



# Killer Countdown (Stella Knox FBI Mystery #15)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** One countdown. One prophecy. Zero second chances.

FBI Agent Stella Knox has faced monsters in every form—serial killers, cult leaders, and the darkest corners of the human soul. So when a millionaire's home burns and his daughter vanishes, a ransom demand screams textbook kidnapping. Until the girl strolls into the wreckage and murders a federal agent.

It's not the end of a case. It's the beginning of something far worse.

Stella's team is left reeling. Carved into the agent's flesh are ancient cuneiform symbols—grotesque signatures that have surfaced at ritualistic crime scenes across the country. Wisconsin. Idaho. New York. And the small Pennsylvania town where Stella thought she helped end a nightmare.

She was wrong.

The Administrator has returned. And he isn't alone.

His disciples believe the world is ending. That salvation requires sacrifice. And unless Stella and her team can unravel the prophecy and unmask the mastermind behind it, blood will soak the streets including the blood of those she loves most.

**Total Pages (Source):** 44

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

The grass was soft beneath Mannie Scharf's feet, the air warm with the scent of cut clover and honeysuckle.

His daughter spun in the middle of the park, her bare arms catching the sun, her laughter bubbling like music over the breeze.

Tyra wore the yellow sundress with the sunflower buttons—the one she'd worn on her seventh birthday.

Her curls bounced with every twirl, and her cheeks were flushed with joy.

Mannie watched from a bench shaded by an old oak, smiling as she looped through patches of light and shadow. She turned toward him, eyes sparkling. "Daddy!"

She ran, arms wide, little feet thudding on the path. He stood to meet her, arms open, heart aching with that strange, beautiful fullness he always experienced around his little girl.

But instead of launching into his hug, she twirled again. As she faced him, something shifted.

Her dress stretched longer, darker. Her limbs thinned. The curls straightened into shoulder-length waves. She was older now—maybe eleven. Still smiling, but not as brightly. Her eyes didn't sparkle quite the same way.

"Look, Dad. "

Another spin, and she was a teenager. The dress was gone, replaced by jeans and a hoodie. Her fingernails were painted a mix of black and purple. The smile was gone, her gaze distant.

She turned again and reappeared older. Frowning.

Another twirl. And now she scowled. Her eyes locked on his, cold and unrecognizable.

“Tyra?” What happened to his little girl?

He blinked, and the sky darkened.

Smoke began to seep from the trees at the park’s edge, curling in like fog. As he watched, the grass beneath her feet yellowed, then blackened. Her form blurred in the haze.

She opened her mouth to speak, but what came out was no longer sweet.

“Daa-ddy!” Her voice cracked, raw and warped.

He ran toward her, but the air thickened like wet wool. Each step took more effort. Smoke climbed up his legs, into his mouth, down his throat.

He couldn’t scream. Couldn’t breathe.

Still, he reached through the choking fog, groping for her. When a wisp of hair brushed his fingertips, he clutched for it, pulling her toward him.

She came willingly—but she wasn’t Tyra.

Her skin crumbled at his touch. Her eyes were hollow, her grin wide and skeletal.

She laughed, a sharp, cracking sound, and exhaled a cloud of smoke into his face.  
“Hi, Daddy...”

Mannie jerked upright, gasping, clutching his chest. A nightmare. Thank God.

He dragged the sheet across his brow to catch the sweat, forcing a deep breath into his lungs...and coughed.

Coughed again.

The panic was instant, primal.

Tyra might've been part of a dream.

But the smoke? The smoke was real .

The clock on the nightstand glowed 11:50 p.m., its red numbers barely cutting through the dark. He fumbled for the switch. The bedside lamp clicked on, casting light through the haze.

There was no question anymore.

The house was on fire.

Panic slamming into his chest, he turned toward his wife. “Frances!” he rasped, heart thundering in his ears. Every breath scratched his lungs.

She didn't move.

He shook her gently. Then harder. “Frannie! Wake up. The house’s on fire.”

She moaned. “What...?”

Mannie grabbed her shoulders, shaking her hard. “You took something, didn’t you?”

She blinked slowly. Her pupils were pinpricks. Damn the sleeping pills.

“Come on.” He pulled her upright, her body heavy and uncooperative. Her knees buckled as he helped her stand.

The knob on the bedroom door was still cool to the touch. He opened it slowly, praying he was wrong.

He wasn’t.

Smoke poured in. Dark. Swirling. Heavy.

Frances coughed beside him, her face twisted in confusion and alarm. “We have to go.” She tugged his arm. “Mannie. Now.”

“Tyra,” he croaked. “I’ve got to find her.”

“No!” She filled both hands with his t-shirt and attempted to pull him toward the stairs. “We need to go. She’s probably already out!”

But he knew his daughter. If she’d been awake, she’d have come to them. Screamed. Something.

Forcing his wife’s hands off him, Mannie pushed her toward the stairs. “Get out. Call 911. I have to check her room.”

He didn't wait for her reply. He turned down the hallway, crawling low, coughing, one arm stretched out along the wall.

Smoke thickened with each step. His eyes watered. He could barely see.

He reached Tyra's door. Pressed his hand to the knob.

Searing pain lit up his palm. He jerked back with a cry before lifting the tail of his t-shirt over his hand and trying again.

The door creaked open...and all hell broke loose.

Flames roared at him. Heat shoved him backward, suffocating and brutal. Tyra's room was an inferno. The walls, the bed, the posters, the stuffed animals she insisted on keeping even into her college years—everything consumed.

He shouted her name, again and again.

The fire answered.

The rabbit she'd had since she was two curled in on itself, blackening. The desk—gone. Her dresser collapsed inward with a crack of surrender.

There was nothing. No shape. No body. No movement.

Just fire.

He coughed, this time gagging. His knees buckled. He stumbled back, smoke clawing at his lungs, his eyes, his thoughts.

Mannie tried to shout again, but only a croak came out. The hallway reeled around

him. He reached the stairs. Fell to his hands and knees.

Where was Frannie? Tyra? Had they gotten out?

His vision tunneled. Every breath scraped fire through his throat. His knees buckled.

He thought of Tyra on her first day of school, how she'd clutched his hand with her whole body, eyes wide, trusting. She'd been so sweet then. So?—

Strong arms caught him. Someone hauled him up. A mask pressed against his face. Cool air flooded his lungs, shocking and pure.

He was hoisted up—over a shoulder. The firefighter's radio crackled near his ear. Lights cut through the smoke.

Mannie fought to lift his head, but he could only scream.

“Tyra! My daughter's inside. You have to save her!”

He kicked against the weight of the man carrying him. Fought to make them understand.

“Please...my little girl's in there!”

No one answered.

He screamed until his voice broke. Until the smoke swallowed it whole.

Until there was nothing left.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

FBI Special Agent Stella Knox had been hoping for a quiet weekend. But work had turned into a scramble during dinner a couple nights ago, after a call from Supervisory Special Agent Jack McHenry of New York—a far cry from her home base, the resident agency in Nashville.

“I’m reaching out because there seems to be a string of copycats to your most recent case...”

For two days now, she and their team had been sharing field reports, comparing crime scene photos, and making what felt like a million phone calls to field offices around the country in an effort to determine what cases might be connected to theirs.

Over the past few weeks, Stella’s focus had been on serial cases where victims were exsanguinated. Cuneiform characters had been carved into the victims’ backs in a strange ritual. So far, she and her partner, in law and life, Special Agent Hagen Yates had caught two different perpetrators.

It appeared there were more out there .

She rubbed her eyes, as if she could scrub away the images she’d seen recently.

“Let it go for a couple hours.” Hagen stroked her back as they stepped onto the porch. He was one to talk. She knew his brain was going at a million miles an hour too.

“But—”

“Ander invited us here so we could all have a peaceful moment together.”

Stella gave it up. “You’re right.” She knocked in the middle of the Christmas wreath that hung on her colleague and friend’s front door.

Behind her, a plastic snowman waved at the street from the middle of the lawn.

She hadn’t pegged Special Agent Ander Bennett as an outdoor-decorations kind of guy.

She rocked on her heels, waiting for him to answer, as her boyfriend, Special Agent Hagen Yates, rubbed the small of her back with long, loving strokes.

Ander had invited them over on this Sunday evening for warm drinks and friendly conversation, a way for Stella and Hagen to get to know his girlfriend, explosives expert Alessandra Lagarde, a bit better.

The couple had moved in with each other after dating for only a month.

So Stella and Hagen were playing catch-up.

On the car ride over, Stella told Hagen that they needed to start thinking about the flights to Florida, as her mother had been pestering her about when they’d arrive for Christmas. Hagen said he’d thought they were spending the holiday with his family at his sister Amanda’s ranch outside of town.

Stella had sworn silently as she stared out the window at the streetlights passing by.

They hadn’t talked this through. She’d just assumed they’d see her mom and stepfather in Florida for the holiday.

Stella liked Hagen’s sisters, Amanda and Brianna, and his mom, but her mom had no one except her second husband.

Cancer had taken Stella's brother years ago.

She always felt it her duty to see her mom during the holidays.

"We need to talk about this," was the last thing she'd said on the topic as she opened the passenger-side door outside Ander's house.

The only thing they had agreed on was that they'd try to avoid talking shop so they could get to know Alessandra. Well, they'd also agreed they'd probably fail miserably at that, as FBI agents always did when they got together.

Ander finally opened the door in a Santa hat, with a steaming mug of mulled wine in his hand. "Ho ho ho!" He beamed a big smile.

Not exactly filled with the yuletide spirit, Stella raised her eyebrows and didn't smile back. "Too soon. We've got eight more days before Christmas."

"I like to get all my ho ho hos in early. You don't want to wait until Christmas Eve to find you haven't handed out nearly enough, and now the stores are closed, and you can't get a ho ho ho anywhere."

Shaking her head, Stella squeezed past him into the living room. "Pretty sure you can get those things everywhere. They come in packs of three."

Ander laughed. "That's what you think. I heard Slade is setting up a special unit to investigate people who haven't ho ho ho'd enough at Christmas. Wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of that." He turned back to Hagen. "How're you doing?"

Stella heard Ander and Hagen slap hands behind her as she walked into the living room.

Wreaths hung around the walls and above the fireplace.

A Christmas tree stood in the corner of the room.

Tinsel trailed evenly around its branches.

The baubles hung in tidy rows and were even color coordinated, rising from blue and red to silver and gold before meeting the golden star balanced delicately at the top of the perfectly dressed tree.

Alessandra came in from the kitchen, holding a bowl of guacamole and another of chips.

Stella smiled and pointed at the tree. “Your work?”

Alessandra placed the bowls on the table and gave Stella a hug. The tall, thin redhead wore a fuzzy white sweater with a long green-and-blue plaid skirt. As Alessandra pulled away, she pushed her chunky glasses up her nose. A move she’d no doubt be doing all night.

“Ander helped.” Alessandra placed her hands on her hips and admired the decorations. “He stayed in the kitchen, mulled the wine, and left me to it, per my orders.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“Isn’t it?” Ander draped an arm over Alessandra’s shoulder. “I haven’t put up Christmas decorations in years.”

“Still haven’t.” Hagen nudged him. “Alessandra put them all up.”

“No. I mean, yes, she did. Murphy usually stays with his mom for Christmas, and it’s always felt weird to do it just for myself.” He pressed his lips to his girlfriend’s temple. “This is better. This is what a home is supposed to look like this time of year.”

Alessandra dipped a tortilla chip into the guac. “Demetri’s dad is out of town for a couple of weeks, and we have Murphy. One big happy family for a few days. It’s perfect.”

She bit into her tortilla chip, and Ander kissed her, smearing a tiny bit of guacamole on her lip. “Ugh. Worst timing!” But Alessandra was laughing.

Stella smiled. The lights and the tree and the tinsel did make the place feel like a home. Warm and cozy.

“Where’s Murphy anyway?”

“He’s in his bedroom. With Demetri.” Ander dropped his arm from Alessandra’s shoulder and shouted for his son. “Hey, Murphy. Come and say hello.”

The ten-year-old popped around an open door. He had a head full of curls just like his father, and there was something in the casual way he stood, one hand on the doorframe, that reminded Stella of Ander. They were going to be close when he grew up, those two. She could see it.

Murphy opened the door wider to reveal that, behind him, sitting against the wall in front of a tower of blocks, was a three-year-old with a shock of untidy red hair.

Alessandra’s son Demetri looked so much like her, Stella wondered if a father had been involved at all. He must’ve had hair as red as hers.

Murphy waved. “Hey.”

Hagen waved back. “You babysitting in there?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Hope you’re charging your dad a lot of money. I think the rate now is fifty bucks an hour. Or is that a minute? I can’t remember.”

Murphy’s eyes widened.

Ander lifted one of the bowls from the coffee table. “He gets paid in chips and considers himself lucky. Here.” He held out the bowl.

Murphy grabbed a fistful of greasy, processed, fried tortilla chips.

Ander returned the bowl to its place and gripped Hagen’s shoulder. “Mulled wine. It’s good stuff. Been mixing it all afternoon. A glass? Stella?”

“Can I have some?” Murphy’s question came through a mouthful of chips.

“No.” Ander shook his head. “Go play.”

Murphy looked crestfallen, but he tramped back to his bedroom where Demetri was banging two blocks together.

“I’d love some mulled wine.” Stella dropped onto the sofa next to Alessandra. “But I want to hear all about your trip to Vegas. What’d you do? What’d you see?”

Ander led Hagen to the table by the wall where he ladled three mugs of wine from a large electric pot set to warm. He gave two to Hagen, who gave a cup to Stella, and

brought another over to Alessandra.

Stella sipped. The drink was warm and spiced and tasted like being wrapped in the comfort of good company on a cold winter night.

But she was sure that Hagen would still have something to say about the wine's terroir , a word she only recently learned—from him, naturally—and the grape and the vintage.

“The trip was good.” Ander's tone was a little too light. “You know. Vegas.”

Alessandra gave him a weighted look.

Ander glanced at the half-open bedroom door.

He lowered his voice and changed the subject.

“Actually, that reminds me of something I've been wanting to talk to you guys about.

I've been thinking of asking Slade for a move.

Maybe join Caleb. Something with less fieldwork and more office time. More family time.”

Hagen looked slightly shocked, but recovered quickly enough with a smile that showed many of his teeth. Ander had clearly thrown him with that comment, trumping any thoughts he might've had about the mulled wine.

“Wow, look at you. Family guy. You've already got the two kids and a pension plan. Next will be confetti, a station wagon, and a dog.”

Alessandra and Ander exchanged a look. Ander's lips drew a thin, pleading line, and Alessandra closed her eyes. She gave a small nod, and Ander's face became one big smile.

Without another word, she removed her hand from Ander's and held up her fingers to reveal a thin gold band that Stella hadn't noticed under the bowl of guacamole .

It was Stella's turn to recover quickly. To cover her surprise, she clapped her hands together. "You..."

Alessandra wiggled her fingers. "While were in Vegas. Just a spur-of-the-moment decision. But it was absolutely the right thing to do."

Hagen pushed Ander hard on the shoulder. "You dog. And you told me you didn't go to Vegas to gamble."

"Dude, I just placed one bet." He pressed a kiss to his wife's hair. "And won big time."

"Hit the jackpot." Stella raised her cup. A mug of mulled wine didn't seem like the right thing to use for this kind of toast, but she didn't care. She just wanted to celebrate the moment. "That's wonderful. To both of you."

They clinked their mugs. The steam above the wine rose and merged. They were going to have a good Christmas.

Ander gave Alessandra a sweet kiss as Stella and Hagen gazed at each other. She was glad he appeared to be genuinely pleased for the couple. She was too.

They all drank after that.

The festive moment was interrupted by the buzzing of Hagen's phone on the coffee table and the vibrating phone in the pocket of Stella's jeans. Ander reached for his own pocket.

Stella glanced at her screen. "Slade wants us in first thing in the morning. Probably something to do with all those cases. Guess the season of peace and love is short-lived in our line of work."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

Only one aspect of Hagen's relationship with Stella still made him uncomfortable.

He'd grown used to the fact that she was a lot messier than he was. He now picked up her clothes from the bedroom floor and tossed them into the laundry without complaints or snide remarks.

And true, her aquarium had reduced his counter space in the kitchen. But he'd grown to like Scoot and sometimes talked to the fish when he was cooking alone, though he'd never admit that to Stella.

Even Stella's willingness to eat anything that wouldn't kill her just meant he had a more appreciative audience for his own culinary creations.

But the walk together into the shared office at the Nashville FBI Resident Agency always made him squirm.

There was something too cozy about it, as though they were the kind of couple that had to do everything together. Even work. Even drive to work. Even sit at the same line of desks in the same open office.

He'd always been independent, ever since the death of his father. These days, as they walked down the hallway of the Bureau, Hagen felt as though everyone was looking at him, judging him, seeing him as dependent.

He'd just have to get used to it.

They hadn't taken two steps into the office when Special Agent Anja Farrow nearly

bumped into them.

Anja was new. She'd recently transferred to Nashville from San Francisco, where Hagen had also served. They'd had a fling in the short time their paths overlapped, and Anja did little to hide the fact she wished it hadn't ended.

She stopped short.

"Oh, hey, Hagen! And Stella. Of course. Morning. By the way, Slade wants to see the entire team in five minutes in the meeting room. I'm headed there now." She turned sideways to let them pass.

Stella wished her a good morning and headed to her desk.

As Hagen followed, Anja jabbed him in the arm with her finger. "Hey, guess who I spoke to last night."

The names of the people they shared an office with flashed through Hagen's mind.

Ander Bennett. Stella's best friend at work, Mackenzie Drake, who had her own room for her cyber sleuthing.

Caleb Hudson, who usually worked on white-collar crime, and Stacy Lark, the newest team member before Anja.

He even thought of their boss, SSA Paul Slade, but doubted that she'd have boasted about the text he'd sent to the entire group.

"I'm guessing...the delivery guy who brought your dinner."

"No. I mean, yes, obviously. All out of leftovers and couldn't be bothered to cook

again. But no. I had a chat with Gregory Wynne. You remember Greg from the San Fran office? Big guy. Big beard.”

Hagen remembered Greg. They’d downed a few beers together in the Mission from time to time and bonded over their mutual ability to launch pickup lines that never failed. Greg was a name from another life.

“Sure. How’s he doing?”

“Good. He ran into your ex, Madi Keneke, in Haight-Ashbury the other day.” Anja smiled. “Said she was looking good.”

Hagen glanced at Stella. She was across the bullpen, taking her coat off by her desk and not listening to their conversation. Even if she’d heard, he doubted she’d have minded too much. Hagen found the reminders from his past irritating, but Stella seemed to think they were amusing.

“I’m sure she did look good. I have great taste.” He brushed past Anja and headed for his seat in the corner behind Stella’s as Slade strode down the hall from his office.

Their boss was in his mid-forties with a head of mostly gray hair that added a decade to his years. The job had probably done most of that work. The man never looked well-rested, and this morning was no different.

“Right on time.” Slade glanced at Hagen and Stella. “The others are waiting in the meeting room. Come and join us.”

Hagen dropped his things by his desk and followed their boss, with Stella right behind him.

Slade was already seated when they reached the meeting room, and so were Ander,

Mac, Caleb, Stacy, and Anja. Hagen and Stella quickly took their seats. Slade placed his fingertips on the edge of the table, inches from the file he'd brought in.

The screen behind him showed a picture of a large house. One side of the building was burned badly, with a gaping hole where part of the roof should've been.

Hagen was surprised. He'd been anticipating more symbols carved into skin, not a house with a crater in it.

Apparently, Stella was also taken aback. "Are our copycats blowing up houses now?"

Slade cut her a look. "I sort of miss you raising your hand." He gestured to the photo. "New case. Priority. There was a fire in a house in Ravensdale late Friday night."

Anja lifted a finger. "Where's that?"

"Affluent neighborhood west of the city." Caleb's voice was a growl. "Probably half my financial fraud cases come from people in Ravensdale. Keeps me in business."

"Thank you, Caleb." Slade pulled a remote control from his pocket and pushed a button.

The screen changed to show a young woman with a pale complexion made paler by her jet-black hair, dark eyeliner, and lush mascara on what might've been fake eyelashes.

She sat at a table outside a bar, a glass of beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

As the photographer had snapped the shot, she'd made a face and stuck out her tongue.

“That’s right. Big house, big fire. No one was hurt.

But here’s the thing. Owner’s daughter is missing.

Tyra Scharf, twenty-one years old. That’s a photo of what she looks like normally.

Though she was in the home, her remains were nowhere to be found.

She did not perish in the fire. She vanished...

albeit with her new car, but she’s gone.

And then her father, Mannie Scharf, received this picture on his phone yesterday morning.

He reported it to the Nashville PD right away. ”

Slade pushed the button again, and the image changed to show Tyra tied to a chair. A gag covered her mouth. Strapped to her chest was what looked like four sticks of dynamite.

He pushed again. Now the screen displayed a text message on a white background demanding one million dollars by Wednesday. Though clearly digital, the letters were designed to look like they’d been cut and pasted from newspapers.

Since today was Monday, that gave them about forty-eight hours .

Ander whistled. “I like it. Always good when someone shows respect for tradition, even if that font was probably designed in Photoshop.”

Mac tutted and lifted her chin. Her white-blond hair bobbed around her neck. “And

it's easier to trace a digital message than pull forensics off a physical note. I can have some fun with that."

Slade inclined his head. He looked doubtful. "Cops said the message came from a burner and the sender used a VPN. They haven't been able to trace it. But the use of explosives on the hostage made them nervous, and they requested our assistance."

At that, Mac smiled with all her teeth. She liked a good digital challenge.

He pointed at Mac. "I want you working the note and the picture. Stacy will help you. Forensics is already at the house. Alessandra Lagarde's on her way there to find out whether the fire was started by one of the kidnappers."

Hagen frowned. "I don't get it. Why would they try to burn down the house? They got the girl. They don't need more than that."

"I have no idea, Hagen. But I would very much like to know. You and Stella talk to the parents. Prepare them about the possibility of a handoff, so they may need to get their money together."

Hagen noted that Stella had already added those details to her to-do list. "Sounds good, Boss."

Slade turned to the others. "Anja, I want you to draft and release a missing persons flyer and disseminate it to FBI field offices, resident agencies, and satellite suboffices around the country. Maybe someone will have heard something. I'm authorizing a fifty-thousand-dollar reward for any information that leads to the victim's whereabouts.

The rest of you, comb the databases and see what you can find out about Ms. Scharf. That'll be all."

He flicked his head toward the door. Hagen and Stella rose with the team.

Hagen held the door open as his colleagues streamed out. This might be an interesting case. A kidnapping and arson. A chance to save a young woman.

They'd find the answers soon enough. But he knew one thing for certain as he stepped across the bullpen to grab his jacket. He couldn't believe Ander would even consider moving from field agent to desk jockey.

He friggin' loved his job.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

“Not exactly the Hilton.” Stella doubted anyone with a decent income would consider staying at the extended stay hotel on Music Row. But here they were, about to interview Tyra Scharf’s well-to-do parents.

“Maybe they think incognito is best?” Hagen lifted his oxfords a little higher off the sticky flooring as a young officer let them into the Scharfs’ accommodation on the third floor.

Stella glanced around at the unwelcoming space, not sure if she was making a statement or wondering aloud when she said, “They wanted to meet here...” Her phone dinged, and she checked the message. “Slade says the command post is set up at the field office.”

The officer excused herself to wait out in the hallway.

As the poster had promised, the living room was cold.

Tan leather chairs looked like they’d been stolen from the waiting room of a dentist’s office.

The scrubbed steel finish of the matching microwave, fridge, and dishwasher in the open-plan kitchen had clearly been chosen for easy cleaning rather than any sense of personal aesthetic or uniform design style.

The black plastic dining table against the wall had just enough room to seat two, provided no one was hungry enough to eat from a plate larger than a saucer.

Frances Scharf sat on the thin-cushioned sofa, a magazine in her lap and one of her legs tucked under the other.

She was in her late forties, with blond hair pulled into a large, untidy bun.

Her black pants looked new. The cuffs hung around her ankles and needed shortening.

The puffed sleeves on her white blouse had yet to suffer their first crushing in a washing machine.

She held a mug of coffee in one hand, the fingers of her free hand mimicking the slow, practiced pinch of a cigarette she no longer held.

As she sipped, flicking through her magazine, her husband paced the plastic parquet floor.

Mannie Scharf's shirt was only half tucked in to his pants.

His dark hair stood up in wild tufts, his face pale and haggard.

Bandages wrapped both hands. Every few steps, he winced—whether from pain or memory, it wasn't clear.

Stella didn't need to have children to empathize with him.

If she'd truly believed her daughter had burned to death—only to find out she'd been kidnapped—an untucked shirt and messy hair would've been the least of her problems. And she'd have searched every basement and kicked down every door in the city by this point.

“Mr. and Mrs. Scharf?” She cleared her throat. “I’m Special Agent Stella Knox and this is my partner, Special Agent Hagen Yates. First, you should know we’re doing everything we can to find your daughter.”

“Stepdaughter.” The correction came quickly. Frances sipped her coffee again. “I’m her stepmother. Her real mother’s out in Hawaii, working on her tan.”

Stella and Hagen exchanged a glance. Hagen took a deep breath. “Our victim specialist will be arriving shortly to stay with you and help coordinate further communications.”

Mannie ignored Hagen’s attempts to smooth whatever personal undercurrent the couple was navigating and addressed his wife. “Tanya’s on her way back, Frannie. She’ll be here tonight. It’s a long flight.”

Stella fought not to laugh. Frannie and Mannie Scharf? Couldn’t make that shit up.

“Sure.” Frances rolled her eyes. “So she says. Will she be bringing her new surf coach for ‘emotional support?’”

This exchange was interesting, and if time wasn’t of the essence, Stella would have let it play out. For now, she tried to bring them back to the matter at hand. “We’re working closely with the local police on the fire investigation as well.”

