident and at ease when he'd talked about the work the shelter was doing. Now the weight of the world seemed to drop onto his shoulders and darken his expression. "His uncle told me what happened. Such a terrible, terrible thing."

"What was your impression of Otto?"

Father Ted sighed. "He was a nice kid. Helped out here a couple of times a week. Quiet. Painfully shy. A little troubled, I thought, when I first met him."

"Troubled?" Stacy tilted her head. Stella could imagine Stacy as a psychologist, probing patients gently for details about their dreams. "In what way?"

"Otto lost both his parents when he was young. I'm sure you know that. You could see that loss in him. Sometimes, I thought his parents took a piece of him with them when they passed. He rarely showed much interest in life. Was never excited or passionate. Didn't laugh. Very little made him happy."

"That must've been difficult."

"A little. I hoped his job would help, and the volunteer work he did here. Sometimes, helping others can be the best way to help yourself. I think it did."

“Why do you say that?”

“He just seemed to be coming out of his shell a little in the last few weeks. Behaved with a new kind of purpose. I don’t know what it was, since it wasn’t his job.”

Stacy looked surprised. “At the funeral parlor?”

“Yes. It was a gamble. I wasn’t sure the apprenticeship would work, but he took to it. You need the stomach for it. And Otto had that. But I’m not sure if that was the cause of his change of mood. Perhaps he was starting to understand the good he could do for bereaved families? But again, I don’t know what else could’ve caused the shift.”

Stella had some idea. Again, she thought of Maureen King.

“What about friends? Did he ever speak of them?”

A woman came in and patted Father Ted on the shoulder as she passed. “I found him a bed and gave him some clean clothes. He’s taking a hot shower now. I think he’s ready to sleep, poor thing.”

“Thank you, Mariella.” Father Ted patted the back of her hand, then returned his attention to Stella. “Friends? No. I don’t think so.”

“He never mentioned someone by the name of Patrick Marrion?”

Father Ted scrunched his nose. “No, I don’t remember Otto ever talking about someone named Patrick. Oh, now that I think about it, he did mention someone named Trevor though.”

“Trevor?” Stacy held her pen above her notebook. “Did you get a last name?”

“No. I don’t think they were friends for long. They met in some sort of online group, and this Trevor person mentioned he was coming down to Nashville. Otto got very excited. Sounded like he’d found a friend. I was happy for him.”

Coming to town. An online group. Maureen King had fallen down a rabbit hole online. Maybe she and Otto had fallen down the same one.

Stella’s eyes narrowed. “Did Trevor ever make it to Nashville?”

“I don’t know.”

“You never met him.”

“No. I’m sorry.”

“Dammit.” Stella glanced up at the priest. His expression hadn’t changed, but she needed to watch her language. “Sorry.”

“I hear much worse here.” Father Ted lifted his chin. “Although usually from people living on the streets.”

Stella hadn’t lived on the streets, but she’d spent a lot of time on them. She shrugged. “Thanks. You’ve been?—”

“Not much help, I’m sure.” Father Ted stood up. “But if you have any other questions, you know where to find me.”

Stella watched him go.

Trevor’s last name would’ve been handy. Still, a first name was a start.

They turned to go, and Stella spotted a familiar figure. Fett.

Delafayette didn't see them. He inched forward, keeping his distance from the man ahead of him. He accepted his bowl of soup, waited for his plate, then gave the plate back and motioned with eager little hand movements for another large dollop of rice.

Content with his extra load, he found a table by the wall and sat with his back to Stella and Stacy.

Stella walked up to the dessert counter. The woman serving the food watched her as she helped herself to a plate with a large slice of cake.

"It's not for me."

"Course not, hun. You take whatever you want. No judgment here."

Motioning to Stacy to follow, Stella carried the plate to Delafayette and slid it across the table.

Delafayette eyed the cake. He finished his spoonful of soup and licked his lips. Then he looked up, saw Stella and Stacy, and leaped to his feet. He still gripped the tray and, as he rose, almost spilled his soup.

"Easy, easy." Stella held out a hand. "Sit yourself down. We just want to talk for a few minutes. Even brought you some cake. This is for you. Looks good, right?"

Delafayette sat slowly, his black eyes still fixed firmly on Stella. He pulled the cake

closer and wrapped an arm around it. “Forgot they have cake. Must be Thursday. You get your own.”

“I’m good, thanks. That’s yours.” Stella sat across from him. “You’re Delafayette, right?”

“Fett.” He grunted through a mouthful of soup. “Told you. It’s what everyone calls me. Since I was a boy. Fett. S’m me.”

“Fett, right. We saw you out in Kerrick’s Alley a couple of days ago. You know a body was dumped there, don’t you?”

“Uh-huh. Heard that. You FBI, right? I remember.”

“That’s right. I’m Special Agent Stella Knox. This is Special Agent Stacy Lark.”

“So Feds are working the case. Nothing to do with me. Wasn’t there that Friday. Slept here. Right here. Through that door.” He pointed at the door that led to the shelter, pushed his empty soup bowl away, and reached for his rice.

That lined up with the alibi they’d received already. But that didn’t mean Fett hadn’t seen something later.

Stacy nudged the plate closer to him. “You ever see anyone hanging around over there? Acting suspiciously?”

“Uh-uh.” Delafayette dug out a big spoonful of rice and shoveled it into his mouth. “People don’t hang out there. That’s why I like it.” He jabbed at his rice with his spoon. “Y’all should get yourselves some of this. Good stuff. And they don’t care how much you take. Eat as much as you want here.”

“We’re good, thanks. You see a vehicle by chance?”

“Just the truck. White Toyota Tacoma. Ready for the scrap heap, almost.”

Stella’s antennae went up at this piece of information. Something else tugged at her memory too. A Toyota. A Toyota Tacoma. Who else owned a truck like that?

Before she could think more about it, Stacy folded her arms. “But you didn’t see the driver. And I guess you didn’t see the plates.”

“Uh-uh.”

“And you wouldn’t tell us if you did, would you? Someone with a record like yours, you wouldn’t want to help the law.”

Delafayette jerked his head up. A grain of rice dropped from the end of his beard. “Yeah, I would. What I did, I did a long time ago. Long time. And I paid. That’s done. I ain’t got no love for the people who dropped that body. Whoever dumped their shit in my alley didn’t do me no favors.”

Stella was starting to like Delafayette. He knew what he’d done and what he was and had come to terms with both. He might not have much, but that knowledge was more than most had.

“What do you mean by that? How did dropping the body in that alley harm you?”

“That’s a good alley. Good dumpsters. You can fish some good shit out of there. Clothes. Takeout food. All kinds of shit. And no one ever sees you, too out of the way. But the cops were all over it on Saturday. Couldn’t get near. Went back on Tuesday, but the place scared the bejesus out of me. Too full of ghosts now.”

“If it’s out of the way, how did you know about it?”

Delafayette shoveled the rice again. A slice of sausage fell from the spoon, and he prodded it back with his finger. “Every town’s got places like that. You just gotta know where they are. Even folks who’ve lived some place all their lives don’t know where they are.”

“So how did you find out? You were up in Lebanon until a few weeks ago.”

“Places like this.” He lifted a finger and made a circle. “As soon as I get somewhere, I come to one of these. Hot food, hot shower, a bed. And all the best secrets.” He chuckled. He had a deep laugh that didn’t sound like it had been used for a while. “Word spreads around these places. That’s what it’s like when you live on the streets. We help each other. ’Cause ain’t no one else gonna help us.”

Stacy frowned. “So who did you help? Did you tell anyone else about that alley?”

“Sure, I told people. Like I said, we help each other.”

“Who’d you tell?”

“I don’t know their names. People. Folks here. Ain’t no big secret.” He jammed the last spoonful of rice into his mouth and pulled the cake closer. “Hmm. Carrot cake. Those old ladies behind the counter know how to make the good stuff. Y’all really should grab a slice.”

“Fett, we need to know who you told about the alley. Did you tell Otto?”

Delafayette chomped down on the cake. “I don’t know who I told. Just people, is all. Yeah, I told Otto. He asked where I was sleeping once, so I told him. S’all there is to it. Now y’all leave me alone.”

He pushed himself away from the table and shuffled away.

Stacy apologized to Stella. “I scared him off. Sorry, I just figured the person he told might have been?—”

“The person who dumped the body.” Stella considered what they’d learned. “Guess that’s how Otto knew where to go. What it doesn’t tell us is who helped him move a naked corpse through the center of Nashville.”

It was almost twenty after nine the next morning, and Hagen's eyes were crossing. Nine different channels divided the screen on his desk. Each frame of the footage showed a section of the streets around Kerrick's Alley at dusk the previous evening.

The corner of River Street and Fourth Avenue. A slice of Fifth Avenue North. A chunk of Commerce Street. One security camera showed vehicles turning in and out of the south side of the alley. This was the feed that had given them Otto Walker's green Nissan.

But the shooter had fled out of the north side of the alley, where there was no surveillance.

All the screens looked essentially the same. In the lenses of the security cameras, the early streetlights glowed a garish white. Backs of vehicles heading south on Fourth Street built patterns of red dots. Bright beams of headlights glowed on Third.

There were more than a few white vehicles in the area right after the shooting. When one of them had a license plate that was visible, he took a note of it, even if it wasn't a truck or SUV. But some of them he couldn't see. His list of white vehicles was growing.

Stella sat next to Hagen in the office. She'd arrived home before him last night and had greeted him with the kind of flying hug usually reserved for soldiers returning from a long foreign posting.

Hagen hadn't been too surprised. He'd been in an alley where someone had taken a potshot, missed, and run away. It wasn't the first time he'd been shot at, and he doubted it would be the last.

But this was the first time he'd been shot at and then come home to someone who cared. The embrace she'd greeted him with, the relief he'd seen in her eyes, made him feel loved. But he worried now how Stella would react the next time someone aimed a gun in his direction.

Hagen was starting to understand that to put himself at risk was to hurt and worry Stella. That weight on his back was new.

As for the risks she took...he tried not to think about them and was mostly successful.

Stella tapped a box in the bottom left corner of the screen, where a white van lumbered past. "Roll that one back. How come Ander isn't in yet?"

Hagen selected the box, and it filled the screen. He slid the counter to the right. The van rolled backward as though yanked by a tow chain. The plate wasn't visible. Hagen minimized the screen and let the other windows run before checking his watch.

"Don't know. Not like Ander to be late. Trouble getting the kid off to daycare, maybe."

The office door opened, and Ander bustled in. His cheeks were red, his hair still damp. Instead of falling in tight ringlets to his collar, his curls stuck to the side of his neck. He looked like a collie who'd been out in the rain too long.

"Sorry. Slade isn't in yet, is he?"

“Yeah. He’s asked about you twice.”

Ander blanched.

Stella let him off the hook. “He didn’t say anything. I don’t think he noticed.”

“Oh, I’m sure he noticed. He’ll say something. And just when I think I’ve gotten away with it.”

“What kept you? You’re not usually late.”

Ander dropped his coat over the back of his chair. He dragged the chair next to Hagen, pulled a health bar out of his coat pocket, and tore off the wrapper with his teeth. “Overslept. Didn’t even have time for breakfast.”

“Seriously? What are you, a teenager?”

Ander pulled his damp hair away from his neck. “I wish. Up late last night talking with Alessandra. She’s not used to me getting shot at.”

“You should’ve told her they were shooting at me.”

“I tried. Figured she wouldn’t care as much if you got shot. Didn’t work. We were both there. She didn’t take it well.”

Stella nodded. “Give her time.”

“Yeah.” Ander didn’t look optimistic. He nodded toward the screen. “Found anything?”

Hagen watched a dolphin-gray Porsche edge out of the frame. “No, nothing. The end

of the north side of the alley is basically a security blind spot. And we don't even know what kind of vehicle he was driving."

Stella sat up. "Stacy and I spoke to Fett yesterday at the soup kitchen. He said he saw a white Toyota truck."

Hagen waved at the screen. "If it's a white, silver, or tan vehicle, I'm marking it down. But, all told, there's no sign of him."

"Smart guy. So this wasn't random. It wasn't some drugged-up kid taking a potshot at law enforcement. He's figured this out."

"Maybe. Probably waiting for us."

Stella's face was stone. Hagen knew she understood. The cuneiform on the wall had pulled them in. The killer would've known the FBI would turn up. Not the cops. The FBI. Them.

The room fell silent. Stacy was sitting in the empty break room rereading the report on the case in Pennsylvania. Caleb was out interviewing a suspect in a fraud case. The office had never felt so empty.

Hagen wasn't sure he liked it. He adjusted his tie. The butterflies hung straighter. That was another change. He wouldn't have worn this tie if Stella hadn't chosen it for him. He didn't even know why he still owned it.

He'd neglected to tell Stella that it'd been a gag gift from Anja, back during their little fling. She'd never expected him to wear it. He couldn't imagine what would go through her head if and when Anja remembered she'd done that.

The videos played on.

“Stop.” Stella pointed at the frame in the top corner of the screen. “What’s that?”

Hagen stopped the playback and blew up the frame. A battered white Toyota truck passed under the lens on Commerce Street. Hagen froze the image.

Stella pulled her chair closer.

Hagen let the video run. The vehicle turned onto a side street. There were no cameras on that street or at the exit. He searched surrounding cameras, but the driver had picked his route. He was gone.

The plates were blurry and impossible to make out. Stella swore quietly. “Anyone get the model?” Her eyes were wide, and there was an intensity in her face that worried Hagen. Anger and fear.

Everyone shook their heads. They’d have to enhance the picture somehow.

“Someone’s watching us.” She paused, then spat out the next word. “Again.”

An ache opened in Hagen’s stomach. They’d been watched before. Bugged. Monitored. Spied on in their own homes. But the people who’d broken into their lives were dead.

Still, they were being hunted as though they’d done something wrong, as though their lives were fair game to a player who didn’t give a shit about the rules. An old anger returned. A burning desire to find the person responsible and...and put them away. That was what they needed to do. They had to stop him.

But first, they had to get those dirty eyes off them.

Stella rose from her seat and called down the hallway. “Mac!”

Mac appeared in the door. “You could’ve walked a few steps, at least.”

“Shouting was easier. Can you arrange to have Hagen’s house swept for bugs?”

Mac’s eyes widened. She stepped into the bullpen. “Seriously? You think?—”

“No. I don’t think. It’s just...I want to be sure.”

“Right. Of course. I’ll make a call. Give me your keys. They’ll do it today.”

Stella threw her keys across the office. Mac caught them with both hands. Those were Hagen’s keys being tossed around like a ball of wastepaper. And yet they were Stella’s keys now too. The place needed to be swept. If only for her peace of mind.

Hagen glared at the screen. Part of him wished he could focus the pixelated blur that was the driver’s face with just the fury of his own eyes. “Hey, Mac, if I send you a picture, think you can enhance it?”

Pocketing the keys to Hagen’s house, Mac came around the desk to stand behind Ander, who was finishing his health bar and starting on a second.

“Enhance that? No. There’s nothing there to enhance. Sorry. You’re going to have to take better pictures next time.”

Stella pushed her chair back to her own desk. She scowled at the screen. “All we’ve got so far is a white Toyota related to the investigation. It’s not much.” She spoke as she typed. “How’s it going with Marrion’s phone?”

“Not great. He couldn’t have bought a cheap Nokia, could he? I’d have been through that like...like Ander at an all-you-can-eat buffet.”

“Hey!” Ander stopped mid-bite. “I skipped breakfast.”

“Sure you did, big guy.” Mac patted his muscular shoulder. “The phone’s going to take a few more days, but I dived back into his computer in the meantime. There was something off there, something I missed on my initial inspection.”

Stella looked up from the screen. “What’s that?”

“He used Tor.”

That was interesting. Tor was a secure, anonymous browser. Left no trace. Criminals used it to browse the dark web, trade drugs, and share the kind of pictures that led to very long prison sentences.

Ander took another bite of his health bar. “Any idea what he was doing with it?” Crumbles of granola landed on his collar.

“Say it, don’t spray it.” Mac gave Ander a disappointed look as he brushed the crumbs away. “If I knew what he was doing, this case would be solved. Y’all found nothing incriminating in his dorm room, right?”

Stella frowned. “His home looked clean too.”

“Yeah, my guess is he was just reading stuff he didn’t want anyone to know about. Hide his search history. I’ll probably know more once I’ve cracked his phone.”

Anja came into the room. She took her seat opposite Ander and eyed Mac. “I wondered where’d you went.”

“Sorry. When Stella shouts, I come running.”

Stella nodded approvingly. “As you should. So we’ve got a white Toyota Tacoma. I’ll put out a BOLO. And some more cuneiform. The same message.” She frowned and twisted her earring before glancing Hagen’s way. “What kind of vehicle did David Broad drive?”

Shit. “A Toyota Tacoma. Not sure of color or year, though. I’ll call the sheriff to check.”

She kept twisting, looking even more worried. “Yeah, thanks.”

“But we do have suspects.” Stacy stood in the doorway. The report from the Pennsylvania case was rolled in her hand. She tapped the tube against her thigh.

“True. There’s Patrick Marrion’s mystery friend. Trevor.” Stella waved a finger toward Stacy. “We still haven’t been able to identify him.”

Ander tossed his empty snack wrapper into the trash can. He looked happier now that he’d eaten. “There’s the mortician too. Walker’s employer. That’s another.”

“But what’s the motivation?” Stella didn’t look convinced. “Why would the mortician kill Patrick Marrion? And then kill Otto Walker, his employee?”

“What’s the mortician’s name?” Anja pulled her keyboard closer.

“Chris Murray.”

Anja typed and squinted at the screen and typed some more. Finally, she tapped the screen. “Here’s a thing. He was accused of fraud a few years back. Wasn’t charged, though. Said it was all a misunderstanding. I think we’ve all come across those kinds of misunderstandings.”

Hagen was surprised. He hadn't thought of Chris Murray as a potential fraudster. "Like you said, he wasn't charged. Anything else about him?"

"Not on his police record." Anja typed again. "Let's see if there's anything in the press. Oh, here's a picture of him. Well, not a picture. A painting."

Hagen raised his head.

Anja faced him. "Yes, Butterfly Tie? You have a question?"

Of course she remembered. Women had minds like steel traps, every one of them. He ignored her comment. "A painting? What do you mean?"

"By an artist called Darwin Rhodell. The article said they were friends."

Stella was halfway across the office and heading for a vehicle before Hagen had a chance to grab his coat.

A service was underway as Stella strode into Chris Murray's funeral parlor with Hagen on her heels.

Darwin Rhodell's victims had not been lucky enough to end up in a place like this. Open caskets hadn't been possible once Rhodell finished with them. After the team had captured him, his grotesque artwork had soared in value. Like John Wayne Gacy's clown portraits.

Stella remembered Rhodell's basement. The damp smell. The groans of his most-recent victim tied to the chair. The sight of Chloe bleeding from a gunshot wound and unconscious on Rhodell's office floor. The "art" he was creating in his studio, a peace sign made up of dismembered body parts.

If Chris Murray was friends with Darwin Rhodell, then Chris Murray was capable of anything.

Someone was delivering a eulogy in the chapel, and Stella heard a round of laughter more polite than heartfelt, but still, it was nice. She didn't slow down to listen in, though.

She'd sat through too many of those services, accepting the condolences of family members she'd rarely met and hadn't seen since, listening to people who'd barely known her father or brother and, yet, needed to inform her how kind they were and how much they'd be missed.

The funeral services had helped Stella's mother. She'd been busy making the arrangements. Talking to family and friends before and after the service had brought her mother back to life. The color returned to her face. She even smiled occasionally.

For Stella, after the deaths of her father and brother, the days of the funerals was the worst. All she'd wanted to do was climb into bed, pull the covers over her head, and dream of a time when they'd both been alive. She hadn't wanted to see or speak to anyone. She just wanted her grief to sink into her bones and hibernate so she could function again.

Stella held her badge at arm's length to the attendant at the chapel door. "We need to speak to Chris Murray."

The attendant's gaze slid to the door. "I'm afraid he's busy right now. Perhaps you'd like to wait. He shouldn't be more than fifteen minutes."

Stella could imagine herself yanking the chapel door open, telling Murray to get his ass outside, and braving the stares of the mourners.

Chris Murray had associated himself with a serial killer, a sadistic murderer who'd shot her friend and taken Stella herself captive. A friend of Darwin Rhodell was no friend of hers.

Hagen headed to one of the chairs by the wall. He was ready to wait.

Stella cocked her head toward the door. "Go and get him, will you?"

The woman hesitated, then slipped into the chapel. At the opening of the door, a woman's voice flowed out, barely intelligible above her tears. The gentle closing of the door cut her off.

Stella waited. By the wall of the lobby, Hagen took a place in the middle of a row of three seats. He sat with his elbows on his knees and his head down. Stella leaned on the attendant's lectern.

The door opened. The attendant returned, closely followed by a man with a long chin and a slow, ambling gait on legs that could've been made of rubber. He eased the door shut without making a sound. When he spoke, his voice was little more than a whisper dragged out of him with a long rope. "Hello again. How...can I help you?"

Hagen rose from his chair and joined Stella. "You didn't tell us you were friends with Darwin Rhodell."

"With...Darwin? Oh." He took a deep breath and straightened his back. "I see. Yes, I can understand how the FBI might find my connection to Darwin...interesting."

Stella folded her arms. "Yeah, Mr. Murray. We do find that interesting."

The attendant watched them closely. Murray said nothing to her. Instead, he pointed toward the end of the hallway and led Stella and Hagen to the top of the stairs. They were less than ten yards from the attendant at the door to the chapel. But the trip was unnecessary.

Murray's voice was so soft that no one farther than a couple of yards away could've heard him anyway. "I was...friends with Darwin. He was a...a gifted artist."

Stella's jaw tensed. Praise for Rhodell grated like nails on a board, but Murray wasn't wrong. Rhodell's gallery had been filled with beautiful paintings of sunsets and nature, all vibrant colors and deep impressions. He kept the horror in the back.

"And you didn't know what he was doing?"

Murray rubbed his chin. He thought before he answered, but his words still dropped slowly. “No, no. We weren’t close like that. I paint in my spare time. Just a little. Nothing like Darwin, of course. I’m not so talented. And his style is very different from my own. Much more vibrant.”

Stella scanned the funeral home’s lobby. Three paintings hung on the wall, all reproductions of nineteenth century pastorals, dark and brooding. Rhodell’s more dramatic pieces would fit right in.

“How did you come to meet him?”

“I took one of his classes. He became interested in my work, and we became friends. Of a sort.”

Hagen lifted an eyebrow. “How do you mean?”

“We’d meet sometimes. Take walks. Paint together on occasion. But I stopped speaking to him about a month before his arrest.”

“Really?” That timing was suspiciously convenient. Coincidental, even. There was little in Stella’s world that was convenient or coincidental. “Why was that?”

“He asked me if I could...give him some body parts. From the morgue.”

Stella stared at him. “He asked for body parts. And you didn’t think to tell anyone?”

“I...” Murray rubbed the side of his chin again. Stella wanted to smack his hand down. “The request was disrespectful. But I didn’t think he was serious. I just thought it was a bad joke.”

“A bad joke. Right.” Arms and legs joined in a circle of different skin tones. There

had been nothing of a bad joke in what Darwin Rhodell had tried to do. Just evil kitsch. “Where were you on Friday evening?”

Murray leaned closer. He had a long, thin body, and he towered over Stella like a stork. “On Friday, I would’ve still been at the National Funeral Directors Association Convention in Columbus. I’m sure you can find a record of my presence there.”

Stella took a step back. Despite his height, Murray’s closeness wasn’t intimidating. Just unpleasant. “In Ohio?”

“That’s right. I stayed at a Radisson.”

She took a note of this. “When did you leave?”

“Saturday morning. Friday was the last day. There was a dinner in the evening. I checked out shortly after breakfast and arrived home around four.”

Stella took a slow, deep breath. She’d check that. She’d check it thoroughly. But a presence at a convention would be a difficult thing to fake. If Murray had been involved in Patrick Marrion’s murder, he’d surely have thought of an easier alibi.

“And on Tuesday morning?”

“Do you mean when Otto went home sick? I was here. Mrs. Osgood’s funeral. Lovely family. Such a loss.” Murray lowered his head and appeared to drop back into mourning.

Stella ignored his apparent grief. Her sympathy for Rhodell’s painting pal was stretched thin. “How convenient.”

“Not for Mrs. Osgood,” Murray countered.

Hagen nudged Stella and cocked his head toward the door. “I think that’s it for now, Mr. Murray. Thanks for your help.”

Murray’s hand shot out. “There is one thing…”

He had a strange look on his face.

Stella had to see where this was going. “Yes?”

He rocked on his heels. “Well, it’s odd, you know. I wonder if this will even be of interest to you.”

“Go on, Mr. Murray.” She tried to tell herself to be patient and listen.

“I know you weren’t really asking about Otto just now, so maybe it’s not pertinent. But you two aren’t the first people to ask about him this morning.”

Stella narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

Murray folded his hands together, then unfolded them. “A young man came through here right after we opened at nine. He was only here for a few minutes. But he said he was a friend of Otto’s.”