Mannie ignored her. He kicked a parquet panel with his socked feet. “I should’ve known this would happen. I should’ve hired a guard for my girl.”

“Please. We’re not the royal family.” Frances dropped the magazine onto the coffee table. “I know your heart’s in the right place. But you do way too much for that girl already. Trust fund. Fancy new Mercedes. Vacation in Paris that was just supposed to be the two of us.”

Stella resisted the urge to glance at her watch.

The bitterness between them was palpable—guilt and resentment, sharpened into a domestic standoff.

Frances sounded like she was competing with a ghost for Mannie’s attention.

Stella had seen that before. Stepmothers trying to navigate the tightrope of loyalty and boundaries.

Frances focused back on Stella, her expression filled with contempt and disappointment. “It’s safer here, Agent Knox, than a flashy five-star hotel. No one’s going to look for us here if they get any ideas about doing more damage. Don’t you think we were supposed to die in that fire?”

Yes, and from what I’ve heard, Mannie nearly did.

“They don’t yet know the cause. That’s my understanding, ma’am.

But it’s good to veer on the side of safety.

” Stella didn’t want to ruffle the stepmom’s feathers any more than they already were.

“Though, if you’d like, we can see about getting you into one of the FBI safe houses. They’re a little cozier.”

“We’re fine here.”

Hagen took a seat at the end of the sofa and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. His posture made him look both empathetic and professional, as though he felt the couple’s pain and was determined to end it.

For a suffering couple, Hagen's concern might've been just what they needed. Even his voice was full of deep care and broad compassion. "Mr. Scharf."

"Mannie. And this," he gestured to his wife, winced, and held his bandaged hands to his chest, "is Frances. First names are fine."

"Mannie, you said you should've known something like this would happen. Why did you say that? Did Tyra have any enemies? Did she receive any threats?"

Puffing himself up, Mannie glared at him. "You think if she'd received a threat, I'd have sat around waiting for this to happen? I'd have had her out of here like shit through a goose."

"Then can you think of anyone who might've done something like this?"

Mannie hunched his shoulders. "That ex-boyfriend of hers, maybe. What was his name?"

"You mean Ian?" Frances crossed her arms. "That's who you're talking about? Ian Montell. The good-looking boy who's good with his hands."

"Yeah, him." Mannie spat out the words. "Like my little girl should go out with a motorcycle mechanic. Wouldn't surprise me if that piece of shit was involved in this. Probably up to his elbows in it."

Stella noted the name and ignored Mannie's crassness. "You know how to get in touch with him? An address or phone number?"

Mannie almost laughed. "Are you kidding? Tyra wasn't exactly forthcoming with that information."

“How about where he works, maybe?”

Mannie shrugged. “It’s some auto body shop. Why should I care where some greaseball hangs his wrenches?”

“Just pay the guy, Mannie.” Frances uncrossed her arms and slid her coffee cup onto the table in front of the sofa, as if she didn’t know what to do with her hands. It left a thick wet line over the hard plastic surface. “Let’s just get her back and move on.”

Mannie walked over to the sliding doors that opened onto a balcony overlooking a small parking lot.

He rested a hand against the glass. “Is that what I’ll have to do?

Pay up?” He glared at Hagen, but his expression soon softened.

His misery was beating out his anger. “I mean, I don’t mind.

I’ll pay that little shit whatever he wants.

Heck, I’ll give him everything I’ve got if he just gives me back my girl. ”

At Stella’s side, Hagen stiffened up, maybe because he remembered his own fury and determination when a crazed pianist had kidnapped his sister.

Mannie hobbled up to Stella and locked eyes with her, his expression a picture of frustration, rage, and even, in the tightness of his cheeks, shame at having lost his child.

“But once I’ve got my little girl, I’ll expect you to track down that bastard, bring back my money, and throw that greasy piece of garbage into the deepest, darkest dungeon

the FBI's got. ”

Stella started to protest that the FBI didn't have dungeons but thought better of it.

At times, she'd wished the FBI did have dark and smelly underground cellars to throw the worst of them in.

“Look, the FBI doesn't condone the paying of ransoms. That tends to encourage kidnappers to do it again, and?—”

Mannie snarled. “So what would you suggest?”

She tried to ignore his tone, telling herself he was a father under duress. “We understand families just want to get their loved ones back and are willing to do whatever it takes. We will need to set up monitoring on your phones for further communications. That's the first order of business.”

He kicked a foot at the phone on the coffee table as if to say, Have at it .

Stella ignored the aggressive gesture. “Our technical team is already analyzing the original message. The kidnappers have given you 'til Wednesday to get the money together. That gives us some time to find another way to bring your daughter home. We're going to pursue every option we have.”

Hagen interrupted the silence that followed as the parents digested this information. “Is there anyone else we can talk to? Friends? Work colleagues?”

Frances sighed. “Tyra doesn't have a job. She finished art school, came home, and has been hanging around ever since. Moved right back into her old bedroom without missing a beat.”

“Friends, then?”

Mannie shook his head. “She doesn’t tell us what she’s doing.

I do know most of her high school friends have moved out of town, to New York or some other city.

But I have a feeling none of them have heard from her anyway.

My sense was that her social life revolved around the mechanic.

That’s where you need to go. You need to talk to him. ”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

Stella nodded. “Okay, we’ll check out Ian Montell.

But before we do, we need your help retracing your daughter’s actions leading up to the fire and kidnapping.

We’ll need access to her computer, social media accounts, and any other digital devices she used.

Those often provide critical information in cases like this. When was the last time you saw her?”

Mannie cocked his head. “The night of the fire. She was at home. I think she was watching TV when Frannie and I went up to bed.”

Frances gave a weak smile. “That’s right. The last time I saw her, she was downstairs on the couch.”

Stella jotted down some notes. “And then what happened?”

Mannie furrowed his brow. “What happened? I’ll tell you.

Just before midnight, I woke up with my room full of smoke.

No smoke detectors going off. I got Frances up and out of the house, then opened Tyra’s door.

It was fully engulfed, everything burning.

” He sank into a chair. Tears slid down his face.

Stella knew the rest. A firefighter had found him on the steps and hauled him out.

Frances gazed at Stella with genuine emotion. “It was terrifying.”

Stella waved her hand for them to continue. “And where was Tyra?”

“I couldn’t find her.” Mannie wiped his face with his bandages.

“Though, obviously, she wasn’t there. We didn’t know it at the time.

I was frantic, yelling at the firefighters to save my daughter.

But they determined pretty quick that no one was inside the house.

And of course, I later realized her car was gone. ”

“What kind of car does she drive?”

“It’s a white Mercedes GLC 300. Brand new.”

Well, that should make it easier to find .

“And you don’t know where the vehicle is now?”

Mannie narrowed his eyes at her. “No. I’m sorry, but are you implying that my daughter might have started the fire and skipped out?”

Stella arched a brow at that conclusion.

“Actually, I was contemplating how a kidnapper could’ve gotten to her room, started a fire to cover their tracks, and then stolen her vehicle.

Perhaps with her inside. I was pondering that, because that’s the story that best seems to align with your version of events.

Should I consider Tyra started the fire and skipped out? ”

The answer is yes, but let’s see what he does.

“No. Tyra would never.”

Frances gave a delicate, almost silent snort.

Stella rocked back on her heels. The dynamic in the room had gone from interesting to important.

“We’re establishing a dedicated phone line at our command post. A couple of techs will come in after us.

” Hagen glanced from Mannie to Frances. “All calls to your phones will be routed through our systems to help with tracing. This card has the number for our twenty-four-hour tech team lead. Her name is Special Agent Mackenzie Drake, Mac for short.”

Mannie accepted the card, peering at it like he might find Tyra between the numbers. “And what should I do with this?”

“Keep it close.” Upon standing, Hagen towered over the man just a bit. “Call if you get any messages.”

After further instructions and taking their leave, Stella and Hagen stepped out of the apartment.

Stella nodded at the police officer stationed outside. “Any updates from the evidence response team at the fire scene?”

“They’re still processing, ma’am. The fire investigator is coordinating with your team at the field office. ”

Fire investigations required thorough examination for the techs to pick out the story of where the fire started, what fueled its spread, and whether arson was involved.

Despite her snarky hint that Tyra’s kidnapping seemed less than likely, Stella still itched to get that report.

Hard data would tell them more about possible scenarios.

Outside, brittle winter sunlight cascaded across the parking lot. At the driver’s side door, Hagen paused with his fingers hooked under the handle.

Stella peered across the hood at him as she popped her door open. “What?”

After a long moment of considering the upper hotel windows, Hagen slid into his seat and started the engine. “If Tyra didn’t kidnap herself?—”

“Which she might have.” Stella settled herself in at his side.

Hagen inclined his head in acknowledgement. “The boyfriend could know enough about the layout of the house and have access to her car to have taken her.”

As he turned them back toward the field office, Monday morning Nashville traffic

hummed along outside the windows of the SUV.

“Agreed. He’s the only other possibility I can see right now. Besides pure extortion, of course.” In Stella’s hand, her phone lit up, buzzing with a call from Mac.

“Got stuff for you.” The cyber expert was all efficiency. Pings sounded in Stella’s ear as information dropped into her phone.

“Got it.” Stella scrolled through the info as Mac hung up, filling Hagen in. “Mac’s looking into Tyra’s phone records. No idea yet if the girl kidnapped herself, but in the meantime, Mac sent over a home and work address for Ian Montell. And get this. He’s got a record. ”

Hagen grinned. “Nice. Seeing as it’s Monday morning, I think we should try his work first.”

Stella checked the address on her phone. “It’s in the other direction.”

He pulled a U-turn. “Only a few hours on the case, and it looks like we’ve got ourselves a prime suspect already.”

Stella smiled. “Now all we have to do is find him.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

Hagen stood in front of Davis Motors and wondered why anyone would ever drive a motorcycle. They were uncomfortable, exposed to the elements, and far too dangerous. One mistake, one moment of distraction, and the driver would be smeared across the road like a squashed racoon.

But Ian Montell looked like the kind of person who might've liked them.

Tyra Scharf's ex-boyfriend sat on a low stool inside the entrance to the small repair shop in southeast Nashville. His head was shaved above his ears so that his cropped bleached hair dropped to a sharp point in the back.

Tattoos climbed from beneath the collar of his faded blue work shirt up the sides of his muscular neck.

Hagen could just make out the tail of a curling serpent, the top of a set of Gothic letters—which looked suspiciously like the tattoo that read “Vindicta” spread across his own upper back—and an ornate cross just below the guy's left ear.

A wide scar that ran along the length of his jawbone might've been the result of a moment of distraction during a ride but could've also been the work of a sharp knife.

Even if Ian Montell didn't look like any father's idea of a good match for his daughter, Mannie Scharf had good reason to suspect Montell's involvement in Tyra's kidnapping.

He had a record. And it contained several arrests for grand theft auto and a couple of short stints inside for assault. The latter irritated Hagen the most.

And yet the delicacy with which the mechanic rested a hand on the leather bike seat as he turned a wrench under the Honda Gold Wing was as close to an expression of tender loving care as Hagen had ever seen.

Montell looked like he'd known how to make an exhaust roar long before he'd fired up his first throttle.

As they approached the mechanic, Stella whispered, "I can see what Tyra saw in him. He's a hottie."

"I get it. You're only into me for the tats." Hagen reached for his badge. "You always did love a bad boy." He took a few more steps forward and cleared his throat. "Ian Montell?"

Montell lifted his head. Deeper in the garage, another mechanic was bent over the handlebars of an oversize Harley. The smell of fresh paint and motor oil enveloped them, despite it being a very open and airy garage.

Hagen braced himself for a chase if Montell tried to run.

He held out his ID. "Special Agent Hagen Yates, FBI. This is Special Agent Stella Knox."

Montell sat straight on his stool. He lifted the wrench.

Hagen calmly put his badge into his inner jacket pocket, unbuckling the strap on his leather shoulder holster in the same motion. He'd need both his hands to hold his weapon, if Montell made a move with that heavy tool.

The other mechanic quietly wheeled away the Harley.

Montell dropped the wrench on the ground next to him. It landed with a heavy clatter. He picked up a rag and wiped his hands. “What do you want? If it’s a repair, you’ll have to come back later and talk to the boss.”

Hagen relaxed. “We want to ask you a few questions, Mr. Montell.”

“Ian. Mr. Montell’s my dad. What’s up?”

“Where were you the night of the fifteenth? This past Friday, between eleven p.m. and one a.m.”

“How’s that any of your...” Montell took a deep breath.

His jaw tensed, then relaxed. The scar on his face blanched, the pale line briefly overtaking his skin before retreating again.

He’d clearly been down this road with law enforcement before and had learned the hard way to control his temper.

Cops would’ve pushed him to talk, and he’d paid for being too mouthy.

There was little point in trying to resist again now.

“I was away. Camping. Got back late last night.”

“Camping? This time of year?”

“Best time to go, winter. I was up near Roan Mountain. Nights are cold, but no one’s up there. It’s beautiful. You can walk for miles without seeing anyone.” His gaze flicked from Hagen to Stella. “You two should try it. Go on. Get yourselves lost.”

His small joke and insult seemed to please him. His eyes smiled, but the look he gave Stella also came with a hint of a wink.

Stella's face hardened. "Was anyone with you?"

"Yeah." Montell rubbed a knuckle hard with his rag. A patch of oil had stained the skin and wasn't coming off. "My girlfriend and two other couples. We all road together in my buddy's big ass Tahoe."

Stella had her notebook in her hand. "Can you give the name and contact info for everyone who was with you?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, I guess." He pulled out his wallet and dug around. "We stopped off at a gas station near my campsite for supplies. I used my credit card to pay for everything I bought. Y'all can track that, right?" He handed the receipt over.

Hagen peeked over Stella's shoulder as she studied the slip of paper. It had the store name but no address. The time stamp was 5:58 Friday evening. "What's the address of the place?"

"Hell, I don't know the address. Right in the town off Roan Mountain. There's maybe two gas stations in that whole place."

Stella wrote that down. "Names and contact information for those who were with you?"

He rolled his eyes and pulled out his phone, listing out the names and phone numbers of his fellow campers.

As Stella took that info down, Hagen hunched his shoulders. The air outside the repair shop was cold, though Montell didn't seem to mind. "When was the last time

you saw Tyra Scharf?”

“Tyra?” A look of concern washed over Montell’s face but vanished quickly. “Not for a long time. Ditched her...must’ve been, I don’t know, six weeks ago. Something like that. Why?”

Montell didn’t sound like he was lying. But he might’ve just been a good liar. Hagen ignored the question and threw another of his own. “You haven’t seen her since?”

“She tried calling for a couple of weeks after I dumped her. I blocked her number.” He shrugged. “We’re done.”

“I’m surprised.” Stella counted on her fingers. “She’s pretty. Rich. On paper, that seems like something guys would want.”

“In Tyra’s case, not if they want to keep their sanity.

” He picked the wrench back up and cranked on a bolt to tighten it, then returned the tool to the ground.

“Yeah, Tyra’s pretty. And her dad’s rich.

But she’s not. She’s got her trust fund, but she spends money like a pimp with something to prove.

She’s also seriously loca . Or just plain dumb. I could never tell.”

Hagen frowned. “What do you mean?”

Montell stood. His stool rocked for a moment, then righted itself.

He walked to a table by the wall of the workshop, opened a large thermos, and poured himself a cup of steaming coffee.

“Look, Tyra’s cute, right? Sexy little thing.

I thought I had it made. But she’s intense, you know?

She’ll get an idea in her head, like the earth’s flat, the moon landings didn’t happen, Tupac’s alive and living in Tulsa, whatever, and she’ll get stuck on it.”

“And?” Hagen prompted when he took a sip of coffee instead of continuing.

He shrugged. “I’m not interested in that shit. I want to ride bikes, fix bikes, and spend as much time in the wilderness as I can. We came from different places, and we’re going in different directions, so we split.”

Hagen glanced at Stella. He believed this guy. He hoped Alessandra Lagarde was having better luck in her investigation of the fire.

“Are you aware Tyra’s been kidnapped?”

“Kidnapped? Shit .” Montell put down his cup, spilling it on the way. He shook the hot liquid from his fingers and grabbed a towel from a hook above the table. “No, I didn’t know that. Like, for money?”

This guy was irritating. Hagen tried to keep steady. Though if Montell was that confused about how kidnappings worked, it boded well for his innocence. “Yeah, for money.”

“Wow. No, I didn’t hear.” He wiped his hand and picked up his cup again. “If it’s just for money, she’ll be okay. Daddy’ll pay. Tyra’s daddy loves his little girl.”

“Don’t all daddies love their kids?” The words shot out of Hagen’s mouth before he could stop them. He regretted them immediately .

“Do they? Guess you and me mix in different circles, FBI agent.” Montell sipped his coffee again.

“Look, I hope Tyra’s okay. But I don’t know anything about a kidnapping.

And honestly? Whatever punishment you’ve got lined up for the person who took her, it won’t even come close to being locked in a room with Tyra Scharf. Now, we done here? I got work to do.”

Hagen scratched his temple. Ian Montell was their best lead so far. He didn’t want to give up this quickly. “Mind if we look around?”

The man could refuse. And he’d definitely want to if the repair shop was storing stolen motorcycles. But he’d dealt with the law before. He had to know a refusal might bring Hagen back later with a warrant, a darker mood, and a deeper search.

Montell put down his cup and threw his hands up. “You do what you gotta do, man. This ain’t my place. I just work here.” He returned to his stool and to the repairs of a motorcycle that looked to Hagen to be in perfect working order.

Hagen and Stella strolled through the workshop. There was little to see. Metal shelving units and racks filled with tools. Assorted engine parts on tables waiting to be reassembled.

A door at the back opened into an office just big enough to hold a desk, a chair, and a tray with packets of sugar and a jar of instant coffee.

A second door led into a back garage area, where three motorcycles were covered in

tarps. The height of the handlebars suggested that two of them were Harleys. Hagen didn't see any sign of a trapdoor to a basement or a storeroom where someone might've been hidden.

Tyra wasn't there.

They returned to the SUV, where Hagen called Slade. "Montell's got what sounds like a pretty solid alibi, if it checks out. We're going to look into it now, but it's probably not him. We're barking up the wrong tree here."

"Right." At the end of the line, Slade sighed. "You're sure?"

"Ninety-five percent, I'd say. He looked surprised to hear about the kidnapping. I don't think he was faking it."

"Well, that was always a possibility." Slade's voice was tense, hard. "But looks like we'll have to start planning for the handoff. I'll call Mannie Scharf, and we'll set it up for tomorrow night. You two meet us here."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

The following evening, Ander sat on a bench in front of the Tennessee State Library and Archives with his beanie pulled low enough to cover the earpiece in his right ear.

Unfortunately, that did nothing to stop the wind from running down the back of his neck or the cold metal seat from sending chills through his jeans.

The kidnappers had picked a bad spot for the handoff.

Two knolls directly ahead blocked Ander and Anja's view of the rest of the park.

But Hagen and Stella were on the other side of the park, covering another exit, with their eyes on the bench.

And Slade had also liaised with the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department to scatter officers across the area.

Blind spots were closed, and access points were covered.

There was no way anyone was getting into the park without being monitored. Or out with a sack of cash without being tracked.

Behind Ander, the lights in the library building glowed a pale yellow. The library had closed over an hour ago, but the last of the institution's workers were making their way toward the parking lot.

Beside him on the bench, Anja hunched her shoulders.

She wore a thick scarf under a short peacoat.

Her hair was loose and spread past her collar.

The cut of her dark-blue jeans begged for boots, but she was wearing sneakers, ready for a chase if they needed to make one. She looked like she was freezing too.

She shifted closer to Ander and whispered, “So all these people are undercover? Feels like overkill.”

Ander scanned the area.

A couple jogged past, running at an uncomfortably slow pace. A figure moved on the roof of the Tennessee State Museum. Two people waited in a dark car in the last row of the parking lot. Neither of the occupants was lit by their phone, and neither appeared to be speaking.

“That’s right.” Ander pushed his hands into his jacket pockets. That helped. “And a dozen more we can’t see. And not overkill, not for a kidnapping with a one-million-dollar ransom.”

He checked his watch again. Two minutes ’til the drop.

His phone pinged, and he glanced at the screen. Alessandra. She was still at the Scharfs’ house, taking more samples. She’d let the babysitter know she’d be late. Looked like they’d both be working overtime today.

Anja tucked her scarf deeper into her coat. The wool was too thick to be easily tamed. “Strange way to do it, no?”

“Do what? ”

“Pay a ransom. Cash in a sports bag. Drop in a park, in the open. Not even a dead drop. It’s like something from a movie. The design of the note was old-school too.”

“The note was sent from a burner. They didn’t do that in old movies.”

“Yeah, but even the burner used a font designed to look like newspaper cutouts. Feels like someone’s been watching too much Netflix.”

The speaker in Ander’s ear crackled. “Thirty seconds. Stand by.”

Ander rested his shoulders against the back of the bench.

“We had a few kidnapping cases in San Francisco. Someone would hack a computer and seal off the data, then demand cryptocurrency to release it. The company would cough it up and get a password in return. There was no cash, and the only thing that changed hands was records on a server somewhere. We could never trace them.” Anja adjusted her scarf again.

It looked new. And itchy. “This is like watching a safecracker use a stethoscope.”

The earpiece crackled again. Slade’s voice came through loud and clear and calm. “We’re a go. Foundation is on the move.”

Foundation was the code name they’d assigned to Mannie Scharf, who approached from the right.

He’d been waiting with Slade in an unmarked van near the entrance of the park, but he seemed to appear from nowhere.

Walking quickly, he kept his head down, a sports bag almost the size of Mannie himself brushing the side of his calf.

A million dollars swinging in the wind.

There was enough cash in that bag for Ander and Alessandra to buy themselves a new house, take a monthlong holiday in Bora Bora, and come home knowing that their children's college tuitions would be taken care of.

But the money was about to be picked up by some crook who'd threatened to kill a man's daughter by way of explosion. Not pretty.

If Mannie Scharf wasn't furious, he should've been.

The man left the path, climbed the knoll in front of them, and stopped at the foot of a tree. He didn't move, except to adjust his grip on the handles of the bag. He looked left, then right, and turned around.

Anja whispered, "What are you doing? Just drop the bag and go."

Ander said nothing. He understood. Mannie Scharf didn't want to let go of his money. And he wanted to see the man who'd taken his daughter almost as much as he wanted his daughter home safe and sound. He wanted to lock eyes with the kidnapper and hope for half a chance to beat him to death.

Ander would've wanted the same if someone had kidnapped Murphy.

"Drop it," Anja urged. "Drop it now."

At last, Mannie laid the bag at the foot of the tree. He stared at it for a long moment before turning and walking slowly back the way he'd come.

Ander sat up straighter.

Any minute now, someone would come and collect that bag.

They'd watch him pick up the ransom, and they'd watch him leave.

The agent on the roof would relay his movements.

Every exit point was covered, ensuring whoever picked up the bag would be followed.

No one would make an arrest, not until Tyra Scharf was released and safe.

But the kidnapper, or his accomplice, would be under constant surveillance from the moment he entered the park to the moment he reached his hideout.

They were ready.

Ander watched. The bare branches of the elm tree next to the bag rustled in the breeze. Somewhere in the museum, a light turned out. But no one came.

A thought was growing in Ander. He leaned a little toward Anja. "He must've known we'd be watching. Why would he?—"

"Caucasian male approaching from Jefferson." Slade's voice was urgent in Ander's ear. "Five-eleven, one hundred eighty pounds. Wearing a black winter coat and baseball cap."

Ander turned nonchalantly to the right. A man was drawing near. He walked quickly, his hands buried in the pockets of his coat.

Ander talked quietly into his sleeve. "Eyes on."

The man continued toward them, moving down the sidewalk next to the grass verge, stepping in and out of the shadows formed by the streetlights.

His baseball cap was actually dark blue and pulled low over his face.

His shoulders were hunched, but Ander could make out a long, flat nose, pale cheeks, and a narrow, weak chin.

The knoll with the sports bag on it lay directly ahead of him but just a hair to the right. The man didn't look at the bag or at Ander and Anja sitting on the bench as he passed by. He just kept going, ignoring them entirely and continuing on his way without a glance or a change of pace.

Anja swore under her breath.

Ander lifted his sleeve again. "Negative."

Slade's voice came a second later. "Copy that. Stand by."

They sat and waited again. Minutes ticked past, and still no one came. They'd wait there until seven. Meanwhile, the sports bag sat by the tree, undisturbed.

A million dollars in cash, and no one wanted it.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

I lifted my wine glass and sipped. White.

Dull. Not even chilled. The caterers always rolled out the cheap stuff at openings like these, the bottles they couldn't move anywhere else.

Any of the professors or historians or curators around here could've brought claret from their wine cellars that would've been better.

Would've been wasted there, though. The quality of the wine on offer suited the quality of the newly opened exhibition here.

Incan art. Again. The usual collection of reconstructed fabrics, pots with faces, and beaten gold plates with misshapen eyes.

Labels that had said the same thing for the last fifty years.

The pieces were so boring, so pointless. Spotlights shined directly over each vitrine, giving every painted pot a gravitas it didn't deserve.

Nothing in that gallery was more than five hundred years old. When the Incas were at the peak of their achievements, drawing faces on gold leaf, Da Vinci was sketching designs for helicopters. Botticelli was painting Birth of Venus .

Yet there was the curator standing at the other end of the room, microphone in one clammy little hand, printed speech in the other.

The audience applauded as he read. There must've been more than a hundred people

in attendance.

The great and the good. Art historians. Archeologists.

Supporters. Journalists who thought they knew this stuff better than the people who spent their lives studying it.

All of them getting off on telling each other how smart they were for appreciating these abysmal pieces. I wanted to gag.

No wonder the curator was so happy. All he had to do was stand there and thank the donors. Another round of applause. Another big grin through that thick gray beard.