“I thought you said Otto didn’t have any friends that you knew of?”

“This was the first time I’d seen this person. I’d never heard of him before.”

Hagen pulled out his notebook. “Did you get a name?”

“He didn’t say. I don’t think I even asked.”

“So what did this young man want?”

“That’s the thing. I’m not quite sure what he wanted. He was asking a bunch of questions. It was almost like he was fishing for information or something.”

Stella toyed with the stud in her ear. “Why do you say that?”

“I don’t know, really. It was just my sense of it. But he asked about you.”

That was a surprise. “What do you mean?”

“At first, he asked about the investigation into Otto in a sort of general way. He was wondering if I’d heard anything, had I spoken to the police, that sort of thing. I have to say, it made me feel a little uncomfortable. But I answered him. Then, right before he left, he asked if I’d spoken to a female agent with long dark hair and a tanned complexion, and a tall, buff male agent with short wavy brown hair.” He gestured to them both. “And here you both are. It’s remarkable.”

“But what did you say to him?”

He looked at Stella. “I’d never met you before.” Then he nodded at Hagen. “But I did tell him I’d spoken to a male agent who matched that description.”

“So what happened then?”

“Nothing. He left right after that. The whole interaction took five minutes. Maybe less.”

Hagen finished scratching out a note. “Can you give us a description of the young man?”

Murray looked up, as if pulling his image to mind. “He was a white guy. And young. I’d say late teens or early twenties. Not quite as tall as you, but almost. Maybe six-foot? Athletic build. He was wearing these dirty clothes. A black hoodie. Jeans, I think. Short brown hair.”

“What about any distinguishing characteristics? Did he have a tattoo or scars or something like that?”

Murray shook his head. “No tattoos. At least, I couldn’t see them if he did. I didn’t see any scars either. Basically, he was a pleasant looking guy, if a little plain. And there was something almost charming about him. He looked down on his luck, though.”

“Did you see where he went? Or what kind of vehicle he was driving?”

Once again, Murray shook his head. “No, I’m sorry. I didn’t go outside with him, so I have no idea if he walked, ran, or used a pogo stick. There was one more thing, actually, though. It also made me uncomfortable. Right before he left, he asked me what time I got off work. I told him five. He seemed upset by this. Then he left.”

Hagen finished writing and placed the notebook in his pocket. “Thank you for that. Just before we go, do you have any security cameras? Any sort of surveillance?”

“No, I’ve never seen the point. But maybe I’ll invest now.”

Stella took out her business card and handed it to the mortician. “Might be a good idea. If you see him again, please call us immediately. We’re going to get someone to escort you home tonight.”

They left, with Hagen placing a call to local MNPd for that escort.

When he hung up, they were barely out of the building before Stella grabbed Hagen's upper arm, stopping him. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Hagen smiled. "I think we just got a description of Marrion and Walker's mysterious friend Trevor."

"Me too." She took her phone out of her pocket and called Mac. After filling her in on the new development, Stella continued. "I need you to check an alibi for me. Chris Murray. Says he was at the National Funeral Directors Association Convention in Columbus, Ohio the night of Patrick Marrion's death. He stayed at a Radisson hotel right next to it, I'm assuming. Can you look into that?"

"Should Anja call the hotel?"

"No. But it's not all that far of a drive from Nashville. He could've checked in, come back, killed Patrick Marrion, and been back in time to check out again. I want to know if he was there. Track his car."

"Right. It'll take a few minutes. Let you know when I'm done."

They were down the front steps by the time Stella hung up. Hagen sat at one end of the steps that led to the funeral home.

"We should wait. If he's lying, we'll take him in now."

Stella took a seat next to him. The stone step was cold through her pants, and her breath hung in the air. But being outside in the cold was better than being inside the funeral home.

"You don't think he's lying, do you?"

“No.”

“He is kinda creepy.”

“He’s a mortician. We expect him to be creepy, so we see him as creepy. If he was a florist, we’d put his slow, mournful ways down to idiosyncrasy.”

“No, we’d think he was a weirdo.”

“Yes, like everyone else we meet.” Hagen smiled slightly.

“And he was a friend of Darwin Rhodell.”

“I think we’d find that Darwin Rhodell was a friend of Chris Murray’s.” Hagen adjusted his tie.

Stella regretted choosing the butterflies for him. It was too jolly for this place. “Making pals with someone who works with dead bodies would’ve given Rhodell easy access to the materials he wanted. Better than the killing and chopping he ended up doing.” She rubbed her hands along her legs. The cold was getting through. “If we rule out Murray, what does that leave us? The person Patrick was mysteriously visiting?”

“At least we’ll have ruled one out. But if Murray’s out, we’ve only got one more option...and it’s looking like the tall, young, charming, down-on-his-luck psychopath. We might have a description. But we don’t have a full name or an address or anything else.”

“Let’s get some locals to canvass the area to see if other homes or businesses might have caught the Tacoma coming or going.”

While Hagen typed on his phone, Stella swore quietly under her breath. There'd be another murder tonight if they weren't fast enough. She could feel it. And they weren't moving fast enough.

Her phone rang. Mac. Stella put her on speaker and placed the phone next to Hagen.

"Murray's car was at the hotel all Friday night. I figured he might've left it there and rented something in case anyone looked, so I checked his phone too. That stayed in Columbus as well."

Hagen picked up the phone and talked into the speaker. "If he was smart enough to change cars, he'd be smart enough to leave his phone behind. Use a burner if need be."

"Yeah, that's what I thought too. So I called the hotel's security team. Murray's got a chin like a plank of wood, right?"

Stella nodded. "Pretty much."

"They think they've got him in the hotel bar at nine o'clock Friday night. They're checking more recordings, but it's looking like he didn't do away with Patrick Marrion."

Stella sat back. Her hands landed on the stone step behind her, the chill caught in them freezing the tips of her fingers. She didn't care. "It's a shame we can't do this with Patrick Marrion. Track his car and his phone, I mean. If we knew where he went the night he died, we might be able to find his 'friend from out of town.' Right now, that friend is by far the most likely suspect, I reckon."

Mac tittered a little and cut it off. "Wait a minute. His phone isn't the only way to track his movements."

Stella glanced at Hagen. Hope was rising. She didn't know what Mac was thinking, but she sounded like she had something.

From the other end of the line came the sound of a laptop opening. After thirty seconds, Mac returned. "I'm checking his computer. Let's see..."

Stella eyed Hagen as they both fell silent. Behind them, a smattering of voices told them the service had ended.

Mac's voice came back. "There's one address here in his search history that doesn't match any of the other places Patrick Marrion's been. I'm patching it through."

I turned my truck into the parking lot of the Good Samaritan Homeless Shelter and Soup Kitchen. It was my second stop this morning, after the mortician's where Otto used to work. That visit hadn't been a total bust. If I couldn't find someone here, then I'd return to the mortician's at five and take that proprietor away.

I had to say, I was feeling optimistic, despite everything. I'd woken up this morning just as the sun was rising. It had been a miserable night. I'd failed. I couldn't believe I missed Yates entirely.

All that time I'd waited, squatting there between the dumpsters like some kind of diarrhetic racoon. I was so sure he'd come.

And he had.

Just rolled into that alley like he owned the place. Climbed out of the SUV all dressed up in his fancy suit and his shiny shoes. Yates's pal wasn't much better. Not as sharply dressed but still tall and handsome and full of ego.

And I missed. Ugh.

But my traps were working.

I'd tracked Knox and Yates down—tempted them back to their old hunting grounds and spread the bait like an eagle-eyed hunter. And they'd followed the trail like a couple of stupid old bears. I could still pull them along by the nose at my whim.

The problem was finishing them off. That was where I was struggling.

And it would get harder now. From everything I'd read and seen on television, cops didn't like it when you shot at them.

And then, when I woke at the crack of dawn in my sleeping bag, everything had become so crystal clear. They were probably hunting me down now, so I needed to send a message that I was still after them too.

I was all out of assistants, and I didn't have time to start building relationships and scouting possibilities. With the agents circling, my next victim had to be quick and easy. I had to go back to basics.

And what better way to let my targets know I was on their tail than to take out one of the witnesses they'd spoken to?

That was why I'd gone to the mortician's and why I was here at the soup kitchen. These were the two places in Nashville that Otto went to regularly. The FBI must've interviewed some folks in both places.

The problem, however, was where?

Where would I lure them to?

The alley where I'd targeted Yates...there was no one around, no one in the way, but that had meant that I couldn't get close without being seen. And shooting at a distance wasn't my forte. And the college had been all wrong because it had been overly populated. No way I could've escaped that zoo had I opened fire on Knox.

The location...that was the problem. I'd picked spots I knew I could bring them. I needed to choose a place where I knew I could kill them.

If I was going to shoot one of them at a time, the killing had to be on my terms, not theirs. On my ground. Not on the street.

I needed to be in control.

My home away from home. The abandoned warehouse where I'd already spilled blood.

I put the truck in park and walked in. There was the smell of breakfast in the air, wafting from trays of eggs, bacon, and pancakes warming in the cafeteria. On the other side of the room, a group of homeless men and women were shoveling the stuff into their gaping mouths.

A woman dishing out the food looked at me and smiled. "Hey, hun, you're just in time. We're about to finish breakfast. Grab a plate."

"I don't have any money."

"That's fine, sweetie. Just get yourself some of this."

My stomach rumbled at the sight of hot food. Ever since I'd arrived in Nashville, I'd been surviving on protein bars and whatever takeout Otto had been thoughtful enough to bring over. And of course, he wasn't here to do that anymore.

I figured, why not? I needed to build up my strength. I took a plate and cutlery and placed them on a tray.

The woman smiled at me again. "What would you like?"

"A little of everything, please."

She loaded me up, starting with some biscuits and pouring gravy over them.

“Say, if I’m remembering right, you knew Otto Walker, didn’t you?”

Her face fell. She lifted the tray on top of the bar, and I took it. “I met him a couple times. Terrible what happened. Were you friends?”

I nodded and pretended to look sad. “Yeah. He was probably my best friend.”

“I’m sorry, hun. What a tragedy.”

“So true. Any idea about what’s going on in the investigation? They catch anyone yet?”

She shook her head. “I really don’t know. But, hey, that man right there, guy sitting at the far table? He might know something. He was talking to the FBI about it yesterday. Right here, in fact.”

I looked over at the disheveled man finishing his breakfast. He was perfect.

It would be easy to lure him back to the warehouse. I’d offer him some extra food. An invitation to stay at my home for a few days—plenty of space there for everyone—and I’d have everything I needed.

Joy swelled within me. I was there. Things were rolling again at last.

The woman behind the counter was looking at me, and I realized I’d been lost in thought.

“That’s great, thank you. I think I’ll let him finish his breakfast in peace. I’ll catch him outside when he leaves.”

Fett bent over the top of the dumpster, kicking hard and pushing his palms flat against its slimy walls. His hips rose as he balanced on the edge with his feet off the ground, half in, half out.

This was always the most dangerous moment, the time when his breath quickened and his heart raced under all his layers of clothing. Anyone could come now. Grab him and tip him inside.

That had happened three times already.

Two of those times, Fett had climbed out to see a group of teenagers staggering off laughing, still holding their bottles of beer. The third time, though, he'd climbed to his feet, unsteady on the pile of garbage, only to receive a punch in the face that knocked him down.

The lid slammed closed after that, and something heavy landed on top, too heavy for him to move. Five hours he'd spent in that dumpster until someone dragged off the sacks of construction material and tossed in a bag of garbage, leaving him there, buried in the muck but at least able to escape.

Moments like that were the risks of his lifestyle. They built these dumpsters high to make it hard for folks like him to search safely. Folks didn't like Fett sleeping on benches. They didn't like him sleeping on the streets, and they didn't even like him taking the garbage they no longer wanted.

But Fett had no choice. This was the life he lived. Scavenging for food, eating at the soup kitchen sometimes, and sleeping in the shelter when they had a spare bed.

He'd gotten lucky last night with a good meal and a slice of carrot cake. Almost missed the cake. First time he'd ever felt grateful to the law. And then he'd managed to snag a bed. Things were looking his way.

Now it was mid-morning, and he was thirsty. He'd eaten good at the kitchen. But he needed a drink. And for that, he needed some cash.

This dumpster was mostly empty—some stray boxes and cartons—but no more than three bags sat at the bottom, all of them squishy, which meant it was food waste or something. Nothing that he could pawn, at least.

A smell that reeked of vinegar and fecal matter rose from a puddle of brown water in the corner of the dumpster, but Fett didn't care about that. He barely noticed stink anymore. All the world's smells just merged into one, a cacophony of odors like all the different cars honking at the same time on I-24.

He'd almost forgotten what a good odor smelled like. Just as he'd almost forgotten his name.

When those federal agents had called him Delafayette, he'd wanted to reply with a "Yes, ma'am," like he'd done when he was a kid. Only his mom had ever used his full name. To everyone else, he was Fett, as long as he could remember.

To the kids at school. To his stepdad every time he whooped his ass with that belt of his. To the warders at juvie, to his cellmates, and now to himself. Whoever Delafayette might've been, that kid was long gone. Fett was all he'd ever be now.

A flash of red between two of the garbage bags caught his eye. With one hand still

flat on the side of the dumpster, he yanked one of the bags away. A pizza box, partially open. The box rattled when he picked it up.

Yes!

There were two slices of pizza. One was missing the tip, and the other was complete. That was almost two whole slices.

He gave one slice a sniff as he shuffled away. The pizza didn't smell of much. He took a bite. Didn't taste of much either. Cold cheese never did have much flavor, but the olives came through. The guy should've ordered pepperoni.

He stuck those in his pocket for later and washed the bite down with the final swig from the vodka bottle he kept in his coat pocket.

That was what he needed.

The burn of alcohol at the back of his throat soothed him. He missed that blaze when he didn't have it. Only when his throat flamed, and the alcohol vapors tickled the back of his nose, was he sure he was alive.

And when the heat hit his belly, Fett could forget for a moment the feeling that someone was watching him.

He'd had that sense all morning. Ever since he left the shelter, taken his first swig of vodka, and shuffled down Third Street. A white Toyota truck. The one he'd seen before. The vehicle those Feds had asked him about. He was sure the truck was creeping along behind him down Third. He turned up Commerce Street and lost it. But then, when he reached Broadway, it came up behind him again.

It disappeared when he turned on First Street, and Fett had been able to amble along

next to the river after that, heading to the dumpsters where the good stuff was often found. There were more dumpsters farther up. He'd once found half a bottle of bourbon on the bank up there. Days like that didn't happen often enough.

He tipped the bottle back, savoring the last drops of vodka as they hit his tongue. Warmth spread through him, easing some of the tension in his shoulders.

Footsteps. Soft, deliberate.

Fett flinched at the sound. Turning wasn't easy under five layers of clothing—the old coat resisted, stiff and unyielding. He twisted as far as he could, but the street behind him remained a blur of shadows. Sure he was imagining things, he kept walking.

The Cumberland River and its dark waters seemed to ice Fett's bones. He shuffled faster.

The dumpsters were just ahead now. Three of them, right next to a steak house. He'd once pulled a whole T-bone out of one, still warm from the grill. Some dumbass diner probably thought it was overcooked or something. Tasted like heaven to Fett that night as he sat by the river, lost in the moonlight glistening across the water.

Again, footsteps sounded behind him.

Fett managed to pivot his whole body this time. All he saw was a guy with his hood up on the other side of the road, hands buried in his pockets, a small backpack hanging from one shoulder. He didn't look like much. If they came to a fight over the steak house dumpster, Fett would tell that guy where to step off.

He increased his pace. Or tried to. His shoes were two sizes too big, and the heels had been almost worn away when he'd accepted them at the church. Now he wished he'd held out for something better.

But five more yards, and he'd be fishing for the good stuff. Three yards.

There he was. Finders keepers.

All this stuff was his now.

Fett threw open the lid and gazed inside. A plastic tray, the lid still on. Someone had dumped last night's leftovers as soon as they'd left the restaurant. This really was his lucky day.

He reached inside just as the footsteps sounded again—so close.

Fett swung around. "Hey, man, you need to find your own?—"

He didn't get to finish his warning. The man in the hood was right behind him, gripping a tire iron in both hands, that backpack open and on the ground beside him. He swung, smashing the weapon hard on the top of Fett's head.

And, just like that, it was lights out for Fett.

Hagen lifted his foot from the gas. “You sure this is the place?”

Stella checked the map on her phone. “Uh-huh. This is what Mac sent us. This is the last place Patrick Marrion searched for in his browser history.”

Hagen peered out the window. “If this is where he’d come to see his friend, his friend wasn’t living well.” There were no student dorms here and no apartment buildings. Each stretch by the river featured one abandoned warehouse after another.

One day, some development firm would no doubt gussy up this part of the city and turn all these warehouses into art galleries and cafés and the kind of apartments tech bros and famous country singers vied for. Until then, they stood derelict.

A pigeon flew through a broken window. A roof of rusty corrugated iron flapped in the wind. Weeds grew in the cracks in the asphalt and bent like grass. Behind them, a freight train trundled south over the bridge.

No other car was on the road, and no one walked down the empty sidewalk.

Hagen pressed the gas. “You know what he was looking for?”

“I’m not sure he knew what he was looking for. There.”

Stella pointed at the entrance to what appeared to be an underground parking lot. Hagen drove toward it. The lot sat under a two-story office building and warehouse

that might once have managed portside logistics, but which now couldn't manage to keep the plastic sheeting in the empty window frames from tearing away.

There was no gate. They drove in.

The light fittings in the underground lot were without bulbs, and the midday sun, hidden by thick clouds, reached little farther than the bottom of the entrance ramp, where water dripped on the Explorer from an overhead pipe. An old Honda Ridgeline was parked just inside the entrance, and that was the only vehicle they saw.

“What are the chances this is Patrick Marrion's truck?”

“Pretty high.”

Hagen pulled in next to the once-sporty truck. Stella was out of the SUV before he turned off the engine. By the time he joined her, she already held her phone next to her ear as she read off the license plate to Mac.

The Ridgeline was filthy. The bed contained a scattering of dead leaves and some old rainwater that had failed to find a way out. The sides were rusted and dented, and the boxy front told Hagen it was an older model. He looked through the grime on the side window, peering through the eyes of a smiley face drawn in the thick layer of filth.

There was little to see. An empty phone mount on the dashboard. A tear in the side of the driver's seat that revealed the yellow foam inside. A jumbo cup stuck in the holder.

Stella lowered her phone. “It's Patrick's. Forensics is on the way.”

Hagen stepped away from the truck. There was no sign of blood inside the cab, no indication that anything had happened to Patrick Marrion in the parking garage. But

this truck was now evidence, a link to his last moments.

A door stood open on the wall of the garage. A sign hanging from a single nail indicated that the stairs led up to the rest of the building.

They were getting closer. “We should check the place out.”

Stella put away her phone. Her face was serious. She joined him.

“Yeah, we should. But there’s no other car or sign of anyone here. Patrick could’ve come, met someone, and moved on with them to another location.”

“Maybe. Or maybe the unsub bugged out afterward. But we should still check it out.”

They reached the stairway door. Dirt had built up on the edges of the steps, but recent footprints smudged the area in the middle.

Stella stopped in the doorway. “Or maybe he’s still here and just headed out to load up on coffee.”

Tires squealed on pavement, and the daylight at the garage’s entrance flickered, swallowed by the shadow of a battered white Toyota Tacoma as it lurched halfway down the ramp before screeching to a stop.

Hagen reached for his gun.

Stella shouted, “FBI. Stay where you are!”

The Toyota’s engine clunked and the wheels screamed as the truck shot up the ramp in reverse.

Hagen and Stella raced to their Explorer. He leaped inside, gunned the engine, slammed the gear into reverse, and floored the gas. Stella was still pulling on her seat belt and shouting into her phone as the SUV spun around. Hagen stomped on the gas again.

The wheels spun. Black smoke rose in the rearview mirror, and the smell of burning rubber leaked through the air vent as they raced up the ramp.

For a second, as the Ford Explorer reached the top and flew out onto the street, the four-thousand-plus-pound vehicle was airborne. Hagen drifted up and out of the seat. Conversely, Stella's seat belt strapped her down hard, but her phone floated away from her ear. Hagen held the wheel steady even as he saw, away to his left, the white Tacoma speeding away.

Their vehicle smacked the ground, and Hagen jerked the wheel. The tires screamed again, and Stella shifted despite her restraint, her shoulder colliding with the passenger door. The Toyota reached the end of the road. Its back end spun, and their quarry raced around the corner and out of sight.

Hagen willed the SUV on. His foot flattened the pedal. The engine roared. The RPMs bounced into the red, and the needle on the speedometer climbed past the vertical.

They had to gain on him. They had to catch him before he joined the highway, or they'd have a high-speed chase amid civilian vehicles in midday traffic.

In this moment, he wished very much to be driving his Corvette.

Hagen reached the end of the road. He kept his foot down and pulled the wheel hard in the direction the back end was swerving. His tires slid across the pavement. The steering wheel vibrated under his fingers, but the SUV straightened out.

There, twenty yards ahead of him—and approaching the bridge above the railway, where a freight train rolled slowly east—was the Toyota.

A boom echoed down the empty street just as the Tacoma's back window shattered. A short whistle pitched a high tone over the roof of the SUV. The freight train running parallel to them hooted back.

The damn guy was shooting at them.

Stella drew her weapon and pulled on the slide. Leaving just one hand on top of the steering wheel, Hagen hit the button on the door and lowered Stella's window.

A second shot boomed.

The side window next to Hagen's hand shattered, spraying pieces of black plastic and glass. Stella unclipped her seat belt, stretched her body out of the cab, and fired.

A small tower of dust exploded from the surface of the road just behind the Tacoma. Stella shouted, "Keep it straight."

Hagen gripped the steering wheel tight with both hands. His foot was still hard on the gas. Past the shattered rear window of the Toyota, the hooded figure reached behind him and stretched out his arm.

He was going to fire again. And Stella was half out of the vehicle, completely exposed.

But before he took a shot, the truck's back tire blew out. Rubber shredded, flinging debris across the pavement. The vehicle lurched violently, fishtailing as the driver fought for control.

Too late.

The truck veered hard, swiping the curb before slamming into the embankment. It shuddered to a stop, nose angled toward the bridge.

Hagen yanked the wheel, skidding the Explorer to a halt. He was already moving before the brakes fully engaged, feet pounding the pavement as he bolted toward the railway line. Stella was ahead of him.

“FBI! Stop!”

The hooded figure was already running, hitting the grassy incline with a thud.

They had him. They just had to cuff him, and it would all be over.

Hagen had his weapon out but kept his finger off the trigger as he sprinted, closing the distance.

But the guy scrambled, blood streaking the back of his hand. He headed for the bridge, stumbling but fast. The train rumbled past in front of him.

Stella shouted, “Stop! Stay where you are!”

He didn’t.

At the top of the bridge, he lunged forward, grabbing on to the last wagon of the passing train. Momentum yanked him off his feet, carrying him away down the track.

Stella climbed to the top of the embankment and watched the freight train rumble away, heading east. The train wasn't moving fast, just slow enough to allow someone to leap on board without killing themselves. But as it left the bridge, the locomotive picked up speed. The tracks rattled until they eventually sank into silence.

She slipped her gun back into her holster.

Hagen had paced away, his phone to his ear. He returned after a minute. "Police'll talk to the freight company. They'll stop the train a couple of miles east of here. He's not going anywhere."

She wished that were true.

"A lot of places to leap off a train within a couple of miles."

"Maybe. But not many that are safe, and there's not much we can do for now unless you feel like chasing a train."

Hagen's nostrils flared. He definitely looked like he wanted to drive after the locomotive.

She shook her head. "Forget it. This isn't The French Connection . Let the cops run him down. If he stays on the train, the police will pick him up down the line. Let's check the Toyota."

She scrambled down the bank toward the truck. Whoever the driver was, Stella hated the motherfucker. She regretted not opening fire when he fled. If he'd still been armed, she could've defended her decision. But she hadn't seen a weapon, and he hadn't tried to shoot once he'd left his vehicle.

Stella peered through the window, careful not to touch anything. There was no sign of the gun. She almost gagged as she spotted some vile-looking brown sludge in a capped plastic water bottle sitting in the cup holder. A paintbrush was shoved into the substance. She made a mental note to deal with that and the backpack lying on the passenger seat—or maybe have Hagen handle that stuff.

The back seat contained some food wrappers, two empty tequila bottles, and something yellow that stuck out from under the passenger seat. She slipped on a pair of gloves before reaching inside to pull out a pair of battered license plates.

“Pennsylvania.”

Her stomach twisted. So the killer had come all the way from Pennsylvania to bait them like this. A friend of Maureen King's, perhaps. The guy who'd tied the knots for her, maybe.

“It's a Toyota Tacoma. I think I know where this is going.” Still holding his phone, Hagen peered over her shoulder. His face was grim. “Just a sec, Mac. I need you to run some plates for me.”