I finished my glass despite the sour taste.

If anyone deserved praise for this pathetic display, it wasn't the curator.

All he'd done was take a bunch of dusty old artifacts from the storerooms, send loan requests to museums, and arrange the items in their cases.

A middle schooler could pull off his job.

He didn't even write the catalog. His assistants did that.

There wasn't a new idea in it. Nothing to deepen knowledge, to improve the world, to make a difference.

Nothing of any importance.

One lifeless statue after another. A belief in false gods long dead.

When the Incas were still practicing human sacrifice and getting excited about chocolate, the empires I studied had already risen, grown, and fallen. Their gods had been born, worshipped, and forgotten.

“Isn’t it brilliant?” The question came from a woman in her sixties.

She had an expensive haircut, a mid-length gray wave from a side part that almost covered one eye.

The kind of cut that demanded hours in a salon at the hands of a stylist who kept up with the latest Upper East Side grande dame fashions.

She wore a spotless pantsuit, with two rows of pearls around her neck and silver earrings that flashed when she leaned too close to the beam of a spotlight.

Only the brooch of a golden boar on her jacket revealed her specialty in Roman and Greek art of the Imperial era.

She tilted her glass toward a gold-and-turquoise mask. “So beautiful. The craftsmanship is just remarkable.”

“And yet so old.” I handed my empty glass to a passing server and took another. “To think they were making things like this...five centuries ago.”

She smiled. I knew she got the joke, since she knew everyone in the department and specialized in empires over twenty centuries older than that.

Her area was little more than nostalgia. And yet garbage like this always won the attention, landed the citations, picked up the glowing reviews, and shoveled in the grants.

“And how is the ancient Near East these days?” She sounded like she was genuinely interested.

But people who attended these things always did.

They faked their interest in other people’s specialties.

I’d rather they were honest. I assumed that anyone who focused on popular, dull, over-researched areas such as the Incas and Aztecs, Greece and Rome, was only in it for the adulation, which was why I refused to feign interest.

No one here was as impressive as Maureen King had been.

And, despite his tendency toward money-grubbing, no one had been as effective as Trevor McAuley.

I’d mourn their losses for the rest of my natural life.

I was blessed, though, since I had many other soldiers out there in the field.

All across the country. South Carolina, Delaware, my home of Pennsylvania, and here in New York, to name just a few states where my soldiers resided.

“It’s coming along. One step at a time, you know. A work for the ages isn’t built in a day.”

“I’m sure you’ll get there.” She smiled with more than disbelief in her disingenuous expression. She also hinted at condescension. “And if you don’t, I’m sure one of the undergrads will pick up the baton at some point and get it past the finish line.”

I took another mouthful of wine as I wished her dead. Like most of the new students

at the university.

The prophecies of the tablet were my real work. So much more important than all this stuff. So much more important than any other avenue of human inquiry.

In those ancient writings was the message I'd long hoped for, the prophecy to end all prophecies. I'd already translated the first part, which told of an apocalypse thousands of years in the future. In other words, right around now.

The writer called it the Day of Changing .

Beneath my very feet was the second part of the prophecy. The section that would tell me the precise date.

I could hardly wait to return to the tablets, to my translations.

The curator finished his speech and introduced the CEO of the financial firm whose generous contribution had made the exhibition possible. He wanted to say a few words.

I pulled my phone from my pocket. "Excuse me. I just need to make a quick call."

The Imperial Rome enthusiast released me with a small bend of her neck.

I took my wine into the reception area and set the glass on the windowsill. In the exhibition room of New York's Museum of Antiquities, the financial executive was explaining the need for great cultural shows such as these.

After stretching my fingers, I began to type.

Continue the sacrifices. The gods smile upon each and every one of you.

The Day of Changing is almost upon us.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

The workday was over two hours ago, yet Alessandra Lagarde was still scraping blistered paint on the charred wall of Tyra Scharf's bedroom.

The place was a wreck—walls scorched black, mattress burned down to the springs, window frames little more than carbon-streaked outlines.

And now that the water used to extinguish the fire had dried, ash and debris on the floor crunched beneath her boots with every step.

She'd been called in to determine whether an incendiary device had been used.

The fire had moved fast—too fast. Questions had been raised. A possible accelerant, maybe something homemade. Until they knew for sure, it fell to Alessandra and her team to collect, test, and rule things out.

Dressed in full Tyvek, she dropped a fresh sample into a nylon evidence bag and sealed it. Two days in, and they were still finding pockets of concern. The floor threatened to give way in places, forcing them to scaffold around what had once been a girl's bedroom.

Alessandra and her forensic team would need a few more days to complete the job. Knowing this, she'd sent her people home for the day. They needed rest and focus.

But she still had juice.

In the second floor bedroom, the damage was bad, though not as awful as it could have been.

Everything in the room had burned—the bed, the closet, the inside of the closet.

Drawers in the wood desk were open, their contents ash.

Even the en suite bathroom had burned, the tiles cracked and blackened.

Something about this attack gave Alessandra the creeps.

She'd seen assassination attempts, evidence destruction, and the whole gamut of accidental explosions. This didn't appear to fit the latter. Judging by the burn pattern, the devastation of the area came from the fire's multiple points of origin.

Wherever Alessandra collected evidence, she saw the same narrow V patterns on what remained of the walls, the furniture, and the floor. She was sure her scrapings—taken from behind the far side of what had been the bed—would reveal traces of accelerant.

Whoever had started this fire had wanted every part of the site to burn, for nothing to remain untouched. This blaze looked like an attempt to destroy not only evidence but a memory. To eradicate all signs of a life.

Standing there between the blackened walls, the burned-out remains of the furniture, and the scraps of charred material that had once formed a wardrobe, Alessandra could feel the loathing.

Someone had hated this room. They'd despised everything in it and wanted to see it all destroyed.

A girl's bedroom.

Patches showed that the walls had once been painted pink. Fragments among the

remains of the bedspring suggested the bed had been home to a number of stuffed toys.

This was a space where a child had grown up before going out into the world. A store of memories and secrets and growth. It reminded Alessandra of Demetri's room. And now it was gone.

Alessandra had never known anyone who'd hated the past so much—either their own or someone else's—that they'd wanted to destroy everything about it. But someone had done that here. She was sure of it.

She shuddered and, taking her bag, stepped into the hallway. There was little left of the handrail there, and the carpet that ran down the stairs had burned away. The air still smelled of smoke and ash and burned plastic.

The news that Tyra Scharf's ex-boyfriend was in the clear was disappointing. Significant others were always a good suspect, and while burning down an ex's bedroom might've been extreme, Alessandra could at least understand that reaction.

Hate was a powerful motive for crime, and rejection was a powerful reason to hate. But if he was the one who'd dumped her, he'd have no reason to burn her bedroom to the ground.

Though she might've had reason to burn his.

Alessandra stopped by the handrail and took another splinter from the wall just above the floor. She'd already checked this part of the house, but she could have missed something.

Perhaps there'd been a second application of accelerant, an accomplice who'd helped spread things around. That would be unusual but not unheard of, and it might account

for what appeared to be multiple sources of origin and the spread of the damage.

She dropped the slip of burned wood into a bag, feeling more hope than expectation. The flames had been so fierce, they'd left little evidence beyond the pattern of the fire itself.

Maybe the kidnapper had attacked Tyra in this room, then burned as much of the evidence as he could. Which meant the woman would've been dragged downstairs and out one of the doors.

Tyra could've fought hard, and there could've been blood.

If so, the fire might've burned away all visual traces of it.

Maybe the firefighters' hoses had washed away every last drop.

But Alessandra didn't want to give up hope of finding something.

Somewhere. A splash that had survived the heat and the hoses and left traces of DNA.

She took a bottle of luminol from her bag and sprayed the wall.

There was nothing. No sign of hemoglobin at all.

Alessandra replaced the bottle. The fire had been big enough to destroy evidence...but there was no real sign there'd ever been any evidence to destroy.

Maybe she'd find something on the scrapings she'd just taken.

In any event, she'd done enough for the day. One by one, she turned off the portable

floodlights the forensic team had set up.

Alessandra continued down the stairs to the entrance of the building, stopping to take her mask off.

She stepped outside and inhaled a deep breath of the cold evening air.

A thick smell of smoke and charcoal still hung throughout the house, but the chill was refreshing and dulled the stink.

The police tape outside flapped in the breeze.

A black-and-white police car sat in front of the house.

Alessandra peeled off her Tyvek suit. A quick stop at the lab to drop off the material, then she'd head home. Back to Ander. The ransom drop meant he'd be home late tonight. They'd be tracking the kidnapper and waiting for Tyra Scharf's release.

But he'd come home. To their house. To their family.

Contentment settled into her bones, warm and relaxing. She opened her bag and pushed the suit inside.

She'd gotten so lucky with Ander. She'd seen him around the office building before they'd spoken and often wondered who that hunk was, with his broad shoulders and his curly mid-length hair. She'd always had a thing for curls.

But she'd had no idea he'd be so kind, so supportive and understanding. So many of the men she'd met at the Bureau combined good looks with giant egos. Ander was modest, grounded, and generous—and a good father too. They got to know each other, and everything clicked.

Alessandra had never thought she'd want to move so quickly. But she also hadn't thought she'd ever be this happy, that love could land this fast and hit so hard.

A woman approached the house from the sidewalk after ducking under the yellow police tape.

Alessandra cast a glance at the police cruiser parked on the street. She couldn't quite see the officers, but they didn't react to the trespasser. She would have to talk with them about staying vigilant.

She moved toward the interloper. "Excuse me. You can't be here."

The woman was young and ambled slowly up the little paved path, her hands buried in the pockets of her leather coat.

Her hair was jet black, as was her lipstick, and her eyeliner was thick and smudged enough to remind Alessandra of a wild raccoon.

A sightseer, probably. A neighbor coming to gawp at the scene of the crime.

She moved past Alessandra as if she hadn't heard her.

"Hey, excuse me," Alessandra tried again. "This is a?—"

Holy shit .

The woman was Tyra Scharf. Alessandra had seen her picture on Ander's phone.

The kidnappers must've retrieved the money and released her. She was alive.

"Tyra!"

The young woman slowed in the doorway. Alessandra pulled out her ID. “It’s okay. I’m FBI.”

Tyra hunched her shoulders. She had a small, pale face. The black makeup made her appear even paler.

“Did my father pay the ransom?”

Alessandra smiled. “He must have. You’re here. Are you okay? Are you hurt? What happened?”

“I’m fine. I thought he’d pay. He gives his money away so easily.” Tyra stepped through the front into the foyer.

Tiny warning bells went off in Alessandra’s head. Something wasn’t right.

“You shouldn’t go inside. It’s not safe.”

Tyra pointed her chin toward the burned staircase and the shattered roof. “What a mess. Never liked this house.”

“Just a second, Tyra.” Alessandra took her phone from her pocket. “Let me call this in. Let everyone know you’re safe.” She needed real backup.

Something’s wrong. Something’s wrong. Something’s wrong.

Alessandra pulled out her phone as Tyra began walking up the stairs. The girl must have been drugged by her captors. She was clearly in a daze.

Ander answered on the first ring. His voice was so warm and welcoming. “Hey, it looks like I’m going to be here for a while. We’ve got?”

“Tyra’s here.”

“What? Where?”

“At the house. Her father’s house. I was collecting some more samples, and she just turned up.”

“That’s...tell her to wait there.” There was a muffled exchange of voices on Ander’s end. “Stella and Hagen are on the way. I’ll be close behind. Does she look okay?”

Alessandra watched as the girl tilted her head back, gaze fixed on the ceiling like she was waiting for something to fall from it.

“Yeah, but...something’s wrong. Send an ambulance. I think she’s been drugged. Or she’s in shock. Either way, send an ambulance.”

“On the way.” He hung up.

Tyra stood motionless halfway up the stairs, her posture strange—too still, too composed. Her head cocked at an odd angle.

Drugged. Yeah.

Alessandra lowered her phone. “We just need you to wait down here, Tyra. The FBI are on their way. You’ve been through a terrible ordeal. Let’s go sit in my car...get you warm, get you checked out. You don’t want to be here.”

Tyra blinked, then smiled faintly. “Wait? I can’t wait. There’s something I need. Upstairs.”

Alessandra looked out the window at her Ford Explorer. She turned back just as Tyra

reached the top of the stairs and disappeared down the hall.

“Hey, Tyra! You really shouldn’t be up there. It’s not safe.”

“Come on up.” Tyra’s voice rang with real emotion for the first time. Urgency. Maybe fear? “You need to see this. It’s important.”

Alessandra waved toward the police cruiser. Nothing. No movement. In the early evening darkness, everything looked so calm. She turned back and trotted upstairs.

The young woman called out again. “I’m in here. In my parents’ room.”

The hallway stretched ahead, dim and claustrophobic. Alessandra stepped lightly, her boots crunching soot beneath them. The air carried a scent—faint smoke, scorched wood, and something else.

She reached the doorway, but only darkness met her.

“Tyra?” She took one step in.

Pain exploded in the back of her head—hot and blinding. Her body pitched sideways, shoulder slamming the doorframe, face cracking hard against the jamb. The breath fled her lungs. Her vision blurred.

She hit the floor, cheek scraping the charred wood. Her arms twitched as she struggled to push herself up, but nothing worked. Her muscles betrayed her.

Footsteps circled.

“Ander...” The word was a whisper, frayed and broken. “Tell Demetri...tell him I love him...”

She wished they'd had more time—more nights, more mornings, more of the quiet in-between.

Her hand curled into a fist.

She blinked, but her sight gave her nothing now. Only flickers of movement. A shadow.

Hands gripped her ankles.

No. No, no.

The girl—Tyra—lifted her legs with eerie strength and began to drag her. Alessandra's body scraped across the floor, through layers of ash and soot.

Away from the primary bedroom.

Toward the blackened ruin at the end of the hall.

Toward Tyra's room.

Alessandra tried to scream.

But nothing came out.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

Stella drove well above the speed limit, trying to understand what the hell was happening. She called Alessandra back twice, but got no answer. No one had showed at the ransom drop. They'd stood around looking like idiots. And Tyra Scharf had returned home? Nothing made sense.

"Did Alessandra say anything else?" She'd asked this question maybe a hundred seventy-two times since they'd gotten in the SUV.

"Ander said she said something was wrong. That was it."

Stella took the turn into the Scharfs' neighborhood at speed. Hagen slid against the passenger door but didn't say anything. She wished they had his cherry-red Corvette right now.

When she reached the Scharf house, she spotted the yellow police tape fluttering in the night breeze. A single police cruiser sat empty, its occupants nowhere to be seen.

"Where are the uniforms?" After they bailed out, Hagen stood next to the cruiser and scanned the area.

Nothing moved. A small copse of trees, perhaps leading to a park, stood beyond the Scharfs' large house. Neighbors were spread far apart in this area. Stella didn't see another human being anywhere.

"Something's wrong."

"That's what she said." But Hagen didn't crack a smile.

“There’s light in the house.” Stella couldn’t precisely tell where it was coming from, though.

She stepped forward and crossed the lawn as she drew her weapon. Behind her, Hagen informed the team via phone that the uniforms were absent and told them to hurry up. Stella didn’t hear the response.

Alessandra’s Ford Explorer was parked out front.

They approached the house carefully, clearing the exterior before reaching the front door, which stood slightly ajar.

“FBI!” Hagen called out as they entered, his voice echoing through the charred entryway.

The air still carried the acrid scent of smoke, but something else mingled with it now—a metallic, coppery smell that Stella recognized instantly. Blood.

Oh, no. Please, no.

They moved through the ground floor quickly, finding nothing but burned walls and water damage.

“Alessandra?” Stella willed the explosives expert to answer. But the sinking feeling in her gut told her she wouldn’t be hearing Alessandra’s voice again.

They climbed the stairs slowly. The hallway at the top was dark, but light spilled from the burned bedroom at the end. Smears of blood tracked from the master bedroom to Tyra’s charred room.

As they approached, Stella heard a soft scratching sound and what might’ve been

humming. She signaled to Hagen, who nodded grimly. They positioned themselves on either side of the doorway .

“FBI! Come out with your hands up!” Hagen was not messing around.

The scratching stopped. Yet the humming continued.

Stella swung into the doorway—weapon extended—and froze at the sight the crime scene floodlights illuminated.

Alessandra hung upside down from one of the scaffolds her team had assembled, her red hair nearly touching the floor.

A large pool of blood had spread beneath her head, staining the burned carpet a deep crimson.

Her throat was slashed open, a clean, precise cut from ear to ear.

Her face was ghostly white between streaks of blood streaming down from her wound.

And standing in the pool of blood, carving something into Alessandra’s bare stomach with a small knife, was Tyra Scharf. She didn’t look up at their entrance, just continued humming and carving.

Humming and carving.

Those familiar cuneiform characters that Stella had hoped never to see again.

“Drop the knife, Tyra!” Hagen’s voice thundered through the room. “Now!”

Tyra finally looked up, her face eerily calm, black makeup smeared around her eyes. She appeared like some demonic entity in the dim light.

“I had to finish the message.” Her voice was oddly childlike. “She wouldn’t stay still for me.”

“Drop the knife.” Stella repeated Hagen’s order, her weapon trained on Tyra as she forced herself not to unload into the young woman. But Alessandra was clearly beyond their help. They needed Tyra to answer. “Put it down and back away from her.”

Tyra sighed as though inconvenienced, then placed the knife on the floor and stood. Her hands and forearms were covered in blood, her black clothes spattered with it .

“Where are the police officers who were supposed to be guarding this scene?” Hagen demanded, moving in to secure Tyra while Stella kept her weapon trained on the woman.

Tyra smiled. “In the trees. They came to help me, you know.” She shrugged. “But I didn’t need help. People see what they expect to see.”

As Hagen secured Tyra’s hands behind her back with zip ties, Stella stepped around the blood pool to check Alessandra, just in case. There was no pulse, and her skin was still warm but noticeably colder than it should have been.

Stella’s throat tightened as she looked at her friend hanging there like some macabre art installation. Alessandra’s eyes were open, staring into nothing, her face frozen in an expression of surprise and pain.

“Why?” Stella turned back to Tyra.

A smile was her only reply.

“Downstairs. Now.” Hagen led their murderer down the stairs and out of the house.

Stella followed, though she didn’t want to leave Alessandra alone. All she wanted to do was pick up the knife Tyra had dropped and use it to cut down her friend.

But she couldn’t disturb the scene.

Sometimes the job was awful.

As Hagen escorted Tyra to their SUV, Stella tried not to replay the grisly scene from upstairs.

But she needed to document everything before the forensic unit arrived.

The cuneiform characters carved into Alessandra’s stomach matched the ones from the murders in Pennsylvania and recently in Nashville.

It wasn’t over.

Tires shrieked outside. Stella turned as Ander’s car skidded to a stop, his door flying open before the engine fully died. He was out and running, his entire focus locked on the house, panic written in every movement .

Hagen had barely gotten Tyra into the SUV, leaving Stella as the only one between Ander and the horror upstairs.

She stepped into his path. One thought pulsed through her— don’t let him see . No one should have to carry that image. No one deserved that.

“Ander. No!”

He didn’t slow. His pace barely faltered as she cut in front of him, boots crunching on gravel, arms out.

“Alessandra!”

He surged forward, halfway to the porch.

Stella grabbed his shoulders, holding on to him with all her strength. “She’s...upstairs. But you can’t go up there.”

He whirled on her, his hands curled into fists. “What are you talking about? Alessandra!”

She grabbed bigger handfuls of his shirt. “She’s gone, Ander. You can’t?—”

“Gone?” His face flushed deep red, blotches blooming across his cheeks. His chest heaved. For a second, she thought he might throw up right there in the yard. “What do you mean gone?”

She didn’t let go. Not yet. Her fingers dug in. “She’s dead.”

Ander lunged forward.

Stella managed to keep ahold of his shirt, but buttons popped off as he forced himself through her grip. She’d never tried to stop Ander from doing anything physically before. He was strong, with grief and adrenaline making him unstoppable.

Hagen managed to get ahold of Ander’s upper arm, and between them, they slowed him down. Barely. “You don’t want to see her. Please. You don’t want to remember

her like that.”

Before Stella knew he was moving, Ander whirled on Hagen, his longtime friend, and punched him in the jaw. Hagen went down at the bottom of the staircase. The whole time, Stella held on to his shirt, but maintaining a grip was like trying to grasp onto a single thread.

Ander shook hard, and she fell. He ran up the staircase.

Stella left Hagen on the ground and chased her friend. Her drive went beyond the need to preserve a crime scene. She couldn't let Ander see his wife like that.

But she wasn't fast enough to stop him.

He paused at the bedroom doorway, his momentum carrying him forward another step before his brain processed the horror before him. His wife, suspended upside down, blood pooled beneath her. The symbols carved into her flesh.

The sound that came from Ander wasn't human—a guttural, primal howl of anguish that made Stella's skin crawl and tears flood her eyes. He lunged toward his wife.

Hagen appeared behind them. He launched himself at Ander, grabbing him around the chest and pulling him back.

“Don't, Ander. Don't look.” Hagen shifted him so they were face-to-face, forehead pressed to forehead. His voice broke as he struggled to restrain their friend. “Look away. Please don't look.”

“Let go of me!” Ander roared, fighting against Hagen's grip with desperate strength. But Hagen managed to secure him in a bear hug. “That's my wife! That's my wife!”

Stella moved between Ander and the scene, trying to block his view. “Ander, please. Let us handle it. We’ll take care of her. You can’t be here.”

But Ander wasn’t hearing them. He continued to struggle against Hagen, tears streaming down his face, his eyes fixed on Alessandra’s body.

“Who did this?” he demanded, his voice raw. “Who did this to her?”

“We have her in custody.” Hagen’s words carried a guttural quality as he continued to restrain him. “Tyra Scharf. She was still...here when we arrived.”

Ander went still, his eyes widening. “Tyra? The kidnapping victim?” The words were barely out of his mouth when rage flooded his features. “Where is she? Where the hell is she?”

Stella grabbed his shirt again. “She’s secure.” She wasn’t sure the words even registered. “But right now, we need to take care of Alessandra.”

Something in Ander broke. His knees buckled as if the floor had been yanked out from under him. Hagen caught him just in time, lowering him with the slow, practiced care of someone handling something fragile and already shattered.

Ander curled in on himself, chest heaving.

Not just sobbing... howling . The kind of grief that scraped up from the bottom of a man’s soul.

Stella crouched beside him, resting a hand on his shoulder, unable to stop her own tears.

His skin burned under her palm, his whole body trembling like it couldn’t hold the

weight of what had just been taken.

She needed to get him out of here.

“She called me,” he choked out between sobs. “She said Tyra was here. Something was wrong. I should’ve gotten here faster. I should’ve...” Ander muttered things they already knew, trying to make sense of the unfathomable.

Stella glanced back at the horrific tableau in the bedroom. The cuneiform symbols. The ritualistic positioning.

Outside, sirens wailed as backup arrived. Stella heard Slade’s deep voice downstairs, demanding to know what had happened. In moments, he would see this scene, and everything would change.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

As Hagen sat in the interview room at Nashville's FBI Resident Agency headquarters a few hours later, an old feeling came over him. It coursed through his muscles and burned through his blood.

Revenge.

He wanted to take Tyra Scharf and tear her to pieces.

Rip her to shreds and keep tugging and ripping until there was no scrap that couldn't be lifted away by a small gust of wind.

He wanted her gone, reduced to nothing. To less than nothing.

There should be no trace of her in the world, no sign she had ever infested their lives.

But here she is.

The murderous bitch sat on the other side of the table, in the standard gray sweatshirt and pants, the remains of her makeup still smeared across her face.

Her dyed black hair was pulled back but had partly come loose and hung over one cheek.

Her wrists were cuffed and chained to a loop in the table.

She cocked her head and half smiled. The expression was worse than a smirk, more than mockery. She reeked of satisfaction, of pleasure, and only a little of fear.

Stella rested her elbows on the table. “Why? Why did you kill them?”

Alessandra hadn't been Tyra's only victim that night. The two uniformed officers who were supposed to be protecting the place had apparently confronted her, one at a time, before she crossed paths with Alessandra. Tyra had left them dead in the copse of trees on the property.

Tyra flicked her head. A lock of raven-black hair flew behind her ear, then dropped forward again. Her hands were chained too close to the table to do anything about it.

“They got in my way. And she was there. That was all.”

“So you killed an FBI agent just because she was there?”

Tyra shrugged.

The fire in Hagen's veins burned hotter. She was lying. Tyra hadn't killed because Alessandra was simply available. She'd carved the cuneiforms into Alessandra's skin. She had a motive.

Hagen folded his arms over his chest. He liked to show handcuffed suspects he could perform actions they couldn't.

“Tell me about the kidnapping.”

Tyra's half smile grew wider. “It was fun, wasn't it? The fire. The ransom note. I spent the last few days at the Opryland Resort. So fun.”

Stella folded her fingers. “So you set the fire? Why? What were you trying to achieve?”

“A big blaze.”

Tyra giggled—light, sweet, almost musical. It belonged to a child with pigtails and sticky fingers, not the blood-streaked woman in front of them.

The sound died abruptly.

She leaned forward, metal clinking as the cuffs strained against the table’s edge. Her voice dropped to a hiss. “I wanted to see that room burn.”

Though his flesh crawled at the abruptness of her demeanor, Hagen kept his tone steady. “Your bedroom?”

“The room I grew up in. My old room. The room that created my old self. I’m not that girl anymore.

I wanted to destroy it all.” She dropped back into her seat.

Her handcuffs rattled. “The idea for the kidnapping came afterward. I just wanted to see if Daddy would pay...” another giggle, “if he lived. And I wanted to see if I could get the FBI’s attention. And I did.”

Yet another giggle slithered through the room—thin, high, too pleased with itself. It didn’t just echo in the air. It wormed its way into Hagen’s skull and stayed there.