As he read the numbers, something thumped from the bed of the vehicle.

Stella eyed Hagen. From the look on his face, she hadn't imagined the noise. They turned.

The thump came again.

Pulling their weapons, they sidestepped to the back of the vehicle and looked inside the empty bed.

It thumped again.

“Inside the toolbox,” Hagen said as he strode toward the driver’s door, which still stood wide open. “Mac, call me when you’ve got something.” He hung up.

Hagen pulled out the keys and tossed them to Stella.

She caught them one-handed and opened the tailgate, then shoved a smaller key from the ring into a slot and opened up the large toolbox.

Delafayette lay curled and bound inside the small space. Blood darkened his matted hair and cast black streaks across his temple. Stella tugged on the knots that held his wrists.

“Hagen, call an ambulance. Now!”

He was already ahead of her. After describing the location to the emergency services, Hagen strode around to Stella’s side.

She busied herself with the rope. “Look at these.” She shot him a quick glance.

The rope was wrapped expertly around Delafayette’s wrist, and the knots were tight, too tight to untie.

At the sight of the binding, Stella found herself back on that evening in the woods not so long ago. A body swinging upside down from the trees. Blood spread across the snow like a splash of ink on an empty page.

“Here.” Hagen held out a penknife, the blade open.

She took it. “I got to get myself one of these.”

Stella sawed at the rope, staying away from the knot, which might provide some useful evidence.

The rope gave way, and Delafayette groaned.

Stella placed a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t try to move, Fett. An ambulance is on its way.”

Sirens sounded in the distance.

Fett tried to move despite her instructions. He moaned. “My left pocket.”

“What’s in it?”

“Check. Now, before I change my mind.”

She really didn’t want to dig in his pocket, but she did, glad for the gloves. She felt a cloth with something inside it and wound her fingers around it.”

“That’s it. Get ’er out.”

Stella did. It was a dirty bandanna wrapped around...a scalpel. She tilted her head like an angry mother about to scold her toddler.

“You saved my life. Plus, the carrot cake was fantastic.” Fett wiped some coagulating blood from an eyelid. “I just found that, so you know. I had nothing to do with nothing about that dead kid.”

Stella believed him and showed Hagen the weapon just as his phone rang.

He rolled his eyes as he took the call and stepped away. “Really? You’re sure?” His voice was quiet, but the surprise in it caught Stella’s ear. “Thanks, Mac. Ask Anja to call him and take a statement, will you? Then tell her to contact Sheriff Deacon. See if she can get a lead on who stole the truck. And ask if he can track down any young men listed in Claymore Township by the name of Trevor. I’ll tell Stella.”

With her hand back on Delafayette’s shoulder, the other holding a key piece of evidence from Patrick Marrion’s crime scene, Stella waited for Hagen to hang up and return. “Sheriff Deacon? From Claymore Township? Does that mean what I think it means?”

“That’s David Broad’s truck.”

Stella blinked. “Broad’s truck that went missing right after we stopped Maureen.”

“Guess someone, possibly named Trevor, must’ve stolen it and lit out of Dodge. Probably a good thing, considering how rarely he’s sober.”

Stella took a deep breath, almost wishing Hagen hadn’t made the joke. Of course Maureen’s accomplice had stolen the truck and left town. If only she’d made the connection back when Broad had brought up his missing truck, but there was no connection to make. Only now, with the truck in front of her and the killer in the wind, could she see the link from Pennsylvania to Nashville.

She was furious they’d missed this, though. “We assumed Sheriff King participated in a crime he didn’t commit. Maureen did have help. But not from him. And that help has followed us down here.”

Hagen lowered his chin. His face showed all the regret and disappointment and anger

tightening her chest. “Whoever it was must’ve read everything about us in Broad’s reports and brought their killings to our turf. We screwed up.”

No. They hadn’t screwed up. Not entirely. “We stopped Maureen King. She would’ve killed again.” A vision of the rope around the tree in the woods flashed into Stella’s head. Her defiance shrank. “But, no...we screwed up badly.”

Delafayette groaned again. Hagen drew nearer and bent over, examining the wound on his head.

“That looks nasty. Let’s hope there’s no skull fracture.”

Sirens going, an ambulance sped under the bridge, followed by two patrol cars. Stella waved them down.

As the paramedics eased Delafayette out of the toolbox and onto a stretcher, Hagen told one set of officers to remain with the vehicle. The other two were both young and fresh-faced, the kind of newly minted officers who were excited to be called to the scene of an emergency but relieved they didn’t actually have much to do when they got there.

With Delafayette taken care of, Stella turned to Hagen. “Why would Maureen King’s accomplice come after us? Why kill us when we’re the people most likely to understand what he’s doing? He hasn’t just been killing. He’s been trying to lead us around. You went to the alley with Ander because of a tip-off and were shot at. The truck was there too.”

Hagen stared at her. “He’s targeting us. He wants revenge.”

“Because we stopped his run in Claymore Township? Because Maureen died in front of us?” Stella lowered her hand. “Or maybe he thinks the law enforcement officers

who stopped him in Pennsylvania would make better sacrificial victims than a psychiatric patient and a couple of small-town cops?”

Being shot on the job was a risk she was prepared to take.

But being hung upside down and bled to death by a lunatic with a hankering for an apocalypse was a step too far.

They were going to catch this monster, and they were going to throw away the key.

Hagen snapped his fingers at the younger officers. “You two can stop standing around like a couple of saltshakers. Get back in your car and follow us.”

They drove to the parking garage outside the abandoned warehouse, where the chase had begun. Hagen stopped next to Patrick Marrion’s Ridgeline. One of the officers approached the bed, and Stella told him not to touch it. She and Hagen had already screwed up enough.

“Forensics is going to be all over that thing. Any news on the train?”

The officer stepped away and spoke into his radio. His shoulder squawked back. He shook his head. “Nothing yet.”

“Dammit. Right, you wait here and keep an eye on that truck until forensics get here.” Stella waved at the officer’s colleague. “You come with us.”

The officer followed as Stella and Hagen headed toward the stairwell. Stella bounded up to the first floor and stopped. The dirt on the steps to the second floor was undisturbed, but the door to the landing hung on one hinge, and mud was smeared across the tiles.

Stella drifted her hand to her gun.

“Looks like Maureen’s accomplice had an accomplice of his own,” Hagen whispered.

“Makes sense, considering Maureen wasn’t available.”

“Right. Until he killed him. You still think it was Otto Walker?”

Stella nodded and relaxed a little. Her arm drifted back to her side. What Hagen said made sense. Otto Walker had helped kill Patrick Marrion. Then the killer tried to cover his tracks, or perhaps, Walker got cold feet and tried to back out. Whatever the cause, the killer—possibly named Trevor—turned Walker into his next victim.

And now he was in the wind. Whoever he was.

She stepped into the corridor. The rooms in front were empty of everything except dust, smashed tiles, and bits of broken timber. A steel door stood at the end, sealed with a padlock.

“Officer, you got a bolt cutter in your car?”

The officer nodded. “Yes, ma’am.” He doubled back down the stairs. The handrail squeaked as he pulled himself around the landing, and his boots thumped on the steps.

Stella approached the door. It must’ve stood there for a while, the final permanent barrier to have survived the dereliction of the old building. The last tenants might’ve used this part of the building as a storeroom or an archive. Only the lock itself was new.

The officer’s footsteps thumped up the steps. The handrail squeaked. He ran down

the passage, a set of bolt cutters two feet long upright in his hands. His cheeks were red, and despite the cold, a bead of sweat ran down his temple. He must've run all the way there and all the way back. Good man.

"How long you been in law enforcement, Officer...?"

"Edwards. Six months, ma'am."

Six months. A few more months on the job, and he'd know enough to take his time.

"Give it your best shot, Officer Edwards." Hagen gestured to the lock.

Officer Edwards applied the jaws of the bolt cutter and squeezed the handles.

Nothing happened.

He changed his grip and squeezed harder. A report as loud as a gunshot echoed down the corridor. The broken lock landed on the floor, just missing his boot.

Hagen pushed past him through the door, and Stella followed.

At first glance, Stella saw a single mattress that had seen better days with a sleeping bag next to it, a gas cooker in a corner, and a long piece of thick rope hanging from a metal bar in the ceiling...with one hell of a strange but familiar mess beneath it. The lingering, metallic smell of blood took her back to the woods, to Sheriff King's shed, to every crime scene she'd ever attended.

And on the walls was that writing again.

That cursed cuneiform.

Hagen examined the long piece of rope that hung ominously from the ceiling before crouching to inspect the nasty brown stain. “Check out the floor here.”

At a glance, it looked like dried mud or paint.

But she knew it was blood.

They’d found the place where Patrick Marrion had been strung up and drained of life.

Outside the door, Officer Edwards’s radio squawked. He confirmed receipt of the message and stepped through the doorway.

“They’ve stopped the train.”

“And?”

“No one on it, ma’am.”

I was alone. Completely on my own. In the middle of nowhere and with no one to help me. I'd always thought I'd manage perfectly fine by myself. People who needed people were losers. Winners didn't need anything but their own brains and abilities. That was me. I could do that. That was how I'd always lived my life.

And it had brought me here. Close to a railway line in the middle of nowhere, with nowhere to go and no way to get there. The Feds had my truck—well, that journalist's—and I didn't even have enough cash in my pocket for a Happy Meal.

That train had come through at exactly the right moment, though. I was due for some good luck, because even with all my athletic prowess, I couldn't outrun an SUV.

Maybe I should've taken a shot at them after the crash. Stopped all this running. I was tired, there was no doubt about it.

Shooting them with any degree of accuracy most likely would've meant instant death for me. In the time that it took to line up my shot, I'd never have gotten both of them. The other one would've killed me on the spot.

The train saved me. Just made it onto the last car, scrambled around the side, and let it carry me away.

But I figured they'd be waiting for me when the train stopped, so I leaped off as soon as the thing slowed.

Train must've still been going a good thirty miles an hour, though, maybe more, when I jumped out about ten minutes after we crossed the Cumberland River. Landed on my left ankle and rolled through a bunch of gorse bushes. They scratched me up all over—both hands were bleeding. I hobbled away from the tracks as quickly as I could, in case someone saw me.

On either side of the train tracks were trees and overgrown vegetation, which separated them from the residential neighborhoods east of the city center on either side. I decided to lay low here on a sawn-off tree stump until sunset. I needed some time to think, to get my head together. I rubbed my throbbing ankle.

I needed to get off my feet for a while too.

There was no way I could get back to my warehouse. The Feds would be all over that place, especially once they found the homeless guy in the toolbox of my truck.

And that meant I was cut off from all my supplies. All my chargers were there, my sleeping bag, all my food.

What a mess.

Some bait that homeless guy turned out to be. I was like a fisherman who whipped out a line only to get the hook stuck in his own ass. After all I'd done, all I'd achieved up in Pennsylvania, to fail like this, to fail so badly, was just awful. It was humiliating.

The pain in my ankle wasn't too bad. Maybe I could walk it off. That was what one of my coaches used to say whenever I stumbled during wind sprints.

“Walk it off.”

“Move your ass, pretty boy.”

“Pain is weakness leaving the body.”

So I'd get moving and the pain would kick in with each step. But it was a good kind of pain. The kind that made a person tough.

The kind that made a warrior.

A small stream ran through the forested area on the side of the train tracks. I scrambled down to wash the blood off my hands. It wasn't all that homeless guy's blood. Some of it was mine, too, from the bushes.

I shivered. The water was almost ice. It numbed my fingers, and I ran them, dripping, over my face.

But I needed to clean up. I must've looked crazy.

The cold water refreshed me. My time wasn't done yet. I could still take them. I would take them. I was determined to finish what I started.

After sitting there for at least an hour, I watched the sun about to set. I knew I had to keep moving, to get away from the railway track. The Feds would stop the train as soon as they could and they'd find I wasn't on it. They'd have dogs and whatnot running down the line looking for the place I'd leaped. Maybe even send up a helicopter to try to see more from the air.

I had to get some cover. I stood up and walked on. The pain wasn't too bad. The cold probably helped. Like having an ice pack. But not just on my leg. I was cold all over. The numbness was welcome.

Adrenaline shot through me when I heard dogs barking in the distance. As I moved out of the forested area beside the tracks, I spotted a helicopter up ahead, sending out a beam of light through the encroaching darkness to find me. I was just in time.

It was nice to think I was that important.

And I was. I would be.

When I crossed the street onto a block filled with small town houses, a powerful pang of frustration shot through me. Dammit.

It wasn't fair. I'd done so much. And now I'd come up short. Darkness was filling the sky. The sun had set. The moon would be up soon.

I couldn't stand the idea that I might not get that bounty.