He wanted to tear the table between them in two. He’d seen a lot of cruel, deviant behavior in his time, but he’d met few people who seemed to enjoy their evil deeds as much as Tyra Scharf. She was a monster.

“Do you know how much pain you’ve caused? To your father? Your stepmother?” He paused. His next words fell slowly. “To the family of the woman you murdered?”

To the families of the officers?”

Tyra flicked her hair away from her face again.

She shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. Won’t hurt for long anyhow.

” Her gaze darted back and forth between them, too bright.

“World’s going to end soon. The Day of Changing.

” She leaned forward, voice dropping into something breathy and reverent.

“Do you know how liberating that is? We can do anything we want. Nothing matters anymore.” A shiver of what he could only call glee rippled through her.

There it was again. The belief the world was about to end, and only the murderers and their victims would be redeemed. Hagen was sick of hearing this bullshit, sick of seeing its effect .

“What do you mean, ‘the world’s going to end soon?’”

“You don’t need me to explain anything.” She fixed her gaze on Hagen and bit the corner of her lip.

She looked as though she’d found a lost kitten and wanted to see what it would do before she drowned it.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.

I know who you are. I’ve seen your picture in the press.

You're the pair who stopped the sacrifices in Pennsylvania and then here in Nashville. ”

“Sacrifices. Is that what you call them?”

“That’s what they are.”

Stella unfolded her fingers and dropped her hands below the table. The knuckles on her fists were white. “Is that why you killed today? Because you wanted to make a sacrifice?”

“Yes.” Tyra licked her lips, almost like she’d just savored a delicious meal. “Your friend was just unlucky. Or lucky. She’s redeemed now. I actually saved her.”

Hagen had to fight a burning desire to grab her, drag her back into her cell, and throw the key into a river.

Tyra slumped back in her chair, apparently exhausted.

Murder would do that to a person.

“I’m bummed, though. I didn’t even have time to take any pictures or anything. Nobody on the Dispatch group will know what I did. The Administrator’s not going to know.”

The Administrator. Hagen locked onto the new moniker. He didn’t want Tyra to know this was the first time he’d heard of the Administrator though. He wanted to draw out more information.

“I have a feeling the Administrator will figure it out.” He felt Stella shift her weight, but he kept his eyes on Tyra. “The Administrator seems to have a good sense of

what's going on. Don't you think?"

"You think so?" Tyra leaned in slowly, elbows creaking on the table, voice dropping to a hush meant to sound intimate— conspiratorial . "He is...a genius. A true sage. We all know it. "

"All?" Stella asked.

"All his acolytes, his pupils, his students. He's taught me so much. The way to salvation." Tyra seemed to float at the mere thought of this Administrator person. "He was right."

"Right?" Hagen didn't think he wanted to know what the Administrator was right about.

"About the sacrifice. I did enjoy it. Doing my part for the cause. And now I'll be redeemed." She flashed her widest smile yet. "And just in time."

Hagen closed his eyes. He couldn't look at her, couldn't bear to see Tyra's smugness, her lack of remorse. Alessandra wasn't some sacrifice. She was dead because she'd been unlucky. Because she'd been doing her job.

But Tyra was talking. She wanted to show off, to demonstrate how much she knew, how much smarter she was than them. They could use that.

Slowly, Hagen took a deep breath and opened his eyes. "The Administrator, huh? You can't piss him off. Sounds like you know him well."

"We're not that close. Yet."

"But you're closer than most."

Tyra shrugged again.

Hagen raised his eyebrows, trying to seem impressed. “Yeah, I’m sure he’d notice you. Smart guy like him.”

“The Administrator is very smart. And the only person who matters.”

“That’s what we’re starting to understand. Guess you got there before us.”

Tyra rubbed the top of the steel loop binding her wrists to the table.

“Better late than never.”

“Is it? Just want to know what we’re getting ourselves into. You know him. Who is he?”

Tyra dropped back in her seat and flashed one final, clever smile. “No idea. No one knows. He’s like some mysterious prophet. He tells us what’s going to happen, and we know he speaks the truth. Told you. He’s a genius.”

Hagen leaned forward. “You know, we’d really like to meet him. Do you think you could get us access to that Dispatch group you’re a part of?”

There was a gleam in Tyra’s eyes. “I’ll never tell. Lawyer.”

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When Stella returned after delivering Tyra Scharf to the Nashville PD, the mood at Nashville's FBI Resident Agency was as grim as the days that followed Martin Lin's murder.

Though late, everyone was still there, except for Ander, who Slade had already put on leave.

Caleb displayed the same quiet rage he'd shown after Martin's death.

He sat in front of his terminal, typing with the force of ten little hammers.

Stacy was ashen. Her hair, usually so neat, was out of place as though she hadn't trusted her shaking hands to arrange it properly. She clicked her mouse, read, and sighed, then rubbed her temple and sighed some more.

Anja, who'd barely known Alessandra but could read the room, brought a tray of coffees without asking. She might've been afraid to ask, afraid to say anything that could've potentially broken the atmosphere. Mac sat in her office with the door closed.

Hagen barely spoke, and his silence suited Stella. There was nothing either of them could say that would lift the mood. And she didn't want to prod. He'd process the news in his own time and in his own way .

Slade walked out of his office and addressed the bullpen. "We lost one of our own tonight." His voice was low.

Mac came out of her office and leaned against the doorframe.

“Alessandra was one of ours. She was an agent, a scientist, someone who gave us the evidence we needed to identify culprits and bring them in. She was diligent, hardworking, and one of the smartest people I ever had the honor of knowing. And she was a mother and a wife.”

Stella swallowed hard. The choice was that or start crying, and the tears running down Mac’s face were enough for both of them.

Slade continued, his voice rising with his anger. “Alessandra shouldn’t have died. But she had a case. And she never let a case go unresolved.” He lifted his chin. “Well, this needs to be resolved.” He looked around the room. His gaze landed on Hagen, then on Stella.

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“I want to know who’s behind all this. They’re threatening my team. Who sent someone to shoot Ander and Hagen on our last case? And who inspired Tyra Scharf to kill Alessandra?”

Caleb growled, “Whoever it is, we’re going to find them. We’re going to bring them in, and we’re going to make sure they pay.”

“We sure are.” Slade nodded. His eye stayed fixed on Stella, though. “Whatever it takes. Get to it.”

Normally, Stella would want to lose herself in the work. But tonight, that meant hunching over crime scene photographs of Alessandra, which she was comparing with those taken from her past two cases. Her chest hurt looking at them.

But it didn't matter how late it was. Stella and Hagen were determined to file their preliminary report on the investigation of the murder of FBI Explosives Expert Alessandra Lagarde.

After Hagen had asked Tyra Scharf to help them access the Dispatch group, the young woman had clammed up, refusing to speak any further. They'd left her with the Nashville PD, who'd agreed to keep her in custody for the duration of the case.

While Scharf was cooling her heels, Stella and Hagen had returned to their office and immediately gotten to work writing and compiling their report.

The first general step in any preliminary investigation was to verify that the crime actually occurred. In Alessandra's case, this was relatively straightforward.

Were it not for the presence of those damned cuneiform marks carved into the agent's stomach, any investigator—Stella and Hagen included—would've considered this case closed.

But now Stella couldn't get the image of Alessandra's sliced-up stomach out of her mind.

After comparing the images taken by the crime scene photographer with those from the cases of Laurence Gill and Mark Tully in Claymore Township, Pennsylvania, and then with the recent bout of murders in Nashville committed by Trevor McAuley, Stella's first instinct appeared to be correct.

The marks on the dead bodies in those cases matched those carved into Alessandra's skin.

Clearly, the answer lay in that encrypted Dispatch chat group, which Trevor McAuley, Maureen King, and the others had been a part of.

And though she didn't have any proof to support this claim, Stella also knew that whoever had paid Trevor McAuley to commit his murders was still in charge and was baiting their followers, including Tyra Scharf, to commit atrocities .

This case was not closed. Far from it.

After three hours of work, they finished the report and filed it with their field office and in the FBI's Central Records System. Then they logged out.

When they finally left the building well past midnight, Hagen suggested they drive over to Ander's house to check up on him.

The house was mostly dark when they got there, except for the living room, from which emanated a dim, pale-blue light. Together, Stella and Hagen walked up the little pathway to Ander's front door, where the Christmas wreath hung. But they didn't knock or ring the bell.

Through the living room window, they saw him. Ander lay curled on the couch, one arm cradling Murphy, the other resting protectively across Demetri's back. Both boys were asleep, tucked against him like they instinctively knew where safety lived—even if safety had splintered.

Demetri's father would come soon. Of course he would. After everything, there was no way he'd leave his son behind.

And just like that, Ander would lose one more piece of Alessandra.

Stella's chest clenched so tightly she couldn't draw a full breath. Grief had a weight tonight, and it was suffocating.

A laptop glowed on the coffee table. From their angle, she could see the slow flicker

of a slideshow—photos of Alessandra with the boys, Alessandra laughing, Alessandra holding Ander's face like she'd never loved anything more.

Beside the computer sat a bottle of scotch, a third already gone.

Ander didn't move. Just stared at the screen as he held the sleeping boys like they were the last solid thing in a world that had fallen apart.

Stella reached for Hagen's arm and pulled him back from the window, guiding them both wordlessly toward the car .

Ander didn't need questions. Or comfort. Not tonight.

He just needed this...his boys, his ghosts, and the dark.

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At her desk the next morning, Stella yawned so deeply her eyes began to water. She and Hagen hadn't gotten anywhere close to enough sleep last night. Stella wished hot chocolate came with more than a teaser of caffeine.

Stella finished her stretch, shifted her weight in her chair, and focused her thoughts on the day's work in front of her. She logged onto her computer and opened her mailbox.

The top email was marked with the subject line, TOP PRIORITY RE : ALESSANDRA LAGARDE PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION .

The sender was Washington, D.C. SAC Kelly Tysen.

Stella clicked on the file and scanned its contents. It appeared Alessandra's death, in combination with the Claymore Township and Nashville ritual murders, had triggered a national task force. Tysen had requested Stella and Hagen's expertise.

A video meeting was scheduled for ten a.m.

Stella checked her watch. Two minutes from now.

Shit.

No longer sleepy, she spun in her seat just as Hagen shoved to his feet. He'd clearly finished reading his own email.

"Stella, Hagen." Slade strode into the bullpen. "I just got a call from D.C. You check

your messages?”

“Yes, sir,” they said in unison.

“Let’s go.”

In the conference room, Slade pulled down the projector screen and set up his laptop with about fifteen seconds to spare.

On their screen, video conferencing in from the FBI’s J. Edgar Hoover Building in Washington, D.C., Kelly Tysen snapped open the file on the desk in front of her with all the authority of a woman in charge. Stella liked her immediately.

Hagen took a seat next to Stella and placed a bottle of water in her hands. They both had their notebooks at the ready, as well as a copy of their preliminary report. In light of Mac’s work in trying to hack into the Dispatch group, Slade had pulled her to sit in on the meeting.

Mac entered quietly and took a seat.

Tysen, the special agent in charge in the Investigative and Operations Support Section of the CIRG, the Bureau’s elite unit dedicated to providing rapid assistance in a crisis, had an authoritative look to her. Her dark suit fit her broad shoulders, and her blond hair was tied back neatly.

“Thank you both for being able to call in at such short notice. Considering recent events, we’ve decided that file sharing is just not enough.

” She looked straight into the camera. “I’m very sorry for your office’s recent loss.

But Alessandra Lagarde’s death is the reason I’m pushing for a more intense

investigation. ”

Stella liked the way she got straight to the point. They could save the small talk for when business was done.

Tysen’s gaze flicked to the corner of her screen, as if she’d just received a notification. “That’ll be the rest of them. ”

Stella cocked her head. “The rest of who?”

“I’ve invited certain agents from around the country to join the call. The unusual markings have appeared on murder victims in all their jurisdictions. We’re forming a national task force. I’ll let them in now.”

Tysen went around and made the introductions. The conference included agents representing field offices from all across the country, including Pittsburgh, New York, Milwaukee, and Lincoln, Nebraska, as well as three others from Charleston, Dover, Delaware, and Phoenix.

The SAC singled out the two special agents from the Pittsburgh field office, Journey Russo, an attractive brunette with penetrating indigo eyes, and Lucas Sullivan, whose slicked-back black hair reminded Stella of James Dean.

“Agents Russo and Sullivan have extensive experience dealing with cults. And they’re located in Pennsylvania, where all this seems to have started.”

Stella had heard of Russo and Sullivan. The FBI had been hunting down a group called The Chosen for a long time. Recently, the partners had taken the organization down. Stella was excited to hear their insights into this case.

Tysen got down to business. “Let’s get started. If you would, please save your

questions until the end of the presentation I'm sharing with all of you. A lot of this might be repeat information, but all of us need to start on the same page."

The screen changed to a picture of a New York subway train.

The floor was covered in blood, with barely an inch unmarked.

It ran from one end of the car and reached almost to the other end, as though someone had spread red paint across the floor and done a pretty good job of coloring between the lines.

A man sat slumped in one of the seats, his head tilted at an unnatural angle, chin brushing his shoulder. The sleeves of his army surplus coat hung in tatters from cuff to armpit. Blood streaked down both arms, pooling dark and sticky over his hands.

Tysen's cursor circled one wrist.

"Queens, New York. The cut was vertical on both arms." Tysen shifted the cursor to the man's other arm. "This wasn't just a random stabbing. The killer wanted the victim to shed as much blood as possible. And then there's this."

The image on the screen changed again, this time to a shot of the victim's bare arm. Alongside the cut, which ran crookedly up the middle of his arm, a series of lines and triangles were carved into the skin. His throat was slit, but the photo focused on the carvings on his arm.

Those same marks had decorated Otto Walker's and Trevor McAuley's walls, the same cuneiform script cut into the victims in Pennsylvania.

The same characters that had desecrated Alessandra's body.

Tysen cut back in. “The killer was wearing a hoodie that hid his face well, and surveillance cameras have yet to locate him. But this kind of hurts. Used to take that train to college every day.”

She brought up a new image. This picture showed a large man sprawled on a sofa. His head had rolled back to reveal a deep slash exposing his windpipe. Blood covered his chest, soaked the cushions, and left a dark stain on the carpet.

“Stanley, Wisconsin. The NYPD have come up blank so far on the subway killing, but this one was easy.” She clicked again.

The picture changed to a bathtub filled with blood and a woman’s body.

A kitchen knife lay on the blood-soaked tiles below her fingers.

“Local cops found the wife. Assumption is she killed her husband in the living room, then herself. They’ve got no motive, though.

Neighbors say they were friendly and quiet.

Rarely argued, and no record of domestic abuse. But we have this.”

The picture changed to show a row of cuneiforms scrawled in blood on the bathroom wall.

“And we also have this.”

Tysen clicked again. A woman slouched against the back door of a bar. Her white coat was stained red from the chest down, and she sat, her legs folded to the side, in a wide puddle of blood.

“Omaha, Nebraska. Stab wounds were in the armpits. Severed the axillary arteries. Police are looking for her date. They’d just met online. His profile was fake, and he paid in cash at the restaurant where they ate dinner. They’re scouring cameras in the area.”

The picture changed to show a single cuneiform scratched into the skin under her jaw. The symbol was easy to miss but unmistakable once seen.

Tysen clicked. “And finally, this one. Meyersdale, Pennsylvania.”

Hagen groaned. Stella breathed in sharply. This picture was much more familiar.

A man’s corpse, stripped naked, hung upside down from a beam that ran across the ceiling of a wooden barn.

His knuckles almost touched the floor. Beneath him, a red circle covered the ground.

A deep cut ran across his neck from ear to ear.

Multiple stab wounds decorated the man’s muscular abdomen, and around the stab wounds were a series of triangular markings written in blood.

Laurence Gill, a psychiatric patient, and Mark Tully, a sheriff’s deputy, had been hung in very similar ways in Claymore Township, Pennsylvania. As had Patrick Marrion, an unfortunate university student in Nashville, before his body was dumped in an alley.

And Alessandra .

Tysen returned to the images of the agents.

“Those symbols were found on each of the victims. We dug into the records and found a couple more murders in Delaware and South Carolina that fit the pattern. They predate the ones you came across in Pennsylvania and just solved in Nashville. So we set up an alert. Got two hits on Friday night and two more on Sunday night, then another on Monday.”

Hagen muttered a low curse, barely audible, his knee bouncing with restless energy beneath the table like it was trying to outrun his thoughts. Stella placed a hand on his leg when the table started to shake.

Tysen leaned back in her chair. “We’ve looked into it, and there’s no personal link between any of these victims. They don’t have anyone in common.

They’re really only connected by the cuneiform symbols.

And look, a wife wants to murder her husband?

There are usually signs of abuse leading up to the event.

There was none of that here, and besides, the cutting of the jugular looked deliberate.

The same for the stabbing on the New York City subway.

You saw how he ran a blade up each arm to open the arteries.

But he left the guy’s phone and wallet untouched. Who does that?”

The agent from Phoenix chimed in. “Are we certain the marks are all the same? They could just look similar?”

“Unlikely.” Agent Journey Russo stepped in. “Can you pull up Delaware?”

Tysen changed the picture to show a single triangular pattern written in blood on a wall.

Journey took over the presentation for the moment. “This was found at the scene of the murder in Delaware. Cops thought it was some kind of new gang tag. It matches one of the symbols Knox and Yates found in Pennsylvania. Tysen?”

Mark Tully’s body appeared on the screen. Tysen zoomed in on one of the signs carved into the skin on his back, then brought up the picture from Delaware and placed the two images next to each other.

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They were the same marks, the same tangles of triangles and lines.

“Knox and Yates, if there’s a connection between these murders and the cases you’ve just solved, and that is our working theory, then no one at the Bureau knows more about this case than you two do.” Journey offered an ironic smile. “Sorry you drew the short straw here.”

Hagen pulled his chair closer. “I’m assuming you’ve read our reports.”

“I have.” Tysen twirled her pen in her fingers. She had long fingernails that she’d painted a glossy lime color, a suggestion of a fun life outside the office. “You did good work. They were a couple of tough cases. What turned you on to the killer in Nashville?”

“Late breakthrough. An informant in Pennsylvania mentioned something that helped us put two and two together.”

“Lucky you’re good at math. The file mentioned a Dispatch group. You ever get into that thing?”

Mac spoke up for the first time. “Not yet. I’ve been trying to find a way into that group for weeks.

Invitations are harder to land than tickets to a Taylor Swift concert.

I’ve reached out to Dispatch’s front office to try to find a back door into the group through them.

But they've been stonewalling me. Privacy issues, they said. ”

Tysen tapped a green fingernail against her desk.

“Keep trying. And let's keep the pressure on Tyra Scharf.

Maybe she can be convinced to give us access.

” She dropped her pen. “While all the victims share the same basic set of four cuneiform characters, some of the victims have even more and different cuneiform characters carved into them.”

Hagen sighed. “So we're talking about lots of different killers in lots of different places who are perhaps using different reference points.”

“Clearly. But all seem motivated by the same thing. Whatever that is.”

Stella twisted her ear stud. They had to find whoever was behind this group, the monster inspiring the murders.

“It's an escalation. Something is driving these murders.

We need to find out what it is and, most importantly, who's behind the wheel.

Because whoever it is, they haven't gone away.

” She thought for a minute. “Can you bring up that last murder again? The one in Pennsylvania.”

The picture of the corpse hanging upside down appeared. Stella studied the stab wounds and the lines of blood running down the victim's washboard abs. The

familiar wide gash across the neck. And the markings carved into the chest.

“Can you zoom in on the man’s right shoulder?”

“I can try. Let’s see.”

Instead of growing larger, though, the victim shrank, giving Stella a strange sense of relief, as though she were being sucked out of the frame, pulled away from this crime. She was happy to see it recede into the distance.

Tysen tapped at her keyboard again. “Sorry.”

The picture returned and zoomed in until the image focused on the marks that ran across the victim’s shoulder, cut into the man’s flesh. Stella was no longer looking at a corpse. She was now facing a puzzle, a clue that might just lead them to the killer.

During the last two cases, Stella had spent hours thinking about this strange writing. Made up of what looked like sets of arrows pointing in one direction and crossed by another set pointing in another, cuneiform was used for millennia. First as pictograms, then as a kind of alphabet.

Before this year, Stella had never thought about it before. Now she’d seen and studied this ancient alphabet far too much.

One symbol caught her attention—a particularly complex mixture of arrows, with a couple pointing down but most pointing to the right. The lines were grouped widely and in clumps, pairs, and threes.

She tilted her head and squinted. “What’s that? I don’t think I’ve seen that one before.”

“Wish I could tell you. That’s why we’ve brought in an expert. I see he’s in the waiting room now.” Tysen pushed a button on her keyboard.

The man who filled the new square on their screen had pale skin, tight curls that started above a receding hairline, and wide, owlish eyes. In his tweed jacket and baggy corduroy pants, the man reminded Stella of Werner, Mac’s boyfriend, an anthropology doctoral student in Nashville.

“This is Dr. Guy Lacross. Knox, Yates, I think you’ve spoken before.” Tysen smiled. “He’s calling in from Chicago to give us a hand.”

Stella recognized the name. Werner had introduced them when they were working the case in Pennsylvania. They hadn’t met in person, but they’d spoken over the phone. Guy had helped them make sense of one of the strangest cases they’d ever encountered.

Hagen waved. “Nice to finally put a face to the name, Dr. Lacross. We really appreciated your help. Couldn’t have made any sense of that case at all without you.”

Guy returned the greeting. “Call me Guy. And happy to help. Really. Usually, I spend my days grading student essays, teaching, or translating cuneiform grain receipts. It’s rare to see my field come alive.”

“Guy’s been trying to help us identify the translator of the cuneiform tablet you two mentioned in your report.” Tysen picked up her pen and turned it end over end between her fingers.

“That tablet was published online,” Stella pointed out. “Is the translator that hard to find?”

“The translation wasn’t in any peer-reviewed journal.” Guy pushed his curls up with

his hand as though pulling an idea out of his head. “A partial translation appeared online anonymously. But no one’s seen the original tablet, so there’s no way to know if the translation is even accurate.”

“Maybe there isn’t a tablet. Maybe whoever put the translation online just made it up.” Stella had dealt with enough psychos to know that sometimes they pulled ideas out of thin air.

“It’s possible but seems unlikely.” Guy tugged at his hair again. “Whoever wrote the post clearly knows the language. You’d need to have read and translated a lot of ancient tablets to get that kind of phrasing down. It certainly came from someone who knows what they’re doing.”

Tysen frowned. “And how many people would have that kind of expertise?”

“I can think of at least a dozen off the top of my head. A bunch of professors, adjuncts, some grad students, museum curators, and a few people who work at archeological institutes. I can look into their interests and try to narrow down the options. Try to come up with a list.”

“So you’re suggesting that whoever translated this also has something to do with the murders?” Tysen asked.

“It’s possible.”

Stella spotted something new. “Can we return to the previous image? Where we zoomed in on the cuneiform on the most recent Pennsylvania victim’s shoulder?”

Tysen nodded, and the image on their screen changed back.

Stella was sure she’d never seen this particular one before. “What about that mark?”

Do you recognize it? I don't remember seeing it on any of the other victims."

Guy cleared his throat before responding.

"It's unusual. There are a few symbols that are rarely used.

That looks like one of them, though it might just be badly written.

If it's right, it's pronounced something like ji-bil with a soft G , and it means 'new.'  
But there are more common terms. You're right about not seeing it before.

It wasn't on the original transcription of the tablet published online. "

The screen changed back to the agents in their squares.

Stella nodded. "Maybe it comes from a different tablet. That would be good. Two tablets could help us triangulate the translator. We'd just need to find someone who's worked on tablets with both this symbol and the original marks."

"Or like I said, it might just be badly drawn." Guy scratched the top of his head.

He looked lost in thought. "It's a complex form, easily miswritten.

But try Professor Andrew Whelan. He's an emeritus at Laurel Mount University.

He wrote a paper once, years ago, about the etymology of gibil .

If this is right, he might be able to tell you which tablets it's appeared on and who's studied them.

Or if it's a mistake, let you rule it out completely. "

“Sounds like we’ve got something.” Tysen smiled. She looked relieved. “I’ll talk to your SSA about grabbing you two for a few days. I want you to go to Laurel Mount and talk to this professor...”

“Whelan.”

“Professor Whelan. And that’s convenient, since Laurel Mount is outside Pittsburgh. I want you two to head up there afterward to assist Agents Russo and Sullivan in their investigation.”

Both Stella and Hagen nodded. Stella found herself not looking forward to another trip to Pennsylvania. But maybe going back to the source of where this whole mess began would provide new insights.

And a chance to catch whoever motivated Alessandra’s murder.

Tysen jabbed a finger at the screen. “Learning more about the world these scholars inhabit might be the breakthrough we need to stop these murders before they spread even further. While you’re doing that, Guy, please come up with a list of everyone who can translate cuneiform in the United States.

Be thorough. At the same time, Agent Drake, we need to find a way into that Dispatch group.

So redouble your efforts. If you need more people, just ask.

But we have to find out who’s running it.”

The meeting ended. The screen went black.

Slade leaned forward. “This is our chance to nail this guy for Alessandra. Good

hunting.”

Stella stood. “We’re on the next flight out.”

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Professor Andrew Whelan sat in his office at Laurel Mount University's Ancient and Medieval Studies Department and sucked a mint. "Guy Lacross said to talk to me, you say?"

The office was less welcoming than Stella had expected.

She'd been looking forward to sitting in an oak-paneled room with a friendly old man in an ill-fitting bow tie keen to talk about his field of research, possibly over tea and little sandwiches.

The office, though, was mostly bare, and Professor Whelan wasn't very friendly. And he didn't even have a bow tie.