All that preparation. All that planning. I'd traveled so far to make it happen, and now bad luck had prevented me from reaching my goal.

How those Feds managed to find my hideout, I didn't know. I knew they'd find it eventually. But I thought I had more time.

They worked fast. I had to give them that.

I came out onto a road. There were no lights except the glow through curtained windows and the flash of pictures moving on television sets. I must've looked real strange heading down that street.

The lights were brighter up ahead from some kind of convenience store, and next to it, a place offering barbecue ribs. The breeze picked up the smell and stuffed it up my nose. Made my mouth water. Two bucks. That was all I had in my pocket. If I used a

credit card, they'd be onto me in a flash. I was dirty, hungry, and homeless.

My stomach screamed.

My rage boiled.

I was so close to claiming my prize. So close and yet so far away.

All I'd wanted to do was take that homeless guy back to my warehouse. I wouldn't have killed him immediately. Rather, my plan had been to call the FBI and tell them where to find their prize. I'd send them a picture, and they'd come running. Of course they would. Like pigeons to old bread.

I'd hide and wait—no shortage of places to hide in a place like that—and when Knox and Yates came charging in, distracted by the homeless guy, I'd take my chance.

My plan was so simple, so clean. The place was perfect, and I would've received the bounty and gotten the heck out of there.

But they'd been one step ahead of me. Once again.

A street sign up ahead pointed the way to Idlebrook. The homeless shelter was there, and the soup kitchen. I'd walk there, and I'd make it happen.

My excitement grew. I didn't have much anymore, but I did have one more lure to set.

I called Dr. Silow, the man who'd tried so hard and failed so badly, and I threw out my bait.

In a Tyvek suit, Stella oversaw the forensic team in the empty warehouse, quietly bustling with focused activity. Several portable compact lights operating off generator power had been placed throughout the space to ward against the onset of the evening.

Downstairs, the young police officers had taped the entire building off, though there were no civilians to protect the site from. Off-site, Ander and Anja were with another forensic team, who were bagging items from David Broad's stolen Toyota Tacoma before hauling it to the lab for sampling.

She was expecting a call from either of them at any moment, giving her an update on their findings.

Stella joined Hagen, also in protective gear, who was standing over the single ratty mattress with the lead forensic specialist, who'd introduced herself as Marsha Donnelly, and a crime scene photographer.

She touched Hagen's shoulder. "What do we have here?"

Hagen indicated the mattress. "Agent Donnelly here has been performing a scene search for biological evidence."

Agent Donnelly nodded. "That's right. I've already collected hair samples from the mattress, the sleeping bag, and these garments here." She pointed to what appeared to be a hoodie and a blanket.

“Any preliminary observations?”

“Well, and of course I can’t say for certain until we get the evidence back to the lab, but I’d speculate that we collected hair samples from at least two individuals. But I also found hair samples from what appeared to be a rodent of some sort. My guess was that whoever was sleeping here found the mattress in a dumpster or similar.”

Stella wrinkled her nose and was glad the suit covered her face. “Do you think there were two people sleeping here?”

Agent Donnelly shrugged. “It’s impossible to say right now. In addition to the hairs, I also found evidence of seminal stains on the mattress, in the sleeping bag, and on the blanket.”

If the mattress had been used by many people, Stella wasn’t sure how that might help. “Is it possible to give an estimate of how long the suspect has been in this location?”

Agent Donnelly considered. “Again, I can’t give you an exact time until I process the evidence. But from the hair samples, the urine and human feces we found over in the corner, and the protein bar wrappers by the side of the bed, I’d say a week at least. Maybe more.”

“What else?”

“Shall we?” The forensic specialist motioned to the large reddish-brown stain on the floor beneath the rope hanging from the ceiling. “I did a quick test with luminol and confirmed my suspicion. All this material is blood. But it’s so dried out, I’d estimate that it’s been left out here in the elements for a week. Possibly more. Considering that DNA and other components in the blood decay rapidly if not stored properly, a delay of even forty-eight hours may make the sample useless.”

Stella mentally crossed her fingers. “Will you be able to perform any kind of blood type match?”

Agent Donnelly shrugged. “It’s cold in here, so that might help, but I won’t know for sure until we perform tests back in the lab.” She pointed to the cuneiform on the walls, brightly lit by their own portable studio light. “Luminol also confirmed that these marks were made in blood.”

Hagen nodded. “That’s not surprising. It looks just like the marks we found in the alley right before the shooting.”

“Indeed. And we’ll need to inspect the photographs in more detail, of course. But what’s interesting is the spatter. Do you see the way the blood has been, for lack of a better word, ‘flicked’ onto the wall here?”

Stella took a closer look. All around the cuneiform marks were speckled streaks of blood, like a macabre Jackson Pollack painting. “I see it. What does it mean?”

“I reviewed the case file before arriving, and what stands out is that these blood spatters don’t align with the victim’s injuries. When the carotid artery is severed, we typically see high-pressure arterial spray...distinct, forceful projections of blood. Even if the victim was positioned against this wall and allowed to bleed out, we’d expect broader, more concentrated patterns, not these finer spatters. That’s assuming the victim remained on their feet throughout the process. The blood is concentrated at about five feet from the ground, which raises questions about positioning and movement at the time of injury.”

“What are you saying?”

Agent Donnelly hesitated for a moment. “My suspicion is that the killer was playing with the blood.”

A surge of anger filled Stella. “Playing?”

Agent Donnelly nodded. “That’s correct. I’m thinking the killer used a paintbrush to throw liquid blood onto the wall. Like a kind of twisted painting.”

Hagen chimed in. “That makes sense. We discovered a paintbrush in his vehicle.”

“Indeed. Well, in any event, we found additional spatter near the bottom of the wall next to where that rope is hanging. That’s where your victim bled out.”

Stella’s phone rang in her pocket. “One sec.” She stepped out into the hall and took off her mask. It was Ander. “What’s the latest?”

“For the most part, it’s what you might expect. We’ve taken hair and fingerprint samples from the Tacoma. We also found some gunshot residue.”

Yeah, from when the bastard was shooting at us.

“Anything else?”

“Yeah, there was a plastic water bottle. It was filled with this kind of sludge that we’ve identified as blood. There was a paintbrush in it too.”

Stella rubbed her temple “We saw that too.”

“Wild, huh? We also found a backpack containing several chargers, a laptop, and a bunch of protein bars, among other things.”

Her phone beeped, indicating an incoming call. Stella glanced at the screen and experienced a hint of surprise. “Ander, sorry, I’m getting another call. I’ve got to take this.”

She'd been expecting a call from Claymore Township. But she thought it would be from the sheriff.

"Stella. How are you? It's Bill."

"Dr. Silow." The administrator of Claymore's psychiatric hospital and the town mayor. "I've actually been needing to speak to you. Do you know if Maureen King knew a person by the first name of Trevor?" She went to the doorway and waved Hagen over.

Dr. Silow chuckled. "That's actually why I'm calling. Trevor McAuley was one of Maureen's students. Must be about nineteen years old now. She talked about him sometimes after she started teaching again."

"And she taught history, yes?"

"Correct."

"What did she say about him?"

"Nothing but positive things. Trevor was one of her star debate students, apparently. He was also on the football team, I believe."

"Really?"

"Yes, she would almost gush over him. She seemed quite taken." He cleared this throat and lowered his voice. "If I'm being honest, there were times when I thought she was a little inappropriate, that perhaps their relationship wasn't on the up-and-up."

"Why do you say that?"

“I have no real reason for saying so. But let’s just say, when you’re in my line of work, you need to be able to read people. I’ll just come out and say it. I suspected they might’ve been having an affair.”

“Why didn’t you tell us any of this after everything that happened?”

Dr. Silow exhaled. “I don’t know. Honestly, I didn’t really remember it, until he called me just now. And now that I do, I feel like I’m betraying Doug somehow.”

Stella tensed. “I take it Trevor’s not in Claymore at the moment.”

“That’s right. How did you...anyway, I haven’t seen him around town for a while. Maybe a few weeks? Though I can’t say for certain. But yes, he just called. He’s in Nashville and wanted to know if I could put him in touch with the FBI agents who were in Claymore. He’d like to meet you.”

Stella gripped her phone tighter. “We’d like to meet him too. How would we recognize him?”

“White male, short brown hair, about six foot tall.”

“Any distinguishing marks? Like a scar or a tattoo? And what color are his eyes?”

“I’m sorry, Stella. I don’t know, on both counts. He looks like a regular young adult male, pretty basic.”

“Did he say where he was?”

Dr. Silow perked up at that. “Yes, in fact he did. He said he was calling from a soup kitchen in some part of Nashville called Idlebrook. He’s been volunteering there apparently. He always was a good-hearted young man. Do you want me to?—”

Stella hung up. Hagen was looking at her with a puzzled expression. “What was that all about?”

“I’ll tell you on the way. Let’s go. We’ve got to move.”

Father Ted Barlow was sweating. The temperature outside was little higher than freezing, but in the homeless shelter next to the soup kitchen, the air was as hot and humid as a tropical paradise. Ten of the twelve beds were already full. Conversation was low and spotted with phlegm-filled chuckles.

The heat was his bishop's idea, a tip given on Father Ted's first day in the diocese.

"Never drop the thermostat lower than seventy-five in the winter. These poor souls have suffered too much from the cold already. And it's the only way you'll get them to part with their clothes so you can get them in the wash."

The bishop hadn't been wrong. Trying to get his guests—and Father Ted always thought of the people who stayed in the shelter as guests—to remove even a crusty, toe-holed sock was harder than persuading a two-year-old to hand over a binkie. When dirt was all someone had, they held on to it.

He stopped at the first bed and wiped his brow. The man who lay on the mattress had narrow clean-shaven cheeks and sunken gray eyes beneath thin red hair. He appeared to be in his mid-fifties but could've just as easily been in his early thirties. The streets added years quickly. Drugs and alcohol added even more.

Mike was new, and Father Ted didn't know anything about him except his first name, that he'd spent five years in the military, and that he liked chocolate cake and couldn't stand carrot cake.

The priest lowered the plastic sack he was holding. He sat on the edge of the bed and waited until his newest guest sat up. “How are you doing, Mike? Get you anything?”

“I’m good, Father. Had myself a hot meal. Got a pillow under my head and a roof over it tonight. That’s about as much as a man can ask for.”

Father Ted smiled. This was one of the best parts of his job. Not many people got to hear gratitude expressed so often and so sincerely for things that were so simple.

He pulled the sack closer.

“Hey, what size are you? Large, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Here.” Father Ted pulled a sweater out of the bag. It was red and woolen with knitted reindeer and a line of green Christmas trees. Last year’s gift, no doubt, tossed away to make room for something new. They often came in this time of year.

He held the sweater in front of Mike. “I think that’ll fit. Why don’t you try it on?”

Mike eyed the sweater suspiciously. “Kinda festive.”

“‘Tis the season, after all.”

Still, Mike hesitated. At last, he sat higher and pulled his sweater over his head. A small cloud of dust and dirt drifted onto the floor. Beneath the sweater, Mike wore a checked shirt with a torn pocket and one button missing.

Father Ted dropped the Christmas sweater onto the foot of the bed. “Just a minute. I think I’ve got one like that too.” He rummaged in the bag again and pulled out a

man's shirt and a round-neck t-shirt. "Here you go, just your style. Why don't you put these on, and I'll put those in the wash for you?"

Mike pulled away. "Hey, these are mine."

"And so are these now." Father Ted laid the shirt and the t-shirt on the bed and held out his hand. "I run a load of laundry here every night. You put these on in the meantime, and when the wash is done, you keep both sets. Hot food, a bed, and clean clothes. You didn't ask for more, but you got it."

When Mike pulled his undershirt over his head, Father Ted struggled not to breathe in sharply.

Mike's ribs were visible under his skin. Scars and bruises ran across his thin chest. Whatever muscle he'd built in the military had long shriveled away, leaving him with little more than ligament and bone.

Father Ted dropped Mike's old clothes into a laundry bag. "I'll get these back to you as soon as they're clean."

At the next bed lay Old Clive, with his white beard and his bulbous red nose. He was a regular and, as usual, he was drinking from a bottle hidden in a paper bag. Father Ted took the bag from his hand.

"You know that's not allowed in here."

Clive tried to retrieve the bag, but his effort was half-hearted and his reach short. Father Ted pulled the bottle away.

"You know we hold meetings in the room next door. Every week. Do you want me to keep a place for you?"

Clive kept his eyes on the bottle. He shrugged. “Sure, Father. You do that for me.”

Father Ted patted him on the shoulder. He’d hold a spot, though he knew there was almost no chance Clive would turn up. He never did.