Professor Whelan did wear a regular tie, but there was a stain just below the knot, and the tie was hardly the focal point, considering his belly pushed open the gaps between his buttons on his shirt to reveal a thin, white undershirt gray from age.

And the bowl of mints on his desk looked like they'd been there since the fall of the Babylonian empire. If he offered Stella one, she'd have to refuse.

A framed poster on the wall advertised an exhibition of Sumerian art that had taken place in 1988. A single shelf held a row of books that didn't look like they'd been opened since they'd been written, perhaps around 1888.

Stella draped one knee over the other and folded her fingers. "He teaches at the University of Chicago."

“I know who he is. Sort of. This world isn’t large.”

“He recommended we speak to you. He said you’re an expert in this particular cuneiform.”

“I’m an expert in many cuneiform-based writing systems, young lady. But to be quite frank, there are so few initiates today that anyone who’s read a page of the Epic of Gilgamesh gets to call themselves an expert.” He harrumphed loudly.

Hagen removed a sheet of paper from his pocket. They’d asked Guy to draw the cuneiform for them, which he’d faxed over to the Nashville office, so that they wouldn’t have to show a picture of a dead man’s bloody body. Hagen pushed the page across the table.

Professor Whelan picked up the sheet and held it at arm’s length. His hands shook. The page rustled. He smacked his lips. A faint hint of mint drifted across the table.

“Now this takes me back.” He placed the paper on the desk.

“I’m retired, you know. Haven’t published for almost a decade.

And to be honest, I produced very little in my last years.

Translating these tablets is a long, slow process.

Half the time, I wondered whether it was worth the effort.

No one outside the field ever read them, and few people in the field did either. You know what I do now?”

Stella really hoped that at top of the list of the emeritus professor’s activities was

helping the FBI with their investigations. But she shook her head and waited for him to continue.

“Guest lecture. Once a year. The rest of the time, I dig around in the library’s collection for something new to exhibit in the entrance and search for something interesting to translate and publish.” He leaned over the desk and whispered, “Haven’t found anything yet.”

Stella pointed at the sheet of paper under the professor’s trembling fingers. “Dr. Lacross thought that cuneiform was particularly unusual.”

“Yes, yes. Let me see.” He lifted the sheet again and held it up to the light.

A knock sounded on the door. Professor Whelan pushed his glasses higher up his nose and scowled at the page. The knock sounded again, louder this time. Hagen turned in his seat just as the door opened and a young woman walked in.

She had long dark hair that fell in waves past her shoulders, wide cheeks, and fingers that were just slightly too large for her hands as she gripped the edge of the door.

She flashed a friendly smile at Stella and Hagen before addressing Whelan. “Professor? Just wondering if you got that message from the dean. He’s still waiting for a response.”

“Hm?” Professor Whelan lowered the page. “Oh, Jodie.” He waved in the air between Jodi and the agents. “This is Jodie Laird. She’s my secretary.”

“Administrative assistant.” Jodie’s polite smile never wavered.

“And an adjunct. Couldn’t do a thing without her. The dean, you say? What does he want now? Let me guess. He wants to reallocate this office. Well, he can’t have it.”

Professor Whelan fumbled in the pocket of his jacket before retrieving a phone with a single lens on the back and a screen just large enough for the numbers to be legible.

The device looked as old as the professor.

He hammered at the phone with one shaking forefinger before giving up and passing it to Jodie.

“Here. You deal with it. These things will be the death of me. ”

She took the phone. Her cheeks reddened slightly. “He’s not very good with technology.”

Jodie sounded apologetic, but Professor Whelan didn’t seem embarrassed. “This new stuff isn’t interesting. Not worth spending my time on.” He lifted the sheet of paper again.

Jodie tapped at the screen. The professor hadn’t turned off the key sounds. As she wrote the professor’s reply to the dean, a series of loud clicks made the room sound like a typing pool.

Professor Whelan glared at his assistant. “Well? Aren’t you finished yet? I haven’t got all day. I have to leave in ten minutes.”

Jodie hunched her shoulders and typed faster.

Stella willed her on. The discomfort was acute.

At last, Jodie turned the screen to the professor. “Here. Is it okay?”

The professor read quickly and nodded. “Fine, fine. That should get him off my back

for a while. Let him have it.”

Jodie took the phone back. She tapped the screen, tutted, tapped again, then tutted again before sighing deeply.

“Oh, this internet. The connection is really bad at this end of the building. Thick walls.” She lowered her voice and whispered to Stella, “That’s why they give these offices and intelligent admins,” she tossed her hair back and winked, “to the emeritus professors.” She handed back the phone. “It’ll go out when you leave.”

“Very good.” Professor Whelan examined the cuneiform again. “Here, Jodie. Before you go. Come and learn something. What do you make of this?”

He turned the page around. His hand still shook. The paper flapped.

Jodie frowned. “It looks like...is it gibil ?”

“Yes...and no. Yes, it looks like gibil , but no, it isn’t. I’m afraid this is more likely to be a bad copy of any number of common terms, Agents. A mistake here or here or here, and you have quite different words.”

Professor Whelan placed his finger over one line, then another. The changes made no difference at all to Stella. They seemed to matter to the professor, though. And to Jodie.

He handed the page back to Hagen. “I think your friend is probably confused. Sorry I couldn’t be more help.”

Hagen folded the page and slipped it back into his jacket pocket. He rose. “Thank you. In a case like this, you never know what could turn out to be helpful.”

Stella stood and, with a nod of thanks to Jodie, followed Hagen toward the door. Hagen stopped and turned back, one hand on the handle.

“You know, we’ve investigated a number of cases that have centered on the contents of a clay tablet. But I’ve never actually seen one of those things. Do you have one here we can look at?”

Professor Whelan lifted his gray eyebrows. His sigh was shallow but still managed to pack plenty of irritation along a strong waft of mint.

“Jodie, why don’t you take these two to the university library? I’m sure you can help them find something suitably educational.”

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On the way to the library, pictures on the wall advertised exhibitions of ancient art.

Flyers pinned to bulletin boards announced a research talk on architecture in Nineveh, a show about digital storytelling through maps, and a lecture on poetry during the Cold War.

Hagen wondered if the university also held car shows but decided it probably didn't.

Jodie spoke quietly as they made their way down the corridor. "I'm sorry about that. Professor Whelan can be a little...cantankerous at times. He really was a great scholar in his day. He's just, well, sort of over it now."

"No need to apologize. I'm half his age, and I can be a pain in the ass sometimes too. As I'm sure my colleague would be happy to tell you." Hagen grinned.

Stella elbowed him. "He's right. And more than sometimes." Her eyes softened. "But he has his redeeming qualities. I didn't notice any in your boss there. Why do you put up with him?"

Jodie hesitated before answering but didn't argue. "I'm applying to professorships. A recommendation from Professor Whelan would be a huge help. Until then...he does have some pretty good ideas." She peered over her shoulder at Stella. "Must be amazing working for the FBI."

Stella smiled. "It has its moments. Right now, we've got a case that appears to have some connection with a cuneiform tablet. We were just looking for some expert help."

“Oh, wow.” Jodie’s eyes widened. “Like those murders in Tennessee and here in Pennsylvania? I read articles about those. How can there be more?”

Hagen wished he had an answer to that question. He was just grateful he had a good reason not to provide one. “I’m sorry. We can’t really talk about it.”

“Yeah, of course. I get it. Totally.” Jodie’s stride acquired a new pace. “Wow, that’s so cool. I mean, it’s not cool you have another case. But something to do with cuneiforms? That’s amazing. If you ever need any help...”

They stepped out of the building and onto the concourse. Hagen held open the door. “Right now, I’d just like to see exactly what we’re talking about. All I’ve seen so far is a bunch of weird lines and triangles.”

“Yeah, of course.” Jodie buttoned her coat against the chill wind blowing over the campus. Dusk was little more than an hour away. “Library’s up here. They keep some tablets in the archive.”

On their way through the next building to the special collections archive, they passed a small display, mounted in vitrines against the wall, showing the different ways monsters had been depicted in children’s fiction.

Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* stood alongside Pixar’s one-eyed blob and an etching of a large wolf talking to a girl in a red hood.

Hagen recognized a printing of *Curious George* that his father had read to him when he was a kid.

That hadn’t happened often. Normally, his mother had read to him. But the mischievous monkey had held a special place in his father’s heart .

Hagen missed him.

Anger at his father's loss rose inside him once more, hot and acidic.

He took a deep breath. He couldn't feel that rage again, that old burning need for revenge.

He had a better life now than the one he'd lived before.

Now he had to catch real monsters, beasts much scarier than anything a children's book illustrator could show.

Stella's hand landed on his shoulder. "You okay?"

Hagen gave a short nod and pointed at the monster behind the glass case.

The print had been carefully made, full of subtle shading that left almost no white space at all.

Lewis Carroll's Jabberwocky seemed to fly out of a dark forest like an angry, bucktoothed dragon.

It hung in the air above a little girl wielding a sword as tall as she was.

"After the craziness of Boris Kerne and his lunatic daughter, I can't look at Lewis Carroll the same way."

Boris Kerne, world renowned pianist, and his equally famous daughter had delivered death and destruction as if they were born to murder rather than music. Hagen bet either the father or daughter would have willingly composed an apocalyptic soundtrack to accompany the Administrator's current plot.

Hagen and Stella followed Jodie to the special collections area, and Jodie went to the desk to speak with one of the librarians. A minute later, she returned. “We can head up into the reading room. One of the librarians will bring a selection of tablets for viewing. This way.”

She led them up the stairs and into a small room with a large table in the middle and walls lined with reference books as thick as bricks. Two people sat at the table, notebooks and large volumes in front of them.

A young man greeted Jodie with a smile, which was quickly followed by a light hug. He had a thin beard that Hagen assumed he’d grown to attempt to add years to his face. It didn’t work. The dark bristles only highlighted the youthful redness of his cheeks.

As the first man returned to his seat, the other reader took Jodie’s hand and squeezed it gently. He was much older, with a mostly bald head that displayed the first signs of liver spotting.

“Good to see you, Jodie. How is the Marduk project coming along? Did you finish it?”

“Almost. It’s...getting there.”

Hagen knew a lie when he heard one. The project wasn’t “getting there” or anywhere near there.

Jodie waved at a couple of empty chairs at the end of the table. “Why don’t you two take a seat? The librarian will be up in a moment.” She laid a hand on the younger man’s arm. “This is Robert Pew. He’s one of our students...well, our best student.”

Robert chuckled. “Just another fellow struggler, I assure you.”

“And this is Dr. Alfie Napp. He’s a curator at the Museum of Ancient Art in Pittsburgh. One of our regular visitors, mining our library for knowledge.”

“Plenty of good knowledge here.” Dr. Napp grinned. He had high cheeks, which his easy smile lifted higher still. His eyes picked up a spark. “And lots of knowledgeable students to help me find it.”

Jodie blushed slightly.

Dr. Napp turned to Hagen and Stella. “But I don’t believe I’ve seen you two before.”

“No.” Stella ran her hand along the surface of the table. She looked like she wanted to be studying again, filling her head with new ideas and thoughts that didn’t touch on murder. Hagen smiled to himself as he realized how well he was starting to know all her mannerisms.

Dr. Napp, on the other hand, had strange mannerisms and intonations that didn’t seem to match his physicality whatsoever. He looked like former military turned motivational speaker. Hearing him talk like a stereotypical stodgy professor was strange.

“We’re from the FBI, investigating a crime that centers on an ancient cuneiform tablet. We just want to see what one looks like.”

“Good heavens.” Dr. Napp placed a hand to his forehead.

Something about the way he did it struck Hagen as inauthentic, even affected.

An instant later, his expression morphed into one of searching interest. “But of course. It’s the talk of everyone in our field.

What a distinct pleasure to make your?—”

The door to the reading room creaked open, cutting off Dr. Napp in mid-flow and saving them from having to make small talk.

The special-collections librarian was in his late twenties and tall, with a small, badly shaved chin.

He held a cardboard box slightly larger and much sturdier than a shoebox, which he placed on the table in front of Hagen.

He fished a pair of blue nitrile gloves from his pocket and handed them to Jodie.

“Only you’re to handle the items, Jodie. Call me when you’re finished, and I’ll take them back.”

Jodie thanked him. She pulled on the gloves, removed a length of soft cloth from inside the box, and laid out the contents.

Each of the three tablets was the color of old chalk. One was shaped like a large blunt nail. Another was a cylinder, and the third was like a large square skipping stone with rounded corners and a gently curved surface.

Hagen was surprised to find that he was impressed. The tablets were simple things and looked too fragile to touch, even with gloves. But the lines of short scratches across the surface, the indented wedges that had been carved into Laurence Gill’s back, looked so ordered here and so neat.

Blood ruined them. These weren’t letters meant to be cut into flesh. They were records and notes carefully kept. And it appeared they’d been preserved for so long.

“How old are they?”

Dr. Napp leaned over the table. He kept his arms folded close to his chest as though worried he'd be tempted to pick up a tablet and hold it in his hands. Or slip it into his pocket.

Hagen understood that. He was tempted to touch one, too, and this wasn't even his field.

“Oh, I know these. They're all about four thousand years old.

” He pointed at the tablet shaped like a nail.

“This one lists the costs of female slaves during the reign of King Amar-Suen. The cylinder in the middle is a receipt for grain. And that small tablet there is a note for an astronomical diary.”

Stella flashed Hagen a side-eye. “Four thousand years old? And they're just here? In a library?”

Dr. Napp laughed. He had a soft chuckle, friendly and without a hint of mockery.

“There are thousands of tablets like these from what used to be Mesopotamia. They're like scraps of paper but made of baked clay.

We've lost plenty, too, of course. More than we've found.

But there are still far too many tablets sitting in libraries and museums and so on, and far too few scholars to read and translate them. ”

Robert drew closer. He leaned over the tablets with his hands safely in his pockets.

“We’re developing AI software to help make the translation process easier and faster. Might just find something special buried in an archive somewhere.”

Dr. Napp laughed again. “A whole new era. One that leaves old guys like me behind.” He lowered his voice and leaned closer to Jodie. “And your Professor Whelan. ”

“Now, now.” Jodie nudged him but joined his gentle laughter.

Hagen watched as she placed the tablets back in the box. Where Whelan had looked old enough to be Hagen’s father, that couldn’t have been the case with Dr. Napp.

“You know, we have a much larger collection at my museum. If you’re interested, I’d be happy to show it to you. Just an hour away, with traffic on your side.”

Hagen rose and thanked him. But he’d seen enough. Now he at least knew what these tablets looked like.

Maybe they’d find what they needed to crack their case once they got outside the city and into the Pennsylvania farmland.

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A freezing wind whipped through the parking lot of the Somerset Motel in Meyersdale, Pennsylvania, where Stella had passed a fitful night's rest next to Hagen, who'd slept like a sloth.

The field on the other side of the empty street was as bare and flat as a hockey rink.

Frost still lay thick over the ground in the midmorning, and she wondered if the sun would be warm enough to melt the ice should it ever emerge.

Not that the clouds looked like they'd clear. They lay as thick and heavy over the hilltops as wet cotton.

She stomped her feet and dug her hands deeper into her pockets. "Should be here by now."

Hagen checked his watch. They'd been waiting nearly twenty minutes. "They're from the Pittsburgh office. That's a pretty long drive. Cut them some slack."

"It's ninety minutes away. I'm not giving them any slack. Not when I'm freezing my ass off."

"We could go back inside."

Stella hunched her shoulders but didn't move.

They'd spent the night in what must've been the cheapest motel in the state.

The carpets in the room had been paced half to death.

The windows rattled. And the air stank of dampness, mold, mildew, manure, and something acrid Stella hadn't been able to identify and didn't want to.

The wind outside might've been frigid, but at least it was fresh.

Hagen lifted his chin. "Here they are."

A black Ford Explorer turned off the main road and bounced over the frozen potholes in the parking lot. It parked in front of them, and the passenger door popped open. The special agent who looked like James Dean, Lucas Sullivan, stuck his gelled head out and told them to hop in.

Stella led Hagen into the back seat and was pleased to find that the temperature inside was almost tropical.

The driver, Special Agent Journey Russo, swiveled to face them while Hagen pulled on his seat belt.

"Sorry we're late. Lots of ice on the road. Had to take it slow."

Stella came close to forgiving her.

In real life, Journey looked like she was in her late twenties or early thirties.

She sat tall in her seat—if Stella had to guess, she'd judge Journey's height to be about five-seven.

Without her jacket on, Journey had a slender, athletic physique, shoulder-length dark-brown hair, and fair skin.

Her eyes were dark blue, almost indigo. And despite Journey's friendly demeanor, she had an intimidating edge to her, a quality that suggested a profound toughness.

People had told Stella that she gave off the same impression.

She liked Journey immediately.

Hagen made the introductions on their end as Stella held her hands in front of the warm air flowing from the vent. They pulled slowly away from the motel.

Journey eyed Stella in the rearview mirror. "We're glad to have you here. We just got through with a major case against a cult, so we know how difficult they can be. "

"Hopefully, this one won't take years." Lucas shifted in his seat.

"I think you're going to have to figure things out faster this time, Sullivan."

Lucas gave his partner a side-eye, and Stella smiled. The two obviously trusted each other.

"This one's not on me." Lucas turned in his seat and pointed back and forth between Stella and Hagen. "You two started it."

He wasn't wrong. Stella snorted a laugh.

Hagen pounded a fist into his palm. "And we're going to end it."

"Having you here is like having a head start. So that's a plus." Lucas turned back and faced the windshield.

The fields rolled on beside the SUV, an endless carpet of frozen earth. Stella pulled

her hands into her coat sleeves. “Well, we’ll certainly be happy when we finally put these assholes away. Where are we headed?”

Journey’s gaze flicked back to the mirror. “The crime scene. I figured that’s where you’d want to begin.”

Stella nodded. Crime scenes always carried memories of lives lost. Every shadow hid something dark. But the scene was, in fact, the first place she wanted to see.

They drove on through the farmland. Stella tried to imagine what the fields looked like in spring, when the white dusting that covered the mud was replaced by green shoots.

Magical, she decided. Magical and warm and colorful.

After about twenty minutes, Journey turned up a track made of rutted, frozen mud. The empty fields stretched away on either side. Stella was grateful for the Explorer’s four-wheel drive and off-road suspension, even as the vehicle rocked from side to side.

Journey pulled up outside a small wooden barn. The structure wasn’t much to look at. Bare boards. A high roof. The remains of red paint, long faded.

Stella stepped out of the cab. The cold wind hit her like a slap. She hunched her neck in to her shoulders. “Know what this thing’s used for now?”

Journey slammed the vehicle door behind her and left the engine running—a law enforcement habit.

“It was used for storage. It’s been empty for a while.

The place is owned by the victim's father.

Gideon Caine. This is his land. Lucas and I spoke to some of the locals in town.

They said youngsters sometimes drive out here to smoke marijuana and screw around.

But only in the summer. Said they've never had anything like this happen before. "

Stella lifted the police tape in front of the door and followed Journey and Lucas inside.

She stopped in the entrance, remembering the pictures SAC Kelly Tysen had shared during their meeting.

The body was gone. But the beam from which the corpse had hung stretched beneath the roof.

A slight wear on the timber revealed where the rope had rubbed.

Directly beneath the beam, blood stained the floor to form a dark, circular patch. Broad swipes disrupted the puddle, where the stain lay thinner on the ground.

Hagen stopped at the edge of the area, his hands in his pockets. "Looks like the killer tried to spread the blood around. Draw himself a nice, neat circle."

Lucas nodded. "Forensics was here yesterday. And they agreed with you. They found fingerprints in the blood, which suggests the unsub pushed the stuff around with his hands. Must've made a heck of a mess."

"Not to state the obvious here, but I'm guessing no one saw someone run out of here

with blood up to his elbows?”

“Time of death was close to midnight last Friday night. There’s no one around here for three, four miles even during daytime.

And forensics took samples from a puddle out back.

They think the unsub rinsed himself off before fleeing the scene.

” Lucas pointed to a plank that ran along the back wall.

“They also took pictures of those things.”

Stella circled around the stain on the floor to the back of the barn. Whoever this monster was had scratched a series of cuneiforms into the wooden wall. The marks didn’t look new. The wood had already darkened in places.

“Forensics say how long these have been there?”

“I wondered that too. They weren’t sure. Guessed a week or more. Maybe longer for some. Before the killing anyway.”

Stella didn’t respond right away. She took out her phone and brought up the images of Charlie Caine’s body, then held her phone at arm’s length in front of the beam. The screen filled the space beneath the rafters.

The naked corpse hung upside down, blood frozen mid-drip from the fingertips. Just like Laurence Gill, Mark Tully, and Patrick Marrion. The same signature.

She zoomed in on the marks on the victim’s back.

They were the same as the scratches carved into the wall.

The unsub had started with wood, then moved on to flesh.

His attempts were rougher than the writing she'd seen on Laurence Gill and on the walls in Nashville, like the spread of a bad rumor that grew cruder with each telling.

She lowered her phone. "Yeah. As we said during the conference call, these are the same marks we found on the other victims. The expert, Dr. Guy Lacross, translated them for us. 'Only blood will redeem the world. Redemption is coming soon.'"

Hagen finished examining the wall and walked around the barn, his hands behind his back, his gaze fixed on the floor. "Did we find out what the victim was doing here?"

Journey shook her head. "Not really. Charlie Caine has been helping his father out on the farm since he got out of the Army. But his dad said he'd have had no reason to come out to the barn this time of year. Or that time of night."

"There was something here." Hagen dropped to his haunches next to the wall. "The dust has been disturbed. Forensics take anything from here?"

"Not as far as I know." Journey joined him. She squatted beside Hagen. "Maybe the place isn't as disused as it looks."

Stella and Lucas peered over their shoulders. On the floor was a rectangular patch, slightly paler than the rest of the wood. Something had indeed been removed recently.

Journey rose smoothly. "That's all there is to see here. If you're ready, we'll take you to the victim's dad."

Hagen pushed himself to his feet. “Sounds like a plan.”

Stella held back as they filed out of the barn and back to the SUV, then took out her phone again. She brought up the picture of Charlie Caine’s corpse, the skin bloody and pale. Past the picture and through the doorway, the ground was frozen white and the gray sky void of color.

For a moment, she could believe what the killer had believed. That the end of the world was coming.

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Hagen stared out the window as they drove to Gideon Caine's farmhouse. The road was mostly empty. Lines of trees edged the fields, stripped of their leaves. The bare branches looked like scarecrows warning Hagen and Stella away.

Hagen was grateful for Journey and Lucas's company.

Places as sparse as this gave him the creeps.

The flat fields of farmland that stretched to the horizon seemed to reveal everything.

The vastness of the landscape felt as if nothing were hidden, except the identity of Charlie Caine's killer.

And the name of the person who'd die next.

They'd have to dig those answers out of this bare, frosted land.

Journey pulled off the road and stopped. "We're here."

Hagen didn't move. The unpainted fences, rusty corrugated iron sheds, and piles of scrap metal that littered the area weren't his idea of a farm. He'd imagined something closer to his sister Amanda's ranch, all white fences, fresh straw, gravel roads, and gentle stomps of horses in their stables.

This place was less bucolic. The road up to the small, low-slung house was muddy and rutted.

A heavy anvil stood on a block of wood next to a trailer loaded with metal pipes.

Damp hay leaked from under a green tarp topped with a thin layer of frost. Lengths of hose curled around a hook on an iron wall.

Hagen wondered if any part of that hose could still hold water or if, laid out, it would leak like a garden sprinkler.

From one of the sheds came the sound of metal striking metal.

Journey killed the engine. “Caine senior’s wife died of cancer twelve years ago. His son was in the military for the last seven years. He’s been alone most of that time.”

Her explanation sounded less like background and more like an excuse for the mess. Hagen had lived alone since leaving college. His home had never looked like this.

“When did Charlie come back?”

“About eight months ago. People in town say Caine senior seemed to come alive again then. Not sure how the man will cope now. Not well, probably.” Journey stepped out of the cab.

The rest followed suit.

A horse neighed from somewhere away to the left.

Hagen thought of Amanda again and remembered that he and Stella still hadn’t talked about where they were going for Christmas.

He really wanted to spend time with his sisters and his mother.

Miami would be fine, sure. But for Hagen, there was something odd about wearing shorts on Christmas Day.

And there was always the smell of corruption in Florida's fetid air. Last time they'd been there was for a case that had centered on bribery. The stink was hard to get out of his nose. Even the horse dung on Amanda's ranch smelled better.

Lucas flicked his head. "This way. "

Hagen and Stella followed Journey and Lucas into a barn, where Gideon Caine was working on the engine of an old tractor.

White stubble covered his cheeks and jowls.

He was underdressed for the weather, and his plaid shirt was buttoned wrong.

A thermal undershirt visible beneath his collar was stretched and stained, dirty enough that it had probably remained on his body for days.

He lifted his head from beneath the tractor's hood as they approached, then wiped his hands on the sides of his cargo pants.

"You again." He didn't smile.

"Us again." Lucas flicked a finger toward the tractor. "That thing looks like a collector's item. How old is it?"

Hagen recognized Lucas's approach. He was trying to build a connection, to break down the barriers between an old farmer and a government official in a suit.

Caine snorted. He patted a patch of rust on the wing.

“Almost as old as me. Must be the last farmer around here not to use that new crap those expensive tractor makers hand out. Can’t fix them, and they always belong to the company.

Those bastards can cut you off anytime they want.

This old thing might belong in a museum, but at least it’s all mine. ”

Pride flickered across his face for a second. He lifted his chin toward Stella, then Hagen.

“Who are your friends?”

“These are Special Agents Stella Knox and Hagen Yates. Nashville. They’ve been sent to help with?—”

“Oh.” Caine sagged and leaned hard on the side of his machine, his large fingers curled around the inside of the hood. Hagen had guessed his age at about fifty. He’d aged at least twenty years in the space of a few seconds, though, and broken.