As he continued to gather clothes, he greeted his guests as he passed them, wished them a good night, returned a fist bump, and delivered a high five. The doorbell rang. Placing the bags of clean and dirty clothes on a table, Father Ted strode between the beds.

The last two beds were empty. There was still room for more that night.

He opened the door.

A figure stood outside. His hood was up, and his face was down. His sweatshirt was torn and muddy, and brambles stuck to the folds of his baggy jeans.

Father Ted opened the door wider. “Welcome home. We have a bed for everyone here.”

The man lowered his hood. He had a fresh face and wild eyes. “I’m not here for a bed. I’m here to get what’s coming to me.”

Hagen blasted through a red light, horn honking. Cars screeched to a stop in the middle of the intersection. Two horns returned Hagen's warning, and the drivers added a selection of swear words to the noise.

Stella called Slade and put her phone on speaker as she scanned their suspect's driver's license. "We've got a lead on a Trevor McAuley, Caucasian male, twenty years old, almost six feet, light-brown hair, from Claymore Township, Pennsylvania. We have a lead that he's at the Good Samaritan Shelter and Soup Kitchen in Idlebrook, a neighborhood just north of downtown. Agent Yates and I are en route, with Agents Ander Bennett and Anja Farrow in a second vehicle."

"It's been a busy night, Agent Knox. I'll alert SWAT and head that way. How'd you find him?"

"Got a call from the mayor at Claymore Township. Trevor got in touch with him...watch it!"

Hagen shot through a stop sign, his hand on the horn, compensating for his foot on the gas. A Volvo hurtling too fast down Trinity Lane didn't even hoot, let alone slow. With a curse, Hagen weaved across the lanes and sent Stella sliding across her seat.

Slade groaned. "That Hagen driving? Tell him to slow down. You people are no good to me dead."

Stella eyed Hagen. "Hear that? Slade says to slow down."

Hagen ignored her. If Trevor McAuley was at the soup kitchen, they needed to get there and shut him down. Before he killed again.

He gripped the wheel, set his jaw, and pushed hard on the gas. With a slight movement of his wrist, he pulled the car into oncoming traffic and zipped past a slow-moving Chevy.

A truck barreled down the road toward them. The truck's horn screamed.

Bright headlights filled the SUV. Stella blinked. She reached for the dashboard as though her arm would be enough to stop the car collapsing in the impact. Hagen pulled the steering wheel to the right, and the SUV slid back into its lane, missing the front of the truck by inches.

“What did I just tell him to do?” Slade sounded exasperated.

Hagen didn't slow. “You both worry too much.”

Stella recentered herself on her seat, pulling her seat belt tighter. “Trevor's going to kill again. He's got a shelter full of vulnerable victims, the kind he likes the most. We've got to get there.”

“Backup's on the way. Wait for them. Don't fall into his trap.”

Hagen had no intention of falling into Trevor McAuley's trap. He had every intention of catching him. But Slade had a point. This dickhead had been pulling them around, arranging a corpse and calling in tip-offs to set up ambushes. They'd been lucky those ambushes hadn't worked. But this call was more deliberate, clearer.

Trevor McAuley hadn't phoned a hotline. He'd called Claymore Township and had the mayor pass on a message.

This was personal.

Slade spoke again. “Did you hear me? Don’t take any risks. If he’s there, take him down together. SWAT’s about ten minutes behind you. This ends tonight.”

Soon, a nightmare that had started with a bloodless corpse hanging in a Pennsylvania wood would come to an end in a Nashville homeless shelter. McAuley would surrender or be shot.

Determination closed in, sharpening Hagen’s focus, shrinking his world. They were going to get him. McAuley would fail, and this whole strange ritual was going to end. For good.

When Maureen King killed herself, Hagen was sure the case was over. Another killer down, another case closed.

He’d been wrong then. He couldn’t be wrong again.

“That Dispatch group. The one on Patrick Marrion’s phone. Did Mac manage to find a way in yet?”

“No.” There was just a hint of disappointment in Slade’s voice. “Mac’s still navigating red tape while waiting for an invite.”

Hagen checked the map on the screen. He slowed slightly and pulled a right. The back tires screamed. “Almost there.”

Stella glanced at him. “We need to take him alive.”

The “what?” that blasted from the phone was even louder than the question exploding in Hagen’s head. He followed up the SSA’s question.

“Stella, if we can take him alive, we will. But?—”

“We’ve got to get into that Dispatch group. We missed the mark with McAuley. Maybe there are others willing to kill. We need to know who they are, all of them, which means we need him to give us access to that group and start tracking people down.”

Stella was right. But they hadn’t been able to take Maureen King alive. There was no guarantee they could take Trevor McAuley alive either.

The phone was silent for a moment before Slade spoke again. “Your first priority is to keep yourselves safe and then secure everyone at the shelter. Only then can you take this guy down. SWAT is seven minutes out. Wait for them.”

Hagen yanked the steering wheel again.

Stella slid into the door. Hagen pulled into the soup kitchen’s parking lot and stopped.

“Yes, sir.” Stella hung up and clicked the safety off on her weapon. “Let’s go.”

Hagen killed the engine. They pulled on their bulletproof vests, and Hagen followed Stella into the parking lot. A food truck was parked near the fence, and there was a smattering of other vehicles.

Anja and Ander pulled in behind their SUV.

“Let’s see what we’ve got, ladies and gentlemen.” Ander greeted them as he tightened the Velcro on his vest.

“Slade said to wait for backup.” Stella was already moving toward the building, however. “But we can do a perimeter check.” Hagen and the other two fell in behind

her, drawing their weapons.

The building in front of them had three doors, all lit by a single bulb that spilled a pool of yellow light onto a trio of welcome signs. The first welcomed the hungry to the soup kitchen, the second greeted the weary, and the third led to a meeting room.

Someone screamed.

They should wait. The rest of the team were less than five minutes away now. They should hold off until everyone arrived so they could all go in together.

Another scream. The noise came muffled through the wall, followed by a loud “nooo,” which was then followed by softer cries, a mixture of horror and panic.

Stella’s dark eyes met Hagen’s. He knew what she was thinking.

They couldn’t wait.

“Breaching.”

The three of them lined up behind Stella.

Stella tried the handle, and the door opened, but the dining room beyond was empty. A faint smell of cooked rice and soap lingered in the air. The lights were off, but enough moonlight beamed through the high windows and the blinds on the door to reveal chairs pushed neatly under clean tables and a floor that had been swept and mopped.

The place was silent. There was no clatter of plates or cutlery. Not even a quiet murmur of conversation from voices deepened by age, illness, and tobacco.

Hagen entered, going left. Stella came behind to his right. “Clear,” they echoed each other as Ander and Anja entered.

Hagen approached the door at the end of the room. A light glowed through the gap underneath. This room should correspond with the sign that had directed guests to the dorm through the second exterior entrance. He put his ear to the wood. Still no sound. Not even a heavy snore from someone who’d fallen asleep too early and wanted to make the most of a night in a soft bed.

Stella took a position by the opposite doorpost. Her eyes met his.

Beyond the door, the shelter had a single dorm room with six beds on each side of the wall. The light was on, and the air contained a thick odor of sweat and unwashed clothes. A door at the end of the room led out to the parking lot.

The place seemed empty.

Next to the dorm, the last interior door led to the meeting room. Here, Hagen heard voices but couldn’t make out the words. Still, the tone was calming, if pleading.

“That’s Father Ted.”

Hagen nodded and motioned for Stella to take point on the other side. Once she was in position, he gently turned the knob and pushed the door open an inch.

A group of men wearing an odd mixture of dirty clothes and clean Christmas sweaters sat on the floor beside the far wall. A priest stood in front of them, his hands pressed together and a look of intense pain on his face.

The cause of that pain was clear.

On top of a Formica-topped table in the middle of the room a man lay face up. He was red-haired and bare-chested. The outline of his ribs showed through pale skin pocked with scabs and fleabites.

His throat had been cut.

Blood ran from the gash in his neck. It flowed over the table, stained the back of his head, and dripped onto a pool that had already formed on the floor. His eyes were wide open, but they didn't blink or move, and it was too late for them to shed tears. A long knife lay on the table next to his shoulder.

A man in a hoodie stood behind the table. Trevor McAuley. He held a gun and motioned to Father Ted with the muzzle. "Now you see I'm not playing around."

Stella touched Hagen's shoulder, signaling she'd go left when they entered, but her touch itself was reassuring.

He watched as McAuley motioned again, waving the gun harder.

"No, no." The priest's pleas were hard to listen to. "Please don't do this. You don't have to do this."

Behind him, one of the shelter's guests jabbed a finger. "You're a coward, man. You put that gun down for one second, and you're a dead man. You're crazy. That's what you are. Crazy."

The figure in the hood shrugged. "Yeah, I might be. Might just be crazy enough to kill all of you. You can thank me when the time comes." He pointed at the body. "Turn him over."

Father Ted placed his hands on the dead man's shoulders. He looked as though he

were blessing him or reassuring him that all would be well and his life would soon improve. His lips moved. Some quiet prayer for the dead, Hagen assumed, though a prayer when he'd been alive might've been more helpful.

The priest lifted one shoulder and pushed with the other.

The body turned easily enough, the movement lubricated by the blood on the table and the thinness of the torso.

Father Ted stepped back, his bloody hands held out in front of him. "Please. Just put the gun down. We can talk. It's not too late."

"Back. Farther." McAuley waved Father Ted away.

Hagen glanced at the door that opened onto the parking lot. From his vantage point, he could tell that the blinds on the window were down but the moon glowed through the slats.

The FBI SUVs shouldn't be visible from that vantage point. Hagen held his breath.

McAuley didn't know he had company yet.

"More. It's not too late. Still got a little time. Now sit down with the others."

When Father Ted was back among his guests, McAuley approached the table. He shifted his gun to his left hand, lifted the blade, and began carving into the victim's back.

Hagen adjusted his mic. "We've got one armed suspect, at least one casualty, and eleven hostages. SWAT's still minutes out. We need to contain this."

Ander signaled he'd take the back exit, and Hagen nodded.

He turned to Anja and kept his voice low. "You're with us. We go in hard and fast, understood?"

Stella wanted to tell Hagen to get on with it, but he held on for another minute until Ander confirmed the exterior door was covered.

Hagen counted down.

This was always the worst moment for Stella, the moment before everything started rushing around her. She remembered taking down Boris Kerne in a music store. That had ended with a busted wrist for her. Hopefully, no one got injured this time. Or worse.

They had to take Trevor McAuley alive.

Hagen gave the signal and kicked the door open.

“FBI. Put down your weapon.”

Stella rushed in behind him, with Anja on her heels. They fanned out, weapons trained on McAuley. Stella scanned the room.

A mosaic of images fought for her attention, each part of the picture striking her at the same time. Ander coming through the exterior door, Hagen shouting orders at McAuley, Anja shifting beside her.

And on the table, a man’s bloody corpse lay face down. His back was bare, the skin marked by the same strange writing Stella had seen too many times before.

Trevor McAuley, the killer who'd hounded them from Claymore Township, held Father Ted as a human shield. He gripped the knife he held to the priest's neck in one hand and aimed the pistol toward Stella and Hagen.

He fired—twice.

Both went wild. Stella hit the floor behind a table as a bullet whizzed past her shoulder. A dozen feet away, Hagen sprawled on the floor too.

No cover. No escape.

“You two took your time.” McAuley's voice was mocking, excited. “Took you long enough. Thought maybe you weren't coming.”

“Trevor McAuley, drop the weapon now!” Stella used her command voice, forcing steel into every word. “Put it down. Do it now!”

Shelter guests scrambled to their feet and shuffled to the wall, pushing and shoving to leave as quickly as possible while the maniac's attention was diverted. Ander and Anja covered for them and escorted them to safety.

The young man didn't seem to mind. Even as his hostages fled, he kept his focus on Stella and Hagen, the muzzle of the gun shifting back and forth between them. Stella badly wished either of her fellow agents had remained inside. Maybe one of them could've gotten a shot.

Even as the thought entered her mind, McAuley's focus shifted to where Ander now stood in the doorway. “Don't you dare try something. You can get these folks out of here. But if you try something, I'll start killing.”

Ander took a step back, but just enough to get out of the line of fire. He'd wait, Stella

knew, for a better opportunity.

McAuley shifted his attention back to Stella and Hagen. “It’s only you two I need. See? I don’t care. I’ll let everyone else go. They don’t mean anything to me.” He fired another shot at Stella. The shot ricocheted off metal, dangerously close.

Stella moved, adjusting for a shot, but McAuley jerked, dragging the priest back, the muzzle of his gun shifting toward her.