Stella moved first. She guided him to an old wooden chair that stood by the wall. The legs creaked menacingly as it took Caine’s weight, but he sank into it.

“The murder of my boy. That’s what you’re here about, is it?” He swallowed hard. “Well, first thing you should know...” He fixed his eyes on Stella. “He was the best kid in the world. None better. He did seven years in the Rangers. Had just come back to work on the farm.”

Stella knelt beside him, taking his hand in both of hers. “That must’ve been a good day for you.”

“Damn right. He’d paid his dues. I thought he was going to take this all over one day.

One day soon, even. A few years of working together, father and son.

Then I’d hang up my boots and enjoy a quiet life while Charlie did all the hard hauling.

” He scratched the stubble on his cheek.

“He was a tough boy, Charlie. Could put in a full day and end as strong as he started.”

Caine wiped his nose with the back of his hand. He took a deep breath and released it slowly. No one spoke. The horse neighed again. Caine reached into the torn pocket of his cargo pants and pulled out a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He lit up without asking or offering.

“Figured Charlie would get married soon, you know. Raise a family here, just like I did.” Caine took a long drag. The smoke drifted through the workshop like a spirit longing to stay.

Hagen pushed his hands into his pockets. His suit wasn’t as warm as he’d thought it would be, though the cold didn’t seem to bother Caine. “Know if he was seeing anyone since he got back?”

“You mean getting serious with a girl? Don’t think so.

Charlie was...he got around some when he was young, see.

” Caine’s face pinched at the memory. “I thought he took advantage sometimes. They’re good girls round here.

But Charlie was a good-looking guy, and he knew it.

I guess when you're young, it's okay. But he was looking to settle down now.

Or so he told me. Just hadn't found the right woman yet. ”

The right one is hard to find.

Hagen shot a glance at Stella. “So what was he doing since he got back? Apart from working on the farm. He have friends here?”

“He didn't hang out with his old friends so much.

Most of his buddies now are veterans like him.

He said they understood him best.” Caine flicked the ash from his cigarette.

“He'd started volunteering with the high school football team too.

He was a quarterback in his day, you know?

Arm like a piston. Eye like a hawk. If he hadn't set his mind on the Rangers, who knows where he'd have gone. ”

Stella shuffled her feet. A piece of straw had stuck to her shoe. “You know if he spent a lot of time online? On his phone? Did he talk about any internet groups he was a member of?”

“Naw.” Caine took another slow drag of his cigarette. Tobacco looked like the only pleasure he had left. “All that new technology stuff was never really his thing. He was like me. If it doesn't work, fix it. And if it does work, don't bust it. New stuff's a

load of crap.”

She plucked the straw free and tossed it away. “We’d like to talk to his new friends. Know where we can find them?”

“The Prairie. He hung out there a lot when he wasn’t here. Working. Most evenings, he was there.”

Journey explained, “It’s a bar on the edge of town. Popular with ex-military types. It’ll be open tonight.”

Stella thanked him and noted the name. “Can you think of anyone who might’ve done this?”

Caine shook his head. “Charlie didn’t have any enemies. Everyone loved him. Only a monster would do something like this. ”

“Monsters are more common than you think.” Stella gestured to the barn and fields. “Mind if we poke around a bit?”

“Do what you need to do.” Caine slumped in his chair, his cigarette between his fingers and his broken tractor rusting beside him.

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After sketching and making notes at the crime scene, they drove back to what had to be Pennsylvania's cheapest motel.

Journey and Lucas dropped them off, then headed back to their hotel, which was apparently twenty minutes away.

They instructed Stella to give either of them a call if needed, then pulled away with Journey berating Lucas's planning abilities.

Stella and Hagen intended to chat with the victim's friends in the bar that evening to try to fill out a picture of Charlie Caine's life and figure out who'd killed him. They needed to find someone who knew Charlie and who, ideally, was also a member of that Dispatch group.

She let herself into their room beside the parking lot and tossed her coat over the chair.

Hagen turned on the light by the bed, which did nothing to lift the gloom. The bulb was too weak, the curtained window too heavy for the dull glow that leaked through to overcome.

Stella flopped onto the bed. The springs creaked loudly, and the mattress rocked. She put her hands behind her head .

"Hours to go in Meyersdale, Pennsylvania, before Charlie's friends will be at the bar. Whatever should we do?"

Hagen fished in his pocket and pulled out a quarter. He pointed at the coin box beside the lamp. “Vibrating bed. Only in places like this. Tried one once on a case in Oregon.”

“Really?” Stella peered down her nose at him. Even after weeks together in a cabin in the woods, he could still surprise her. She liked that. “How was it?”

Hagen lifted an eyebrow. “Made me seasick. Want to try?”

“Not right now.” Though the idea was damn tempting, she pushed up to her elbows. “We’ve got to get a handle on this, and quick. We’re not just investigating one murder here. If we don’t crack this soon, more people will be sacrificed. I can feel it.”

“Maybe the mastermind is one of those people Guy suggested. An academic, a translator. Someone who knows cuneiform. There can’t be too many people who fit that description, like that Dr. Napp we met in the library at Laurel Mount.

He seems like a leader and a bit of a pompous ass.

Maybe we’ll get a name before we’re done here. ”

“As long as Guy’s looking in the right direction.

” Stella sat up. “His theory is that Dispatch group is being run by a professional historian with some charisma. I see your point about Napp. But maybe our unsub is more of an amateur. Someone more charismatic with a little knowledge of ancient history. A hobbyist. That would cast a wide net.”

Hagen nodded. “Yeah, that’s way too big.

Breaking into the Dispatch group is probably the most streamlined way to find this

guy.

But we still don't have a way in, and even if we did get in, everyone's username is probably protected by levels of encryption, like the group itself.

I know we'll break in sooner or later. But I have severe doubts that we'll be able to do it before another murder occurs. ”

Stella closed her eyes. The way forward was unclear. And Hagen was right. The longer they took to fumble through, the greater the risk of more people dying. She rubbed her temples with the heels of her hands before taking her phone from her pocket.

Hagen watched her. “You calling Tysen? We’ve don’t have much to report yet that she doesn’t already know. And she’ll let us know if her people managed to hack into the Dispatch groups.”

Stella shook her head. “I know. I owe my mom a call.”

They hadn't spoken for more than a week. A motel in the middle of nowhere with little to do until evening was as good a chance as any to catch up.

Hagen turned his back and assessed the packets of instant coffee and ancient tea bags on offer next to the tiny motel kettle. “Guess I should call my family too.”

Stella stretched her neck as she waited for her mom to pick up. The motel bed was the opposite of comfortable. “You should. No excuses now.”

“I'll do it later.” He put the coffee back and sniffed a packet of tea. His head jerked back.

Stella assumed he was making a fuss. No tea could be that bad. Even in this motel. “I’m sure they’d appreciate it.” The line rang on. “Where is she?”

“Probably would. But my mom will ask about my job, and I hate talking about work with her. Especially when we’re on a case. Amanda will go on about how beautiful the ranch looks with the decorations up. And I don’t really have the patience to joke around with Brianna.”

Stella’s mom broke the ringing of the phone and stole her attention. “Hey, honey!” Barbara’s upbeat voice was jarring in that dark motel room, with the bleak scenery outside and the bloody memories of the case in Stella’s head.

“Hi, Mom. You took your time.”

“Well, I was sitting on the balcony enjoying the sun, and I left the phone inside. If I hadn’t come in to get Jonathan some more ice, I wouldn’t have known you’d called. I hardly expect you to.”

Stella rolled her eyes. She was grateful her mother was halfway across the country and couldn’t see her.

Barbara tutted. “You just rolled your eyes at me, didn’t you? I know you.”

“Not at all.” She laughed, unable to hold it in. “I was rolling them at Hagen, who’s having a meltdown about the quality of the refreshments at our motel.”

“Oh, a motel? Where are you?”

“Don’t get too excited. In Pennsylvania on a case.”

“As usual. Well, say hello to him for me.”

Stella lowered the phone. “Mom says hi.”

Hagen took the kettle into the bathroom, stopping just long enough to shout, “Hi, Barbara,” over his shoulder.

“Now, when are you both coming for Christmas?”

Stella silently groaned. This was the question she knew was coming.

She glanced toward the bathroom, then rose from the bed and stepped out of the room. The cold wind whistling across the parking lot hit her hard. “I don’t know. Hagen really wants to see his family. He hasn’t seen?—”

“And I haven’t seen my only daughter since...the unfortunate incident at the golf course. I know Jonathan wants to see you both too.”

“Mom, I...it’s...you know. I don’t know what...”

A deep sigh sounded at the other end of the line.

“Fine. You know what? You do what you want. I’m sure Jonathan and I will have a lovely Christmas by ourselves.

I thought it might be nice this year, since Jonathan’s kids are still a little upset by the new arrangement.

Four of us little chickens. But you do whatever you think is best.”

The line died, and Stella had a great urge to hurl her phone over the empty fields. She stormed back into the motel room.

Hagen held up a steaming mug. “Tea? It’s not as bad as it smells.” He saw the expression on her face and stopped. “Oh. Guess not. What’d she say?”

Stella hesitated. If she told him why her mother had angered her, the guilt she’d just dropped, he might fold and say they should go to Florida.

But Stella didn’t want to push him. Not like this.

If they were going to see her mom for Christmas, it needed to be their decision, not a choice forced on them by her mother’s emotional blackmail.

“Nothing. Never mind. I’m just hungry. Let’s go eat.”

Hagen kept his gaze on her. He didn’t believe her. She could see that. But he was also smart enough not to push. He put down the cup and grabbed his coat.

“I was lying about the tea anyway. Tastes like dishwashing liquid. Even the instant coffee would’ve been better. Got a place in mind to eat?”

Stella was already halfway out of the room. She remembered seeing a pizza place on the way to the motel. The restaurant was close enough to walk to, though little in the town was more than a short stroll away, even in the cold.

“Maybe.”

She strode on, her hands buried in her pockets and the collar of her coat tight against her neck. Her mother really knew where to hit when she wanted to, how to dig her finger into Stella’s guilt. It just wasn’t fair. Stella kicked a patch of snow drifted against a wall.

Hagen trotted after her.

The restaurant close to the center of town looked as bad as Stella remembered when they'd driven through on the way to the motel.

Lettering on the dirty windows had mostly faded.

A menu taped to the glass had yellowed and freed itself at one corner, nearly halfway to escaping to the floor.

The smell when they stepped inside was a strange mixture of burned cheese, damp wood, and spilled beer.

Apart from one old man sitting in the corner—sipping a Bud, scratching his white beard, and reading a newspaper over an empty plate—Stella and Hagen were the only customers.

They took a seat by the window.

Hagen leaned across the table and whispered, “There’s nowhere better around here, is there?”

Stella lifted her eyebrow. “Thinking you’re gonna find a Michelin star if we walk a hundred feet farther? No. This is far as I go. I’m starving.”

A server placed two dog-eared menus on the table and pulled out her notebook.

She looked like she was in her mid-twenties and had long blond hair she'd pulled back into a neat ponytail and a small chin beneath full lips.

She was slim and pretty, the kind of girl who'd always win a place on a cheerleading team even if she'd never lead it.

The crooked badge on her apron identified her as Sandie.

“What can I get for you folks today?”

Stella lifted the menu. “We’ll take a large pizza with pepperoni, mushrooms, and olives.”

“No olives.” Sandie gave a sorry grimace. “All out. No mushrooms either.”

Stella suppressed her irritation. “Then a large pepperoni.”

“Sure.”

Hagen handed her the menu. “Quiet here, isn’t it? Always like this?”

Sandie glanced at the clock on the wall. The face was a picture of a pizza. “It’s after two. See you folks aren’t from around here.”

Hagen shook his head, looking grateful. “No.”

“People around here eat real early. We start serving at eleven for lunch, and our dinner rush is at five. By nine, half this town’s asleep in bed, and the other half’s asleep in front of the television.”

There’d been times in Stella’s life when she’d ached for quiet. But too much quiet didn’t sound good either. “You from here?”

“Born and bred. Never lived anywhere else. And the way things are looking, doubt I ever will.”

“Did you know Charlie Caine, then? You guys must’ve been about the same age,

right?” Stella held up her badge. “We’re FBI, looking into what happened.”

Sandie’s face fell. She’d clearly not only known Charlie but known him well.

“Yeah. We were at school together. It’s so awful.

” She pulled the menus to her chest like a shield.

“He was such a great guy. A real hero. Picked up a Purple Heart in Afghanistan, you know. Heard he just volunteered to coach the school football team too. Always had time for everyone, that guy. It’s just terrible. ”

Hagen picked a lemon seed from his water. “Sounds like you were close.”

“We dated, back in senior year. I’d see him sometimes when he was home on leave.”

“Really? You dated?” Stella glanced at Hagen. Running into one of the victim’s exes was a stroke of luck. They hadn’t had any of that for a while.

Sandie waved away Stella’s interest. “Me and half the girls in school dated Charlie at one time or another. He had a jaw like a sideboard and these beautiful green eyes.” She sighed.

“I was kinda hoping I’d have another chance now he was back.

Most of those other girls have either moved out or shacked up.

Guess I should’ve known nothing good ever happens in this town. ”

“Can you think of anyone who’d want to hurt him?” Stella asked .

“Hurt Charlie?” The server shook her head vigorously.

“I mean, he broke a few hearts back in his day. I don’t think Tracy-Ann Lampert has ever forgiven him for cheating on her with...

well, that was me. But Tracy-Ann, she’s got a mouth like a sewer, but she couldn’t hurt a fly.

And besides, she moved away years ago. No, I can’t think of anyone mean enough to want to hurt a guy like Charlie.

And honestly, I don’t know anyone who’s dumb enough to try either. ”

Stella toyed with the prongs of her fork. They were getting information but not their pizza. “Heard he was hanging out at the Prairie since he’s been back.”

Sandie nodded. “Yeah. Town’s veterans call it their MWR. Their morale, welfare, and recreation place. Guys who go there spend more time with each other than they do with their families. Guess Charlie never got the chance to make that mistake. I’ll get your pizza in the oven.”

Still hugging the menus, she left them.

Hagen rubbed his chin. “You know, I think this is going to be pretty straightforward. This is a small town. Everyone knows everyone. Shouldn’t take us too long to identify Charlie Caine’s killer.”

“That’s only half the job. We’ve done that half job before.” Stella’s stomach rumbled. “Remember what we’re here for. We need to find whoever inspired them, the monster who’s been sending out those messages on Dispatch and getting people to kill.”

Hagen nodded. “Well, solving one might solve the other.”

Stella peered out the window. A truck drove past, with an old couple in the front seats. They’d probably lived in or near the town forever. All the family would come down to the homestead and join them for Christmas. A giant gathering of the clan. Stella had nothing like that. Nothing but her mom.

Her stomach ached again .

“Sweetheart?” Hagen laid his hand on her arm. “You okay?”

She warmed at the pet name.

“Yeah. No. Not really. My mom. She really wants us to go to Miami this Christmas.”

Hagen scratched his jaw. “Um, I?—”

“I know.” She threaded their fingers together. “You want to spend the holiday with your family. I get it. And I want to spend Christmas with you. It’s our first together as a couple.”

She stroked his face. Her phone pinged. A message from her mother.

Stella took a deep breath and, with Hagen looking over her shoulder, played the video.

Her mom stood with Jonathan behind her, smiling.

Barbara started off the wheedling. “We so want you to come for Christmas this year. I know it’s a long way, but we haven’t seen you for so long. There’ll be presents.”

Jonathan leaned in closer to the camera. “And food.”

“And we miss you. Both of you. Please come.”

Stella sighed, set down the phone, and looked over at the kitchen door. “Where the heck is that pizza?”

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

At a few minutes before seven that evening, the parking lot outside the Prairie didn't contain a single car.

Instead, half a dozen pickup trucks stood with their tires partially buried in the potholes.

A pair of dirt bikes, held together by mud and spit, leaned against a wall.

A chain looped around the rear spoiler of an ATV, attaching the vehicle to a rusty drainpipe that ran down the side of the bar.

There wasn't a sedan or a family-sized SUV in sight.

A neon sign in the window advertised Coors. Its blue-and-white letters glowed in the thin evening fog. Rock music thumped through the walls, and someone inside whooped and hollered. Stella assumed the backslapping in a place like that came with enough force to dislocate a shoulder.

She pulled open the door and stepped inside.

A bartender looked up, then returned his attention to the glass he was polishing.

The lighting in the bar was dim enough to hide most minor sins, but Stella could make out a line of faded military pennants on the walls.

Between the flags, crooked frames displayed photos of men in dusty uniforms cradling rifles in front of armored vehicles.

At the pool table, a man in a dirty trucker's cap shot, missed, and swore.

Three men sat at one table, sleeves rolled up to their muscular biceps despite the cold air.

Two more men sat at the bar while the pool player's companion clung to his pool stick as though the cue was the only thing keeping him upright.

Stella counted six empty beer bottles on the corner table behind him.

She'd met plenty of tough guys in her time in the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department and plenty more after she arrived at Quantico. These men looked like tough was all they had.

Hagen strode up to the bar and perched on a stool.

The bartender finished wiping and placed the glass on a display behind him, though the shelf looked as dirty as the rag he whipped onto his shoulder.

He had a bald head, small ears that grew too close to his skull, and thin, pale lips that would've struggled to stretch into a smile.

"What can I get for you?"

"Coke. Stella?"

Stella took the seat next to him. She wanted to ask for a dirty martini, though a cosmopolitan would've worked fine too. Duty sucked sometimes. "Same, I guess."

The bartender sent two coasters skimming down the counter, landing neatly in front of Stella and Hagen with impressive precision. Ice rattled into glasses, followed by a

quick hiss of soda from the bar gun, and then— thump—he set the drinks down with practiced finality.

“Want me to run a tab for that?”

Hagen dropped a twenty on the counter.

As the bartender grabbed his change, Stella thought of the cocktail bar she and Mac used to visit before Stella and Hagen had coupled up and before Mac met Werner.

They should head back there again when they returned.

At least she’d get a better drink than an ice-cold Coke on a frozen December night.

Hagen took his change and dropped a couple of bills into an almost-empty tip jar before taking out his badge and introducing them both. “I hear that Charlie Caine used to come in here a lot. You knew him?”

Stella expected the bartender to react the same way Sandie had. To display sadness at the loss of a friend and a desire to talk about a murdered buddy.

Instead, he planted his fists on the counter and sneered. “That’s all we need. A couple of government goons coming here to tell the locals what to do. Charlie was one of us. He was our friend. We don’t need your help.”

A man sat hunched at the end of the bar. He wore a padded khaki vest over a plaid shirt and jeans that might’ve been blue once but were now white from the knees up. His cap was pushed high on his head. His cheeks were pinched, and his narrow chin ended in thin strands of black bristles.

“Damn right.” He sucked on his Coors. “We’ll find that bastard and deal with him

ourselves.” He pulled a Smith & Wesson from the back of his pants and placed it on the counter.

Hagen glared at him. “Don’t even think about it.”

The bartender lifted his chin toward the gun. “Get rid of that, Dennis. Don’t need anyone getting any stupid ideas.”

Stella lifted her glass. “He’s right. You should put that away. And mouthing off about enforcing your own laws in front of federal officers isn’t the smartest of ideas, is it?”

“We ain’t scared.” The claim came from one of the guys playing pool.

As Dennis stuffed his gun into his pants, Hagen swiveled on his stool. “You should be scared. Believe me, you should be very scared. ”

Stella changed the subject. “So Charlie came here a lot? That’s what we heard.”

The bartender shrugged. “He came.”

“He have any enemies? Get into fights with anyone?”

Dennis scratched his head through the top of his hat and cackled. “It doesn’t matter. Enemies. Friends. Fights. Punishment. None of that shit matters now. End of the world is coming.” He laughed again and tugged at the wet label on his bottle. “You heard it here first. End of the world.”

The bartender sighed and pulled a glass out of the dishwasher.

Stella rested an elbow on the counter. There was that talk again, the favorite conversation topic of everyone in the Dispatch group.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Don’t mean nothing by it. Just that the world’s about to end, and there’s nothing anyone can do about it.”

“Who told you that?”

The man shrugged. “S what I heard.”

Hagen took another sip of his drink. “Heard? Or read? Something you saw on the internet?”

Dennis waved away Hagen’s question with a clumsy swipe of his hand.

“I don’t go on the internet. Never have.

Never will. The government can’t track me with this.

” He reached into his pocket and tossed a Nokia cell phone on the bar.

“See? And the only reason I agreed to carry one was because my daughter said I had to. No, I was told all that stuff. Word of mouth.”

“Told by who?”

Dennis shrugged. “Brook. He knows stuff, man. He knows.”

The bartender snorted as he polished his glass. “Dennis, what are you doing listening to that fool? Brook’s nuttier than squirrel shit. ”

Stella relaxed. If Dennis didn’t use the internet, then he probably wasn’t a member of

the Dispatch group. No, it didn't seem like he was their guy. But this Brook character might be. "Who's that?"

The bartender put the glass on the dirty shelf next to the first.

"Brook Irving. He's a vet. And I shouldn't have said that.

He's not really a fool. He just had a rough time in Afghanistan.

Don't know if it's PTSD or TBI or a mixture of both.

When he came back, he wasn't all there. It was sad.

" He rammed lemon slices onto the edges of their glasses.

"Forgot. Not a lot of demand for soft drinks around here. Anyway, Brook's basically a hermit.

Charlie was the only person who saw him on a regular basis. "

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, Charlie used to give him some work at the farm, buy him groceries when he needed them, that sort of thing. I think he even bought him a cell phone. Charlie felt sorry for him, sort of protective. He was like that, Charlie. One of the good guys."

Stella finished her too-cold Coke, still wishing it had been a cocktail. And that she was in a bar that served them. "Know where we can find him?"

"Brook? He moves around a lot. Sleeps wherever he can find a place to lay his head. But if I were you, I'd check out this shack out near Soldier Creek right now. It's

about three miles off, not far from Old Man Caine's place. Here. I'll draw you a little map."

As the bartender drew the directions on a napkin, Hagen finished his drink with a gulp and sucked the lemon. "Thanks for this." He pushed the car keys down the counter to Stella. "You drive."

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

Hagen held the handle above the passenger seat window as Stella pulled off the road and onto a dirt track. They bounced through the darkness, the wheels of their rented GMC Yukon crunching over the frozen mud. His stomach felt queasy. That pizza wasn't sitting well.

On the drive over, he'd called Journey Russo and informed her on where they were going.

Journey, in turn, told him they were on their way.

Hagen imagined the pair of them were bored. They didn't seem the types to sit things out. He wanted to tell them to wait, but he was also interested in seeing them in action. Plus, this was their turf.

"Is that them?" Stella looked in the rearview mirror.

Hagen glanced at the passenger side mirror. Sure enough, it looked like a black Bureau-issued SUV was tearing up the road behind them. They'd made quick time.

"That's them."

The SUV fell in behind them and matched their pace. They looked like a protective detail for the president. If any Meyersdale citizen had looked out their window at that moment, they might've been a bit intimidated. Hagen felt a strange sense of comfort with Journey and Lucas behind them.

A dark shape grew out of the gloom straight ahead.

Through the mist, Hagen could just make out a rectangular wall, broken windows, and the jagged shape of a roof the weather had partially destroyed.

If someone was in there—someone who believed the world was about to end and had killed to seal his place in the days to come—they needed to approach quietly.

“Shut off the lights. Let’s go in on foot.”

Stella pulled over and turned off the headlights, and Hagen noted the SUV behind them did the same. The engine died. They sat there for a moment, watching the building. Nothing moved. Somewhere in the distance, an owl hooted.

She spoke quietly. “Maybe he’s not in there. Doesn’t look like the place is fit for habitation. Especially not this time of year.”

“Maybe we should go back to that bar.”

“You want another Coke?” Stella lowered her chin and fixed her gaze on him.

Hagen hadn’t even wanted the first one.

“I was thinking we should go back and kick some asses in there for sending us on a wild-geese chase. We don’t have time to sit in a muddy field in the dark, watching an empty building.”

A yellow light flickered through the filth of a broken window.

“Not so empty.” Stella eased open the door and stepped outside.

Hagen followed. They left the doors open. The light fog swirled as the warm air leaked out of the cab.

Beside them, Journey and Lucas also climbed out and left their doors open. They moved like ghosts .

Quickly, they synced their mics and earpieces.

Hagen opened his coat to have easier access to his shoulder holster but didn't draw his gun as he walked alongside Stella. Journey and Lucas fell in behind them as if they'd all worked together for years.

The freezing mud clung to the sides of Hagen's shoes and made a soft sucking sound. Cleaning them would be a pain.

"Oxfords, huh?" Lucas whispered. "Good luck with those out here."

Hagen noted that both Lucas and Journey wore black boots.

"At least he looks good." Journey crept to the side, indicating she and Lucas would take the back entrance. The pair broke off.

"I like her." Hagen stepped closer to Stella.

"Blah, blah. 'She told me I'm pretty,'" Stella teased, her voice softer than the wind.

They reached the door, an old wooden thing that hung crookedly on its hinges. A thin strand of yellow light squeezed below the planks. Stella gripped the handle, but Hagen held up a finger to stop her.

Crouching, Hagen crept to the broken window until he was directly beneath it. He lifted his head and, using the tip of his finger, cleared a small hole in the grime covering the glass.

A man, maybe thirty years old, sat in the middle of the floor. The front area seemed to be a living room. A small kitchenette stood in the far corner. The guys at the bar weren't lying when they said Brook Irving was down on his luck.

Irving had a ragged beard and long, dirty hair.

His chest was bare despite the frigid air, and the lines of his ribs, along with some visible scabs, were highlighted in the pale glow of a flashlight that hung from a post above him.

A pair of dog tags on a silver chain glinted in the light.

He scratched the sparse hair on his chest with the end of a pen, then bent over a sheet of paper on the floor in front of him.

At least a dozen sheets were arranged around him in three rows of semicircles. One sheet was held down by an old cell phone with a crack that ran up the screen. Another sheet was held in place by the weight of a gun.

As Irving lifted the sheet to place it on the pile in front of him, Hagen recognized the familiar pattern of lines and triangles, the cuneiforms that this strange cult carved into its victims.

That Charlie Caine's killer carved into his victim.

Hagen turned to Stella and pointed in Irving's direction, keeping his voice low. "It's our guy. He's got a gun."

"Copy that." Any teasing had left Journey's ghost of a murmur. "Breaching rear exterior."

Even though neither Hagen nor Journey had made a noise, Irving lifted his head, as if his Spidey-sense had activated. He looked right at Hagen with strangely soft blue eyes that contradicted every other thing about him.

In one quick sweep of his arm, Irving grabbed his gun from the pile of papers in front of him and fired.

The window shattered, showering Hagen with broken glass. “Shots fired.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Through his earpiece, Hagen heard Journey and Lucas entering in earnest. “FBI!”

Stella yanked open the front door and leaped inside. “FBI. Put the gun down, Brook.”

Shaking glass from his shoulders, Hagen took his Glock 17 out of its holster and ran in after her.

She didn’t shoot, even though the man was armed and dangerous.

Journey and Lucas stood in the kitchenette. Weapons were drawn, but they didn’t fire either .

Everyone wanted him to be able to talk.

The only cult member they’d found alive had been Tyra Scharf, and she wasn’t cooperating.

Stella stood against the front wall, her weapon in hand. Irving was now on his feet in the corner of the shack. The agents’ flashlight beams cut through the dim light.

His chest heaved in time to his rapid breaths. He held his gun to his temple.

Hagen lowered his weapon, and the others followed suit. “Put it down, Brook. There’s no need for this. You need help. We can get you that help. Just lower the?—”

“No.” Irving shivered, though whether the cause was cold or fear, Hagen couldn’t tell. “No one can help. I know why you’re here. You’re here because of Charlie. He was my friend.”

Stella shifted sideways, out of the puddle of her flashlight’s pale-yellow glow.

“We know he was, Brook.” Journey sidled ever so slowly out of the kitchenette. She was closest to him. “We just don’t know why you killed him.”

“I had to kill him. I had to save him. He told me to.”

“Who told you? Put the gun down, and we can talk about it.”

Hagen glanced at Stella. Maybe Journey was getting somewhere.

Irving lowered the muzzle a tiny bit. “He…”

All four agents waited a moment longer, letting the silence encourage Brook to continue. When it became apparent he wasn’t going to speak, Journey pressed. “He? Who’s he?”

Hagen waited for an answer. They had to get him to put down the gun. But if he wasn’t going to, they had to get him to talk.

Irving adjusted the angle of the muzzle. A squeeze on the trigger would still be enough to blow his brains out. Hagen heard Stella’s breath catch. He was sure she was thinking of Maureen in the psychiatric hospital. That had not ended well.

“The Administrator. He said we had to make a sacrifice. Save ourselves. Save our friends. It’s what the prophecy demands.”

There it was. The mention of the mastermind behind all these murders. Hagen needed to be careful now. And he had to be fast. They had to find out who The Administrator was, who was running the Dispatch group.

“Who’s that, Brook? The Administrator. Who is he? Just put that thing down. You can help us. We can help you.”

Irving grinned. He was missing a front tooth. “You’ll see. It’s coming.”

He closed his eyes.

Stella shouted, “No!”

Déjà vu.

The boom that followed was much louder inside the shack than it had sounded to Hagen outside. The noise echoed off the wooden planks. It shook dust from the rafters and sprayed blood and brains onto the wall.

As the body thumped to the ground, Hagen dropped his head. “Shit.”

“The phone.” Stella was already standing among the sheets of cuneiform. She grabbed the cell phone and touched the screen.

Lucas caught on to what Stella was doing first. “Any luck?”

“It’s still unlocked. Let’s keep it that way.” Stella began typing and scrolling.

Hagen stepped closer, watching as she turned off the passcode requirement .

Stella swiped the screen. “But he is in that Dispatch group. We’re in.”

Ignoring the body still leaking blood in the corner of the shack, Hagen looked over Stella’s shoulder. She opened the app and scrolled through the messages. They were inside at last.

Reply after reply announced that the members were ready.

Hagen holstered his weapon, his focus still on the screen. “What are they ready for?”

Stella scrolled up. A message from someone with the username TheAdministrator declared that the end was coming.

It’s close now. Just two more days. Be prepared to prove yourselves.

Hundreds of replies followed.

Stella shook her head. “Brook was right. Something’s coming. Something big.”

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

New Orleans, Louisiana...

Turk Chase ran his tongue over his sore, swollen bottom lip. A crack in the middle hinted at the taste of blood.

He swore quietly and muttered to himself as he packed his trumpet into its case.

“You better go easier next time, Turk. Gonna split that thing one day, playing hard like that.”

Injury had always been a fear of his, that he’d blast a high note and something would rupture. Blood up the side of his horn. Stitches in his mouth. Years before he could play again, like an athlete with a busted leg.

Fifty years he’d been blowing, man and boy. The fear still hadn’t gone. He licked his lip again.

A sequence of light beats worked a jazz pattern in his head as Turk bent over to close the latches on the case. And his drummer, Dave, tapped a drumstick on the case like he was hitting a high hat.

“Great set tonight. ”

In response, Turk lifted a thick, bent thumb. His voice was a growl. He’d copied the tone after listening to his grandma’s Satchmo albums when he was a boy in Hurtsboro, Alabama. He thought all jazz trumpeters talked like that. The voice had stuck with him ever since.

“Sure was.” His laughter sounded like a frog with a wheeze. “But every set’s great at Tommy Moore’s.”

He laughed again, and Dave joined in. His drummer waved good night with his drumsticks and hopped off the stage to land among the empty tables.

The last of the patrons were collecting their coats from the cloakroom. Marty, the bartender, was wiping down the counter one last time and preparing to set up for tomorrow.

Cassie, the pianist, emerged from the bathroom and waved at Turk. “See you tomorrow, big man. Same time, same tunes.”

Turk waved back. Maybe not the same tunes, though. He might just shake things up a little tomorrow. Less “Round Midnight.” More Nat Adderley. That’d get the house moving.

He eased his ample weight off the stage and passed between the tables. Broken glass crunched under his feet. He thought he’d heard something crash during “Moanin’.” There was always someone who didn’t watch their elbows. Every club. Every night.

“Turk!”

Tommy Moore strode out of his office, arms wide. The club owner was a big guy with a shiny bald pate. No musical talent at all but a strong love of jazz. Tommy could name every swinger on every Blue Note album since Albert Ammons and Meade Lux Lewis cut their first record.

Turk put down his case and met Tommy’s hug.

New Orleans needed men like him, men who could sell the seats, serve the drinks,

and bring in the audiences so that guys like Big Turk and his band could swing every night.

Men like Tommy let Turk make a living doing what he loved.

Sure, he wished he made more money, but he was a jazz trumpeter, not a rock star or a country singer.

“Gotta be grateful for what you got in this world,” his grandma used to tell him, and she wasn’t wrong.

Turk picked up his case and retrieved his jacket.

The cloakroom attendant wished him a good night. Kylie, was it? Callie? He could never remember their names.

A cold rain was coming down outside, and his rideshare hadn’t arrived yet. He tightened his belt and sighed. It was almost one thirty.

Without the music to hold him up, the post-gig tiredness was creeping in. He wasn’t a young man anymore. He couldn’t go all night like when he was a teenager, full of hope and energy. All he wanted now was a hot bath and a good, long sleep. Half an hour, and he’d be home.

His phone told him the car was less than two minutes away.

He opened the door and peered down the road.

A couple of headlights shined through the rain shower.

He waited ’til the car was right outside before running through the rain.

At nearly two hundred thirty pounds, he wasn't tiptoeing between any raindrops.

After confirming he was in the right car, Turk slid his trumpet case onto the back seat next to him, wiped the rain from the top of his head, and pulled his seat belt around his body. The car pulled away, windshield wipers swishing the dots of light on the glass.

"You a jazz player?"

The driver's eyes filled the rearview mirror. Turk didn't want to talk. He just wanted to sleep.

"That's right."

"That's cool, man. I like jazz." The driver watched the road, but when he stopped at a traffic light, he returned his gaze to the mirror. "You got a lot of fans? "

Turk didn't really want to answer that question. He got a few streams online every day, and plenty of people came back night after night to hear him and his band swing. He wasn't sure he could call any of them fans, though.

"People like what I play. What can I say? People in this town have taste." He laughed.

The driver laughed with him. "That's good, man. It's great that your life means something to people."

Turk chuckled at the strange statement. But he was in New Orleans. The city was full of characters.

They drove on. The windshield wipers beat their pattern.

Turk closed his eyes, and the night in the club came back.

Light glinting off the brass of the horn.

Applause at the end of each number. The feeling that came with being lost in the music and knowing that the rest of the band was lost with him, a group of explorers adventuring together through a world of rhythm.

The car slowed. Too soon. Turk's eyes fluttered open. Had he dozed off? The ride seemed like a half note—there and gone.

The driver's door creaked open.

Turk blinked against the dim blur of rain on glass and reached for his trumpet case, easing out into the wet night. "Thanks, friend. Appreciate that."

Except it wasn't his street. No porch light. No mailbox. No rhythm to this place at all.

Rain drummed steady on the roof.

He turned to face the driver. "Hey, what the?—"

The fist came from nowhere, cracking across his face. Lights burst behind his eyes. Blood sprayed from his nose. He stumbled, tried to shake the dissonance loose.

"Sorry, man," the driver said, stepping in close. "But you had a good life. You all but announced it."

A blade caught the streetlight, flashed like a cymbal crash, and sliced clean across Turk's throat before he could even lift a hand to stop it.

His case hit the asphalt first. He collapsed after it, face-first into the pooling rain. His bottom lip split open on impact.

As darkness closed in, he thought—not of the pain, not even of the man—but of the last note he played.

Blue.

Unfinished.

Hanging in the air like it still had something to say.

But it never would.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

Though I was just one person, I'd built something larger than myself, something that would echo through the ages. A noise no one would ever forget.

And soon, I would make the greatest impact anyone had ever made. What was once obscure would be immaculately illuminated.

It happened one night last week. I'd been working on the very first translation of a cuneiform tablet.

Most people didn't know this, but the vast majority of writings from the ancient world had never been translated.

Reams of ancient papyrus and scrolls and row after row of stone tablets sat undisturbed in the storage rooms of the world's great educational institutions, just waiting for someone to decipher their wisdom.

I'd been dedicating a little time in the evenings to that personal pursuit for a couple of years now.

The cuneiform tablet had looked like so many others. True, the fragment was just the bottom half of a longer piece of writing. But fragments weren't unusual.

In other words, nothing about its shape or size would suggest anything other than a run-of-the-mill list of bureaucratic accounting. How many oxen did King Enmebaragesi of Kish slaughter on a feast day? How many slaves were sold at market in Uruk in the year 2573 BC? That sort of thing.

But when I dug in, deciphering the meaning, character by character, I'd been struck by the most powerful sense of déjà vu.

I had seen this before. Or to put it more precisely, I had seen its top half before—a tablet I'd translated a year before, that proclaimed a kind of apocalypse was coming—the Day of Changing.

I'd started the group on Dispatch soon after my discovery.

But that tablet had only held the first part of the prophecy.

Written on the latest tablet was what I had long searched for. The missing puzzle piece. The bottom half of the tablet from last year. The rest of the prophecy was revealing itself to me, word by word, bit by bit.

The precise date and time of the Day of Changing—right there, right in front of me. Finally.

It must've been divine providence that I'd successfully found and translated it so close to the actual Day of Changing.

There was no way to stop the prophecy. What was written would come true.

I didn't want to get the group too excited too soon, though. It was all about timing.

All I could do was help a few courageous individuals save themselves and others. I had actually alluded to my discovery to one special person. She was a real warrior for the cause. And I appreciated her loyalty and action. She reminded me of Maureen King, the original warrior.

The day was coming now. It was close. Nothing could stop it.

A ping alerted me to a new notification.

A follower in New Orleans had posted a picture of a sacrifice.

Photographic evidence was an important show of faith. So many people boasted that they'd completed a sacrifice, but I couldn't be sure they were telling the truth.

I also needed to make sure that the cuneiforms they inscribed on their sacrifices were accurate and not simply gibberish, or the sacrifice would be nullified.

I inspected the new photo. The figure was hard to make out.

He'd been killed late last night in a dark alley.

A big man lying on his side, one arm beneath his head.

But even through the rain, I could see the slice across the man's thick neck and the blood darkening the puddles.

My follower had also photographed the characters he'd carved in the man's forehead.

He'd only written the bare minimum, something simple and quick, but better than nothing.

The end of the old world was coming, and I was in charge of the last days. And when the new world was born, I would be in control. Everyone would look to me. Only I could commune with the gods.

The only thing that could stop me now was the law.

Of course, the authorities would be sniffing around, trying to forestall the sacrifices. I

knew the FBI were on the case. With all the attention my followers had created, everyone in the United States knew.

They didn't understand. They probably thought they were dealing with some kind of serial killer or just some murderous cult whose leader wanted to shed blood.

If they only understood the prophecy, if they only knew the old world had reached its last days, they wouldn't have wasted what little time they had left looking for me. They'd have joined me and tried to save themselves.

I could've helped them.

But they would never join me. No one was more obstinate, more stuck on their path, than an FBI agent.

I had to keep them off my back. While the sacrifice in New Orleans showed the right spirit, it would draw attention.

What I needed was to keep my people quiet until the glorious end.

Then we would bring about the Day of Changing together.

I typed out a new post. Gratitude and congratulations to the warrior who has sacrificed for the good of all. After meticulous work, I have determined The Day of Changing.

Tomorrow when the sun is at its zenith.

Prepare to follow in this warrior's footsteps. All must make a sacrifice when the world changes.

I went on and demanded silence and restraint. I wanted nothing now until the Day of Changing had come upon us, like an ancient soldier taking a deep breath before hurling his spear into the heart of the enemy.

We would wait, and as the world changed, blood would run, and redemption would be granted to those who deserved it.

The last day of the old world was so close.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

Stella and Hagen were still in Meyersdale the next day, dealing with the scene of Brook Irving's suicide.

Journey's sister, Michelle, was the head of the Evidence Response Team that came in and took over the site.

She arranged the cleanup, liaised with the local police, and got busy cataloging tons of new evidence.

The team sent cuneiforms on paper to Guy Lacross to analyze and overnighted the killer's unlocked phone to Mac in Nashville.

They now had access to the Dispatch group.

While Mac was working on pulling the rest of the phone's data, they all had screenshots of the pertinent pages.

Last night, Stella had called Tysen and given her a brief update.

The SAC suggested they have a full debrief via videoconference first thing the next morning.

Now Stella and Hagen sat at a small table in their motel room, huddled in front of a laptop, as Tysen let them into the meeting.

Guy Lacross was already there, as were Journey and Lucas, who'd placed themselves on mute since they were driving.

Lucas waved. A new square popped up, and Stella found herself looking at the crowded meeting room in Nashville, full of her friends and colleagues.

Mac, Caleb, Stacy, Anja, and Slade. Ander was heartbreakingly absent.

Tysen began. “Good morning, all. Agent Drake, I take it you’ve received the phone your colleagues recovered.”

Mac nodded. “I have. It was here when I arrived this morning.”

“Good. I appreciate you haven’t had access to the device for long, but what are your impressions so far?”

Mac pushed a lock of white-blond hair behind her ear.

“I’ve downloaded the data from the Dispatch group, and I’m still working through it.

There doesn’t seem to be too much else on the phone.

Separately, I’ve gained access to the group myself using the invitation Stella and Hagen sent me from Irving’s phone. ”

Excited, Stella leaned in. “They accepted you without question?”

“Sure did.” Mac grinned. “This is to say, to anyone who might be monitoring the group, it would appear that I’m a friend of Brook Irving’s and that he brought me in.

And it might be of interest that Irving’s death has gone unreported on the platform.

So I think we can probably assume he didn’t have any coconspirators in his hometown. ”

Hagen leaned forward. “Can you see who created the group, Mac?”

“Its creator is someone called TheAdministrator. But no one uses their real names in this group, including Brook. Initially, people talked about ancient history. Incas, pyramids, stuff like that.”

“Pyramids?” Guy sighed. “There’s a lot of stuff online about pyramids being made by aliens. Social media algorithms promote it. People will believe anything.”

Mac gave a brief nod. “Yeah, that’s pretty much what happened here. The messages begin by discussing archeology reports but soon move on to conspiracy theories and stuff.”

“Another end-of-the-world group. Will we never be free?” Lucas raised his hands to the sky as if asking a deity for help. Journey smacked his arms down.

Mac glanced up at the camera. “About a year ago, the translation of an ancient tablet was the first post. The Administrator says he came across a tablet that contained a prophecy about the end of the world. Or as he calls it, the Day of Changing. But he doesn’t say where he found this tablet, and he doesn’t ever post an image of the tablet itself.

We just get a few lines of cuneiform and a few lines of translation. ”

Guy didn’t look impressed. “That’s what’s making the thing so hard to track down. How did members of the group react to that?”

“The real history buffs dropped out early on. The Administrator insists that ancient tablets like these are ignored at the world’s peril.

The end of the world is coming, he says, and the only way people can redeem

themselves and others is through sacrifice.

There's a discussion. Some more people leave.

But then others join. The first killings begin in Pennsylvania. ”

“That's Maureen King.” Stella tried to shake the memory of trekking through bloody snow.

Mac nodded. “Shortly after, crimes in Delaware, then in South Carolina follow.”

Tysen pushed her. “And how did that come across in the group?”

Mac flipped a page in her notebook. “I checked messages sent around the time of the murders. There were a number of declarations of sacrifices without images, likely false. This went on for a while. The Administrator then required photographs for proof and that each so-called sacrifice contain four specific cuneiform characters. Apparently, it adds some kind of meaning to the sacrifice.”

“And no one from the group went to the police or called the FBI on the images that were posted?” Stacy asked.

Tysen fielded this one. “We get reports like this all the time. People share snuff images online, pictures from accidents. All kinds of things. We can't investigate them all, especially when it's so hard to trace the senders. We have to prioritize.”

Slade cleared his throat. “So you're saying there could be more murders out there that we haven't connected to this cult yet, Mac.”

“It's possible. If someone killed but didn't write any of those cuneiforms on or near the body, cops might've overlooked the connection.” Mac took a deep breath.

“There’s something else, though. The Administrator posted a message this morning.”

Stella and Hagen shared a worried look. They’d seen that message.

Mac continued. “He gave a date. The Day of Changing is tomorrow. December twenty-third. That’s when the tablet says the old world will end. According to The Administrator, everyone must make a sacrifice ‘when the sun is at its zenith.’”

Slade removed his glasses and folded the arms. “Tomorrow?”

“Yeah.” Mac sounded subdued. Tomorrow was far too tight a deadline.

Stella pulled her chair closer to the table. “He said that everyone must make a sacrifice?”

“That’s right.”

“How many people are in that group?”

“Total members? Seven hundred forty-eight.”

Tysen dropped back into her chair. Even through the screen, she looked pale and, for the first time since Stella met her, not entirely in control.

Journey spoke up. “This sounds like a pretty significant escalation on the part of The Administrator.”

Lucas added, “Agreed. We dealt with a significant escalation during our recent case with The Chosen.”

Stella’s head reeled. Even if only half the group participated, if they killed one person

a piece, they'd have three hundred seventy-four murdered people by tomorrow afternoon.

And the members of this Dispatch group, from her experience, didn't stop at one. In Claymore, three people were killed. In Nashville, five. Tyra Scharf alone had killed three.

Stella's mouth was dry. She cracked open her bottle of water and sipped.

They had a little over twenty-four hours to stop a potential massacre scheduled to happen all across the country.

Tysen tapped her fingernail against the table. "Now that you've got access to the group, Agent Drake, send invitations to me, your two colleagues here, and Agents Russo and Sullivan. We need to be in the loop."

Mac turned her attention to the phone, and a few seconds later, a ping announced Stella's invitation to the infamous group.

An agent appeared in Tysen's square and handed her a note.

Tysen unfolded the paper. "Shit. There's been a murder in New Orleans."

Mac scrolled through the Dispatch posts, her finger flying across the screen. "New Orleans? This is...there are hundreds of posts coming in, basically nonstop now. Gimme a sec. "

Tysen read from her document as if she hadn't heard Mac. "More severe bleeding and some of those cuneiforms carved into the victim's forehead this time."

Mac finally stopped and swallowed hard. "Someone posted a photo that matches that

description.” She held up her screen.

Beside Stella, Hagen’s face hardened. “Mac, can we just round up the members? All of them?”

The question was focused and forceful and would take a lot of resources if it could be done. But he was right. If they couldn’t find the Administrator by tomorrow, maybe they could dent his organization.

Mac blew out her cheeks. “I’ve already put in multiple requests to Dispatch for the phone number and IP address of the Administrator. I’ll keep trying. They’re dragging their heels on the Tyra Scharf warrant for her DMs too.”

“We’re hitting a wall there.” Slade looked grimmer than Stella had seen him in a long time.

“I can ask for everyone in the group, too, but I suspect Dispatch will fight each one. They’re more cooperative than they used to be, but they’ll take their time, which we don’t have.” Mac tapped the phone screen as if it would magically reveal its secrets to her.

“And there are regular reminders in the chat about using the app without revealing your phone number,” Stella pointed out. She’d accepted Mac’s invitation and started scrolling herself.

“Users send the verification code to a burner phone, which they toss.” Mac almost seemed to admire the steps taken to thwart her. “Then they use a VPN to hide their IP. I suspect anyone we could identify would just be a lurker, not a killer.”

Stella took another sip of water. “Mac, were you able to identify Maureen King’s messages in the app? Or Trevor McAuley’s?”

“Some of the messages seem to match their actions, but everyone’s anonymous, so it’s hard to say for sure. However, we do know that Monty31 was Trevor McAuley’s handle. We learned that from his first victim’s phone. I found his account.”

Tysen nodded. “What else?”

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Mac held up the phone again. “I looked at his messages. At one point, there was an interesting discussion among the members about mental health. Some people were complaining about spouses and parents trying to send them to therapy. And McAuley, Monty<sup>31</sup>, said that his therapist was fine. He’d just sit in silence during the sessions, but as soon as they ended, he and Bill would chat it up like bros. Anybody know a Bill?”

“Dr. Bill Silow? From Claymore Township.” Stella glanced at Hagen.

Tysen stopped her. “This is the guy in Pennsylvania, right? Where you investigated these murders for the first time?”

Dr. Bill Silow headed the Claymore Psychiatric Hospital and was the mayor of the small mountain town.

He’d seemed more like a kind grandfather than a fanatical killer.

Stella and Hagen had managed to rule him out of those first murders.

He’d been at the hospital when Maureen King had committed the murders with the help of her former student, Trevor McAuley.

Something wasn’t adding up. Maybe Silow himself didn’t add up. Guilt bubbled up inside Stella, triggered by the idea that she and Hagen had missed something so large in Claymore. Again.

How many times did they have to solve this case?

“Yeah, Bill Silow is the hospital administrator, but?— ”

Tysen held up her hand. “So this Silow treated not one but two of the killers? And he didn’t mention this to you? And he’s an ‘administrator?’” She dropped back in her seat. “We’ve got to talk to him again.”

Stella shook her head. “Administrator is just a job title, and he doesn’t know anything about cuneiform. He was into...what was it? Entomology.”

Guy spoke up. “Insects?”

“He collected dead butterflies and things. Framed them and put them on the wall.”

“Gross. And I thought my interest was weird.”

“It is.” Stella gave Guy a smile to cut the sting of her comment. “But his dead bugs don’t make him a killer any more than your interest in the Akkadian empire makes you one. And the behavioral profile we’ve created for the Administrator suggests that he’s an expert in cuneiform, not insects.”

Tysen shifted in her seat. Her enthusiasm was growing.

She’d caught a thread, and she didn’t look like she wanted to let it go.

“Agent Drake, didn’t you say no one’s seen any images of this tablet?”

He might’ve just cobbled enough stuff together about the ancient world to create a cult.

Doubt his followers would know any different. ”

Journey spoke up. “In my experience, when a large number of people do terrible things, it’s because some big, charismatic cult leader has told them to.

Charm is more important than expertise here.

The fact that the Administrator hasn’t released his source, the tablet, merely adds weight to this theory. He could just be lying.”

Stella wanted to argue with her. She knew Silow.

She liked him. But Journey’s instinct might’ve been on the money.

Silow was charming. He knew two of the killers, had treated two of the killers.

His title might not have been a coincidence.

She looked to Guy. “How are you doing with your search for experts in cuneiform?”

Guy rifled through a notebook in front of him.

“I’ve drawn up that list you asked for. It’s still too long, though.

Too many names, and they’re all over the country.

California, South Carolina. There are even a couple of people in Canada who could talk about this stuff intelligently on the Dispatch platform.

” He rifled through the pages again. “New York, New Jersey, several people in Pennsylvania. Just about everywhere’s got someone. ”

“Professor Whelan?”

Guy nodded. “Yeah. I included everyone until we can start ruling them out.”

Hagen frowned. “Professor Whelan, though? I think that guy’s older than these tablets. And we met a guy named Napp in the Laurel Mount library when we interviewed Whelan. He’s not much younger. Hard to see either of those old guys being so sophisticated as to launch the Dispatch group.”

“Alfie Napp? From the Pittsburgh Museum of Ancient Art? Yeah, I’ve met him, and he’s on my list. He’s a knowledgeable guy.

I wouldn’t underestimate either of them.

They’re not exactly undergrads, but Napp is a natural leader, and Whelan is more ambitious than he looks.

But I agree. I think we’ve established that the Administrator isn’t the one getting his hands dirty. And look here.”