She cursed and flipped the table, its surface forming a temporary barrier between them. It was made of some kind of compacted wood that might be able to withstand a bullet or two. But not much more.

Hagen scrambled over and joined her behind the table.

This was too familiar. Less than two weeks had passed since they’d found themselves in a similar position, aiming their weapons at someone and hoping they’d get out of the room with no more spilled blood.

They’d failed then. They couldn’t fail this time. They couldn’t let this kid kill the priest. And they needed McAuley’s help to put a stop to these killings entirely.

“Trevor, you need to put those weapons down. It’s not too late.”

The young man laughed at Hagen’s order. He was excited. “You’re right, it’s not. Everyone can get out of here safely. Except you two. That’s the deal.”

Stella shifted to the left edge of the table. If Hagen went right and she went left, one of them might get a clean shot.

McAuley backed toward the wall, dragging Father Ted with him. His gun pressed

against the priest's ribs. "So what's it gonna be? Your lives or his?" He reached the corner of the room. He had no way out.

And they had no easy way to take him down. They'd have to talk their way out of this problem.

"Trevor." Father Ted's voice trembled. "Is that your name? Trevor? Why don't you tell me what you want. Maybe we can?—"

The deranged young man laughed at him. "We can what? It's very simple. There's no other way out of this. None of this is on me, you hear that? None of it."

Stella knew this moment. Trevor McAuley wanted to talk. He needed to be heard. And that was fine by her. If he was talking, he wasn't killing.

She grabbed onto that thread. "Okay, that's fine. Why is it not on you?"

His grip tightened on the priest. "I have to do this. I have to! It's for my future."

That laugh again. Excited.

But what did he mean? His future?

Before she could ask, he went on. "I'm not like Mrs. King. I don't care about that redemption bullshit."

Stella stayed calm, patient. "You and Mrs. King killed Laurence Gill and Mark Tully?"

"That's right." His tone was almost conversational. "She had this idea one day that Laurence was the key to salvation. I never bought into it, but I'd do anything for her.

And Mark...well, that was just for fun.”

Hagen’s jaw clenched. “Is this a game?”

McAuley grinned. “Nah. Furthest thing from it. But some people are worth more than others, that’s just the truth.”

Stella eased left, inching toward a shot.

McAuley didn’t notice. He was too caught up in his own voice.

“What about Patrick?”

“Bait. Something to lure you two back home.”

Bait. For her and Hagen.

But why?

Stella tightened her hands on her weapon. She wanted to shoot him there and then. If he just moved a little, she could take him.

And they’d struggle to catch the other players. She needed to keep him distracted.
“And Otto Walker?”

McAuley scoffed. “Otto was my assistant. Or so I thought. He had this method...said he had a better way to take the blood we needed. We used his little trick on Patrick. Then Otto got cold feet.” His lip curled. “Can’t have that. Either you’re in, or you’re out.”

“So you killed him.”

“I did. I had too. But Otto didn’t matter. Or Patrick. It was you I wanted. Both of you. Then I’ll get paid and get out of here. No one from my old life will ever find me again.”

Paid.

Who was paying him?

A question for later.

Stella nodded. “Well, here we are. Let Father Ted go. You don’t need him.”

That laugh came again, and goose bumps rose on Stella’s arms.

“You’re right again. But that puts me at a bit of a disadvantage, no?”

“Come on, Trevor.” Hagen shook his head. “That’s not how this works. Let him go and put your weapons down. We can figure this out.”

“You’re surrounded, Trevor.” Stella couldn’t understand what was going through the young man’s head. Had he played one too many video games and believed his life would be reset later? “SWAT’s on the way. You don’t want to die today.”

She watched him process. He was doing the math, calculating the odds.

“We can help you, Trevor. If it’s money you want, we can give you money. But only if you let Father Ted go.”

McAuley hesitated. Then, a flicker of realization.

No way out. No reset button. Game over meant forever in the real world.

McAuley pressed the blade deeper into Father Ted's skin. "I'll let him go once everyone else leaves. Get out!"

He fired two more shots at the doorway. It was empty, thankfully.

But the situation couldn't go on like this. She needed to act.

Stella shifted around the left side of the table. Father Ted was bleeding. McAuley's blade had broken through skin, and his white collar sucked in the red from the wound like a sponge.

Though now exposed, she could shoot McAuley before he did any more damage. She knew she could. Adjusting her aim, she slid the muzzle down his body and squeezed the trigger.

A red mist exploded from McAuley's thigh. He screamed, dropping to his knees. The knife clattered beside him as he tried to staunch the sudden rush of blood. His gun was still in his other hand, though.

Rushing forward, Stella kicked his gun out of his grasp as he rolled over in agony. One hand dropped close to the knife.

"Father!" Hagen yelled, and the priest started crawling away.

As the young man reached for the knife, Stella lunged to get to it first just as another gunshot blasted through the room.

The top of McAuley's head opened up like a dropped pumpkin. His brains splattered across the floor and wall. And a wisp of smoke drifted away from the muzzle of Anja's Glock.

Stella's gut twisted. "Dammit, Anja!" But she didn't have time to dwell on the consequences of the other agent's choice. "Call an ambulance!" She kicked the knife clear and checked for a pulse.

Nothing.

She looked at Hagen, who was tending to the priest. "Hagen?"

Father Ted took a shaky breath. "I think I'm okay. A surface wound." He touched his bloodstained collar. "Someone's watching over me."

Hagen pressed a cloth to the wound and activated his radio. "This is Agent Yates, requesting EMS to my location, now."

Stella inhaled deeply, trying to slow her racing heart. She'd checked the oven three times already, but her stomach still twisted with doubt.

It looked right—bubbly cheese, golden edges, the rich scent of tomato and herbs filling the kitchen—but what if something had gone wrong? Could you burn lasagna? Probably. If anyone could, it was her.

Her mouth was dry. Her heart thumped too fast for something as simple as dinner.

Hagen must have noticed, because he brushed a kiss against her ear. "Smells great."

She swallowed, forcing a smile, and pulled open the oven door. The heat rushed out, wrapping around her face. It was fine. More than fine.

Hagen grabbed the oven mitts off the counter before she could. "Here, let me."

She stepped aside, watching as he pulled the dish out effortlessly. Why did he look so damn confident when she was sweating like a crazy woman?

She followed him into the dining room, edging around Bubs, who barely lifted his head from the rug. The dog had his priorities straight. Hagen had fed him before their guests arrived, hoping a full belly would keep him sleepy and out of the way. So far, it was working.

At the dining table by the window, the entire team was squeezed in, glasses of wine

in hand, waiting. The moment Hagen set the steaming lasagna down on the trivet, a loud “Ooooh” filled the room.

Caleb’s mouth dropped open. “You made this, Stella?”

“With my own mediocre hands.” She flexed her fingers, mentally crossing her fingers. “Hey, I’ve got to do something while I’m on administrative leave for the shooting. Anja too.”

“Hey, all I did was buy the Italian bread.” Anja smiled.

“Damn. Hagen, listen to her. She can teach you a few things.” Slade held up his plate like a hopeful starving orphan.

Stella cut a large chunk, thrilled that it didn’t collapse into a soggy mess.

“I always listen to Stella.” Hagen took the seat next to her.

She shot him a look.

He winked at her. “I sometimes listen to Stella.”

She laughed. “Hagen usually does all the cooking. And I always listen to him...as he tells me the history of the dish and how it needs to be prepared, how it should be eaten, and why it just doesn’t taste the same in restaurants.”

Slade took his plate and breathed in the steam rising from the cheese. Stella passed him the bowl of salad as Mac held out her plate.

“Smaller piece, please. Gotta tell you, I still haven’t found a way into that Dispatch group. I’ve compared Trevor McAuley’s phone with devices belonging to Patrick Marrion, Otto Walker, and Maureen King. Looks like they were all members of the

same history group on Dispatch. I would kill to get into that thing.”

Stella would too. “Amen to that. Let’s reach out to Sheriff Deacon and get Maureen King’s phone down here. Then we’ll have one more avenue to dig into.”

“I’ll do that.” Mac passed Stacy the salad.

Stacy took the salad bowl as she waited for her lasagna. “Yeah, I’m trying too. None of the forums know anything about it or any of the social media pages. I’m struggling to get an invitation.”

Slade wasn’t waiting for the others. He dug into the lasagna, shoved a large corner into his mouth, and breathed out heavily. “Hot...hot. But good. Oh, boy, this is good.”

Stella bit back a smile at her SSA’s thumbs-up.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d cooked for people. And the last time she’d cooked for people who’d enjoyed what she made was lost even further back in time. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Mm-hmm. I do.” Slade swallowed and sipped his wine. “I talked to your friend this afternoon, the sheriff in Claymore Township.”

Stella wrinkled her nose. She’d hoped she heard the last of him. Sheriff Deacon was no friend of hers. “Did he thank us for finding David Broad’s stolen truck? We just halved his annual caseload for him.”

“He didn’t. But you’re right, he should have. He said he’s been sniffing around, spoke to Trevor McAuley’s parents. Looks like McAuley headed down here as soon as he read you and Hagen worked in Nashville. Then he waited for you like a spider.”

Stella took Caleb's plate and began to slice.

"Don't be stingy now."

Grinning, she added another slice. Caleb was a big guy. He could handle it.

"He came to target us." She still couldn't believe it.

"Probably. He could've tried taking you down in Claymore, and he didn't. Maybe he felt the town was too hot after he lost his first partner. Just try to...stay out of the headlines in the future."

Hagen poured her a glass of wine. Ander had brought the bottle, and Stella could tell from Hagen's expression that the choice did not impress him. He'd drink it anyway, out of respect. "We'll do our best. But the paparazzi...they're everywhere."

Stella sipped her wine. The grapes were more dry than sweet and did little to drown the ache in her stomach.

Slade waved his fork. A piece of cheese fell onto his plate. He looked very grateful for the chance to be out of the house in the evening and enjoying a social event with his team.

"Let's be content knowing we caught the bad guy. He won't be carving up any more victims. You two were in an unlucky situation. But if you both hadn't been on leave, Maureen King and Trevor McAuley would still be up in Pennsylvania, killing their way through Claymore Township. It's thanks to you we've wrapped this up."

He raised his glass. The others did the same, and Stella's cheeks warmed. She didn't want attention from the media, and she didn't want attention from her colleagues either. She was only doing her job.

Besides, there was another problem they had to consider. “I’m not sure this case is wrapped up. We still don’t know who’s giving the orders on the Dispatch group.” It was hard not to shoot a pointed look at Anja, but she managed. “For all we know, they could recruit other criminals and strike again.”

Slade rubbed his eyes, and Stella hoped he didn’t get oregano in any sensitive areas. “That’s true. But I think we can leave that until tomorrow.”

Hell yeah.

They ate and drank and laughed. The compliments on her cooking resumed. Hagen’s arm lay across the chair, and he ate heartily, only occasionally turning to flash her a little smile.

The lasagna was good.

She’d buried the takeout containers from the local Italian restaurant deep in the trash, making sure they were out of sight. Hopefully, the mystery of how Stella had become such a talented chef would be one mystery even Hagen Yates would never solve.

While Stella indulged in layers of cheesy goodness—made extra special by chef subterfuge—Slade’s phone chimed. Everyone stopped chattering and focused on their boss. When he saw all eyes on him, Slade waved at the meal. “Keep going, nosies.”

He rose and headed into the living room. But he was back within twenty seconds. He gave Stella a weary smile. “You just had to call it, huh?”

Stella’s confusion mixed with a small jolt of adrenaline. Something had happened.

“Everyone listen up.” Slade put his phone on speaker. “Jack, repeat what you just told me. My team’s here.”

“This is Supervisory Special Agent Jack McHenry. I’m based out of New York, and I’m reaching out because there seems to be a string of copycats to your most recent case. Right now, I have three confirmed murders involving cuneiform and exsanguination. One in Omaha, one in Stanley, Wisconsin, and one here in New York.”

The silence in the room made Stella’s ears buzz. She set her fork down. Her appetite vanished.

“This is Agent Stella Knox. Are you sure, Agent McHenry?”

“I’m sending the files now. You tell me.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for them.” Slade disconnected.

Stella wiped her sweaty hands on her lap. She’d known someone was behind Trevor’s actions. She’d known the case wasn’t closed.

But she hadn’t expected such a slaughter.

Across the table, Slade looked as pale as she felt. He slipped his phone into his pocket, exhaling slowly. “Looks like McAuley wasn’t as special as he thought. Someone out there’s picking up where he left off.”

Stella’s stomach twisted. A killer clone.

Slade pushed back his chair. “Time to get back to work.”

The End.

To Be Continued...