Guy took out his phone and opened his browser. The page showed a story in The New York Times .

“I was just reading this before the meeting. Looks like the press got wind of the cuneiform markings on the arm of the subway victim in New York. They asked Whelan what they mean.”

Tysen pressed her lips together. She looked like one more piece of bad news might make her explode.

“That’s all we need. If we didn’t have copycats before, we’ll definitely get them now.

Every killer in the country will be carving lines into their victims to throw the cops

off their scent.

Idiots. And what's this Whelan guy doing helping them? ”

“I think he's enjoying his moment in the spotlight.

” Guy looked embarrassed at the behavior of his colleague, as though Whelan's decision to talk about the details of a murder reflected on him.

“How often does an Assyriologist get interviewed in the news? Believe me. He wasn't going to turn that down. ”

Tysen was right. The interest of the press could complicate an already overly complex case. Stella folded her arms across her chest. “What did he tell them?”

“That the killer wouldn't need to be an expert to leave those marks on a body. Anyone who's ever read an ancient history book could've done it. The good news for the police, he added, was that so few people read ancient history books.”

Tysen shook her head. “That's something, I suppose. And it backs up my theory that the mastermind doesn't have to be an expert. Agent Knox, how did you get on with Whelan?”

Stella shrugged. “Okay, I guess.”

“Good. Give him a call. I don't think you need to drive there for this. Ask him if he's serious about anyone being able to copy those characters. If that's true, this Silow guy could be the one pushing it.” Tysen turned off the screen. “And for pity's sake, ask Whelan to stop talking to the press.”

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

Stella called Professor Whelan after the videoconference. As the line rang, she arched her spine and pushed back her shoulders. She never liked talking to informants and witnesses on the phone if she didn't have to.

Detective Dan Garcia, her partner when she'd been a cop, had warned her once that only half the information witnesses and informants provided came from their mouths.

The rest, and usually the most valuable part, came from their eyes and their body language.

A phone call rarely revealed the whole story.

The line rang unanswered.

Hagen paced to the window. "Reception is bad in his office, remember? Try his assistant."

Stella hung up and phoned Jodie.

She answered right away, her voice slightly breathless. "Hey, Agent Knox. What can I do for you?"

"Need to speak to your boss, Professor Whelan. He's not picking up."

A small groan escaped her lips. "He's in his office. I just left him there to go pick up some lunch. Want me to go and get him?"

“I’d appreciate that.”

Jodie’s heavy breathing returned as she tramped back into the building. Stella set her phone on the table and put the device on speaker.

A few minutes later, Whelan’s voice filled the meeting room, still a little creaky but happier than when they’d spoken to him last. “Agent Knox! It seems my expertise is in demand.” He laughed. “How can I help you today?”

His greeting explained his cheer. Stella couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen a historian quoted in a newspaper. Let alone a historian of the ancient world.

“Just wanted to ask you about something you told The New York Times . You said that anyone could’ve drawn the character the reporter showed you. Is that true? Wouldn’t someone need expertise to know that character even exists?”

“No, no. Not really. The symbols left on that poor victim in New York were very simple. Very simple indeed. One was part of the Sumerian word for death. Anyone who’s ever seen a cuneiform, anyone who’s been to a museum, really, could’ve drawn that symbol.

Can probably buy them on little pendants in the gift shop. ”

Whelan laughed again.

His mood grated on Stella. The old man’s pleasure didn’t reflect the gravity of the situation. They were dealing with a series of brutal murders that might mark the start of a massacre. Whelan needed to realize that.

But he might not have been wrong. None of the killers they’d stopped so far had been experts. Brook Irving, a troubled veteran rotting away in a freezing barn, certainly

hadn't looked like he was a frequenter of museums.

There was another option—Whelan was lying. The professor could simply be saying as much to throw them off his trail.

Stella had to know more. “Professor, have you ever seen a cuneiform tablet that gives the exact date of the end of the world?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

Finally, the professor responded. “Well I’ve certainly seen tablets that discuss some sort of day of reckoning or an apocalypse.

” As he spoke, Stella wished more than ever that they were in the same room.

She needed to see his body language. “But no, I don’t think I’ve ever translated anything that gives a precise date for such an apocalypse. ”

She couldn’t tell from the tone of his voice if he was lying. “How about the phrase ‘the Day of Changing?’ Have you ever heard that?”

“Again, I don’t think so. But perhaps that’s simply an alternate translation of ‘apocalypse.’ I couldn’t say without more specific details or the text itself.”

Hagen strode to the table and leaned over the phone. “Just one second, Professor.” He hit the mute button.

“What do you think?”

“The killers don’t have to be experts, but what about this Administrator? The guy who’s running this thing. You’re telling me he’s not some ancient world know-it-all?

Really?” Hagen sucked in a cheek. He didn’t look convinced. For that matter, neither was Stella.

She unmuted. “Has anyone else contacted you for your opinion, Professor?”

“Oh, yes. The Washington Post has been in touch, and CNN called me yesterday as well. Everyone wants to know about these murders.”

Hagen rolled his eyes and swiveled away.

Stella picked up the phone. “Professor, I need you to not speak to anyone else about this case. If the press calls again, just tell them you’ve been asked not to comment. This isn’t about prestige...it’s about lives. People are dead. More might die. You don’t want your name tied to that, do you?”

“Certainly not!” Whelan barked. “I’m having the time of my life. No one outside my field has ever heard of me or my work before. Do you have any idea how jealous my peers will be or what this will mean for my department’s funding?”

Good grief. “Then let me be crystal clear. If your quotes interfere with this investigation, the FBI will no longer be treating you as a helpful expert. We’ll treat you as a liability. And I promise you, that kind of publicity won’t help your tenure committee.”

Silence.

But only for a beat.

“I’ll take my chances,” he snapped.

Stella ended the call and set the phone down with more force than necessary. “Not

sure I'm Professor Whelan's biggest fan."

"He got his fifteen minutes of fame, and he's holding on to it for dear life." Hagen headed toward the door. "You want to break the news to Tysen? Or you want me to do it?"

Stella got her on the phone.

Without any pleasantries, the SAC started in. "What did Whelan tell you?"

"He said he's having a wonderful time talking to the press and has no intention of stopping."

"Great. Now every murder in the country will come with a little cuneiform tag, just to confuse the cops. Idiot." Stella heard Tysen thump her desk twice. "Right. Drive up to Claymore. Talk to that psychiatrist."

Stella frowned. "Silow?"

"Yeah, him. If the Administrator doesn't have to be a cuneiform expert, he's top of my suspect list. In the meantime, Agent Drake will see if she can identify any of the group members, and Guy will keep working his list of experts."

Stella nodded. "Copy that."

Tysen had one more thing to add. "Hey, if this hospital administrator is the Administrator we're looking for, we can wrap this up now."

Stella was quite sure they weren't going to get that lucky.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

Stella sat in the passenger seat on their three-and-a-half-hour drive to Claymore. Hagen was behind the wheel. If they avoided traffic, they would reach the little town near Lake Erie by midafternoon.

The monotony of the drive made Stella's mind wander.

First to logistics. If they had to spend the night in Claymore Township, Stella had arranged another stay at the cabin in the woods where they'd recovered from the death of the man who'd murdered both their fathers.

The place where, for a few weeks back in the fall, they'd cut themselves off from the world and focused only on each other.

Each day during that unofficial sabbatical, they'd trekked around the woods, taking in the fresh air, the quiet of nature.

In the evenings, Hagen cooked while Stella lay on the sofa and read, a book resting against her knees.

The fire crackled in the grate, and Bubs snored at her feet.

The thriller on the pages in front of her was all the excitement she needed.

And she had all the romance she'd ever dreamed of.

Stella stole a glance at Hagen. He was in the zone, focused on the road ahead. She slipped back into her thoughts .

Those weeks in Claymore Township had been the best of her life, relaxing days and long nights that ended each morning, safe in Hagen's strong arms.

It couldn't have lasted. They'd known that when they arrived, having cashed in all their overtime and vacation days.

The day would come when they'd have to go back to the blood and the bodies, the forensic reports and the witness interviews, the antiseptic stink of the morgue and the stifling air of police cells and interview rooms.

They just hadn't expected that day to come while they were still in Claymore Township.

A search for a missing patient. Their discovery of his body hanging naked and bloodless in the middle of the woods near the cabin.

The first of a series of murders that followed them home to Nashville, took them back to Pennsylvania, and now brought them here again, back where they'd started.

It seemed there was no getting away from these murders.

Stella imagined how it would be when they returned to the cabin. Hagen would ease open the door and step inside. She would follow and take a deep breath of the cabin's woody air—the hint of pine and the aroma of burned logs in the fireplace. Then she'd light a fire while he unpacked.

She had found it best to leave him to put away the clothes.

He was fussy about having all his hangers facing the same direction and had his own way of storing his jacket.

The collar had to stay straight, and the lapels couldn't curl.

Or something like that. Stella would've been happy to pluck the next wrinkled item out of the suitcase each day. Unpacking was hardly worth the effort.

She'd pile the kindling into the fireplace, ensuring there was sufficient airflow for the flames to take before arranging the logs carefully. The landlord always provided more than enough.

Stella would strike the match and listen to the fizz of the phosphorous.

Those days had been so carefree, so...weightless.

The death of Joel Ramirez had been like the removal of a boulder from her shoe.

And the darkness that Hagen had shouldered since she'd met him had lifted.

For the first time, they'd been able to see each other as they really were.

And they loved what they saw.

The kindling would catch. Fire would lick at the logs. Everything would be back to normal.

Before she knew it, Hagen pulled off the highway at the exit in Claymore Township, up the road to the mountains on the way to the hospital.

The Claymore Township Psychiatric Hospital hadn't changed in the weeks Stella and Hagen had been away.

The snow had melted, then returned, so the drifts were now as deep against the walls

as they had been during the last visit.

But the roads had been plowed, and the fog had lifted so that the short drive from the cabin to the hospital no longer felt like an adventure.

They left their rental vehicle in front of the building, made their way up the cleared path to the front door, and rang the buzzer for entry.

Stella stomped the snow from her boots as the door unlocked.

Inside, in the entrance hall, was where Maureen King had stabbed Kenneth Hannan, a patient at the hospital.

If she squinted, Stella thought she could just make out the shape of a dark stain on the marble floor where the blood had soaked into the stone.

The real culprit was probably a shadow from the banister on the staircase. But the memory made Stella shudder, and she wondered how the murders had affected the staff and patients. The residents at the hospital were fragile enough.

A nurse came down the stairs and headed toward the rec room with only the briefest of glances in their direction. She was young, with a short blond bob pinned back neatly. Stella didn't recognize her.

Hagen whispered, "Guess Dr. Silow finally found a replacement for Ann."

She nodded. Nurse Ann Mayhew hadn't seemed like a good fit for Claymore. Her inappropriate relationship with Kenneth, her patient, had ended her position and probably killed her career too.

Stella approached Dr. Silow's door and paused to listen for voices. He might've been

in a therapy session. She didn't want to burst in just as someone was laying out their soul. An interruption might set them back in the healing process.

Hearing nothing, she rapped her knuckles gently against the wood.

"Come in." Dr. Silow's low voice was warm and welcoming.

Stella turned the brass doorknob.

Dr. Silow sat at his desk at the end of the room, writing in a notebook. The walls were still covered with framed dead insects. Here, a set of butterflies looked ready to take off and fly around the room. There, a platoon of beetles stood in stick-straight lines, as if ready to march on an enemy.

Dr. Silow lifted his head from his book. He stared at them for a few seconds, frowned, and removed his large spectacles, leaving them to hang from the black string around his neck. "Stella! Hagen!" He smiled widely. "How wonderful to see you both again. I was so glad to hear you were coming."

Rising from his chair, he came around the desk, his arms stretched wide. He greeted Stella with a grasp of her shoulders and an air kiss that landed somewhere behind her ears. Hagen received a hearty handshake.

"Come, come. Make yourselves comfortable." He waved toward the two leather chairs in front of the desk. "Now let me think. It was coffee for you, Hagen, and a decadent, thick hot chocolate for you, Stella. Am I right?"

Stella couldn't help but smile. Dr. Silow remembered. He fished a jar of ground coffee and a box of instant hot chocolate packets from the cabinet beside the door and took out the French press.

As he busied himself with the drinks, Stella noticed a rug in the middle of the floor. A dark-red and navy blue Persian-inspired design covering the spot where Maureen King had cut her throat. Dr. Silow, too, must've struggled not to see the stain on the floor.

Silow placed the steaming cups on the desk in front of them and returned to his seat.

"Such a terrible thing, what happened to young Trevor. I assume that's why you're here. Following up."

Hagen sipped his coffee. "Something like that. You were very helpful. Not sure we'd have caught him if not for that tip you gave us, telling us where he'd be. Did you know him well?"

"I'm glad I helped, if that's what I did.

But I wouldn't say I knew him well, no. He was closed off.

Very, in fact." Dr. Silow steepled his fingers.

His nails were always cut short and even.

"But I could certainly see him influencing a vulnerable Maureen King. To be perfectly frank, Maureen was so unstable at that stage, anyone could've moved her. She was quite impressionable."

Stella agreed completely.

Hagen was taking his time, drawing Dr. Silow out. So far, he hadn't told them anything they didn't already know. They understood Trevor McAuley's influence. He'd pulled Maureen King into the cult, twisted her into his violence, and eventually

trailed Stella and Hagen all the way back to Nashville.

What they needed to know was why...and who was pulling his strings.

Stella cupped her hands around the mug and sat back in the chair.

There was something intensely relaxing about Dr. Silow's office, with its dark wooden panels and hot, steaming drinks.

She could sense herself sinking into the seat, desiring to tell him everything about the case and asking for his opinion.

Only the rows of dead beetles in the frames on the wall beside her head kept her alert.

"What have the other patients said? Anyone mention anything about the Dispatch group Maureen and Trevor joined?"

Dr. Silow took a small cloth from his desk and wiped his spectacles.

"No, no. Not at all. The other patients don't know anything.

We don't talk about the case in front of them.

And I'm afraid I don't know any more than I've already told you or read about in the press.

My only connection with Trevor was during his therapy sessions, and even then, he didn't say much. "

Hagen slid his coffee onto the desk. "So you did treat Trevor?"

“Oh, yes. Well, tried to. His parents sent him to me, but I’m afraid the sessions weren’t very effective. Patients have to want to take part, and Trevor didn’t. He just sat there, saying nothing, mostly.”

Hagen’s jaw set. “You didn’t think to mention this? That you were Trevor’s psychiatrist.”

Dr. Silow blinked. He had small, dark eyes that made his white beard look whiter.

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“I’m sorry. I didn’t think it was relevant.

We had three sessions in all, and I doubt he said more than three words total.

There was nothing to say.” He checked his watch.

“Listen, I’m so sorry, but group therapy’s about to begin.

The patients can get a little...antsy if I’m late. You’re staying overnight, I take it?”

Hagen nodded. “We can, though we haven’t decided yet.”

“Very well. Why don’t you come to my house in the early evening? About five thirty? I’ll be off then, and we can catch up. You can ask me anything you want.”

As Stella finished her hot chocolate, Hagen gave a curt nod and rose to his feet. “We’ll see you then.”

They left the hospital and climbed into the Yukon.

Stella ramped up the heating and held her hands in front of the vent. She spoke as Hagen pulled on his seat belt. “I can see those gears grinding away. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that maybe Tysen’s right. The murders started here, at the hospital Dr. Silow runs. He treated both Trevor and Maureen. No one would’ve had more influence over Maureen than he did. Or over Trevor. And he didn’t tell us of that

connection.”

He put the vehicle in gear and eased away from the hospital.

Stella rubbed her hands together. Moving from the hospital to the Yukon had taken but a few seconds, and she still couldn't get her fingertips warm.

“He only had three sessions with Trevor. And he said Trevor hardly spoke.”

“We only have his word for that. And three sessions is still plenty of time to get under the skin of someone like Trevor. Especially for someone like Dr. Silow. Didn't you say what a charming old man he is?”

And didn't you theorize that the Administrator wouldn't have to be an expert on cuneiform, only that they needed a little knowledge of it and a lot of charm?”

They reached the junction. A right turn would take them down into Claymore Township. To the left, the road continued up the mountains to their cabin. In the distance, down the slope and over the snow-covered pine trees, Lake Erie glistened in the morning light.

Hagen tapped the steering wheel.

“Left or right?”

“If we're staying another night, we're going to need food. Right.”

Hagen turned down the hill. “I'm just thinking that maybe you and Tysen are right, and Guy Lacross was wrong. Maybe we were off base to focus on experts in cuneiform and exonerate Dr. Silow so early. The guy behind this thing might've been right under our noses the whole time.”

There was a note of excitement in his voice. Stella wanted to solve this, too, and if they could wrap it up today, they could close the case and stop the coming massacre.

But she was less sure about Dr. Silow's involvement.

He was kind. He'd always been dedicated to the community and generous and supportive to both Stella and Hagen.

He'd urged them to stay until a new sheriff could be found.

Surely, Dr. Silow was too sensible and too grounded to get caught up in something like this.

"I don't know. I still have some doubts. Like, I think the big thing is that if Dr. Silow is the Administrator, then why would he send Trevor all the way to Nashville to kill us when he had us here in Claymore? In fact, why ask us to be the interim sheriffs at all?"

Hagen cocked his head to the side. "You know, I didn't consider that. Maybe he wanted some distance between himself and Trevor? Some sort of plausible deniability?"

"Maybe."

"But you have to admit it's weird that Dr. Silow treated Trevor, and he didn't tell us, right? It's weird that he treated both of them. "

"Look, I'm right there with you. Basically, I agree.

But as far as treating goes, it's a small community.

He probably treats everyone. Plus, doctor-patient confidentiality.

And I just can't help but think, more generally, why would someone like Dr. Bill Silow, a psychiatrist, a hospital administrator, and a mayor, inspire people to kill? ”

Hagen shrugged. “I don't understand why half the people we catch do the things they do.

We've stopped torturers and psychopaths, people who killed out of rage, people who killed for profit, and people who killed for kicks.

What was the line in that movie? ‘Some men just want to watch the world burn.’”

He glanced at Stella. She knew he'd once wanted to kill for revenge. For a short period, so had she.

“ The Dark Knight . That's what it was.”

Hagen nodded like he was picturing the scene. “Well, what I do know is that Dr. Silow is an administrator who's treated at least two of the killers and some of the victims.”

“Okay, we keep talking to him. We'll get another chance this evening.

But just...you know, keep an open mind. Guy might come up with a better candidate.

Someone like Professor Whelan. Or that Dr. Napp.

Or anyone else on that list he compiled.

Or maybe it's one of their students, or one of their friends. ”

“Right. And again, if this cult leader doesn’t need extensive knowledge of cuneiform, anyone with an internet connection and the ability to persuade the masses and google what a cuneiform is could be orchestrating this.”

Hagen turned onto the main road and pulled up outside Claymore Township’s general store.

He left the engine running. “If we’re digging into students or friends of cuneiform experts, we’ll never find the killer in time.

There must be hundreds of them. Thousands, even.

Why don’t you give Mac a call? See if she can get anything from Dr. Silow’s phone records. ”

Stella took out her phone and placed the call. Even without a search warrant, they should be able to see any calls or texts between Dr. Silow and Trevor when he was in Nashville.

“Hey, Mac. Need you to dig into Dr. Bill Silow’s phone records for me.”

“Yeah, of course.” Mac sounded so close and yet so far away. Stella didn’t like the distance.

“Highlight any calls or texts between him and Trevor McAuley. And Mac? I assume you’ve already checked whether his number is in that Dispatch group.”

“It’s not there. Doesn’t mean he’s not there, but his phone number isn’t registered. I’ll see what I can find and let you know.”

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Stella wished Journey Russo was with them as they parked outside Dr. Bill Silow's house late that afternoon. And Lucas Sullivan. Not just because she missed working with her new professional friends, but because she wanted a third opinion. And a fourth, if possible.

She stepped out of the SUV and tightened her coat. "I hope it's not him. I really hope not. He's too nice to be the guy we're looking for."

Hagen gave her a short nod as he locked the door. The shallowness of his movement suggested acknowledgment rather than agreement.

"Yeah, Bill's a nice guy. But that doesn't mean he can't also be nasty. You and I have met enough killers to know looks and behavior mean very little. Not every murderer broadcasts his intentions with blood-curdling threats and sinister stares. Remember Rhodell? He was nice too."

Darwin Rhodell had been an artist, all sweetness and charm, until he'd tried to make art out of the body parts of his murdered victims. Stella and Hagen had caught him in the end, but only after he'd almost killed her. Some murderous psychopaths really were hard to spot.

Stella followed Hagen to the path that ran up to the house. Dr. Silow had cleared away the snow, leaving a route to his door as straight and dark as a surgeon's cut. She stood there for a moment and shuddered.

Dr. Silow was friendly, kind, and charming.

But the Administrator in the Dispatch group had to be all those things, too—enough to inspire people to murder their friends and loved ones. And more than anything, Stella wanted to catch the killer tonight, even if it meant cuffing the kind doctor and reading him his Miranda rights.

There was no more time to waste.

The door swung open. A breath of warm air drifted over the welcome mat, inviting them inside.

Dr. Silow stood in the entrance, a broad smile on his face.

He'd changed out of the dark suit he usually wore at the hospital into a thick Aran turtleneck that his potbelly only slightly stretched out of shape.

Though Dr. Silow's house was always a little too dark for Stella's taste, the Christmas decorations brightened it up and made his eyes twinkle.

"There you are! How wonderful to see you both again. Come in, come in. Out of the cold. That's it."

He took their coats and hung them on a stand, an old-fashioned thing with too many hooks from which far too many hats hung.

Fishing hats with lures pinned to the sides ready to tempt trout.

A baseball cap with a New York Yankees symbol embroidered on the front.

Even a pale-blue beanie, which Stella couldn't imagine the man wearing.

Dr. Silow moved the cap to make way for Hagen's coat. Hagen straightened the

sleeves behind him.

“I didn’t know you were a Yankees fan, Bill.”

“Me? No, no. Never really saw the point of baseball. Picked it up in New York just now. A souvenir from the Big Apple. Come on in. You’ll take a glass of wine, of course. White or red? I have both.”

“Not for me, thanks. So what were you doing in New York?”

“Hm? Oh, the usual. Sightseeing. Visiting my daughter.”

He led them into the living room. A fire crackled in the grate next to a small worktable. An overstuffed sofa took up most of one wall, and a pile of printed pages lay on the coffee table in front of a rocking chair.

Dr. Silow lifted a bottle of red wine from the sideboard beside a two-liter bottle of Coke.

He showed the wine label to Stella. She shook her head.

He poured himself a glass. “Suit yourself, but you’re missing out.

It’s a good one. Anything else I can get you?

Coffee? Tea? Cocoa? I think I might have some schnapps somewhere. ”

Stella thought of taking the cocoa but decided she’d had enough chocolate for one day. And they were here to work, not relax. “Just a Coke. How long were you away?”

“Left on Saturday and got back around midnight last night. My daughter’s taking a

sabbatical at Columbia this year, so I just went for a short visit.

Had a wonderful time. Lots of beautiful nature here in the mountains, but not very much art, unfortunately.

Unless you count the patients' landscapes.

Which are...well, at the moment, the most I can say is they try.

I do miss museums and galleries and so on. She brought me to an opening."

He held out the glass to Stella. The almost-black drink was made darker by the house's low light and the mahogany frames that held more of Dr. Silow's insects.

A blast of "Flight of the Valkyries" trumpeted through the room. On the worktable, a phone screen flashed.

"That'll be Melanie, making sure I got home okay. Excuse me one moment." Dr. Silow picked up the phone and took the call. "Everything's fine, my dear. Home safe and sound."

As he reassured his daughter, Stella took her glass and approached the table. Black pins were piled in the corner. A frame ready for hanging held a praying mantis carefully arranged on the end of a twig. A gooseneck lamp stretched over the body of a large beetle that gleamed in the light.

Insects didn't really bother Stella. She'd never been the kind of person who'd screamed at the sight of worms at the edge of a playing field or panicked at the appearance of a wasp at a picnic or a spider in the corner of her bedroom.

But there was still something strange about the idea of handling and displaying dead

creatures.

As Dr. Silow slipped his phone into his pocket, Hagen joined Stella. He lifted the frame. “I see you’ve been busy.”

“That thing?” Dr. Silow squinted from the other side of the room.

“Beautiful, isn’t it? Ordered it online.

You can find anything online these days, and I’ve always wanted a praying mantis.

I know people tend to compare them to priests making their prayers, the way they hold their little hands together.

But I’ve always seen them as more like royal advisors rubbing their palms as they plot their power grabs.

I suppose that says something about me, doesn’t it? ” He laughed.

Stella sipped her Coke. She pointed at the beetle, which seemed huge—almost two inches long, reddish-brown, with a pair of sharp pincers. “And this?”

“Oh, that I picked up in the woods here. Pretty little fellow, isn’t he?”

Hagen wheeled away. To him, the desk must’ve looked dirty, filled with dead bugs that needed to be swept into the garbage. “Where did this interest come from?”

Dr. Silow made his way around the rocking chair to stand directly behind Stella. He wasn’t a tall man, but his shadow fell over the table, dropping the dead beetle into darkness.

“Actually, my interest in entomology predates my interest in psychiatry. I was always fascinated by the idea that cockroaches could survive a nuclear holocaust.” He chuckled.

“I don’t know whether they really could.

It’s probably an old wives’ tale. But I spend all day helping the most fragile members of our society.

These things...” He pointed at a hissing cockroach in a frame above the desk.

“They’re the most resilient creatures on earth.

The world could end, and they’d still be crawling along. ”

The hairs on the back of Stella’s neck rose. Once again, here was someone mentioning the end of the world.

She returned to the sofa and placed her drink on the coffee table.

The coaster was decorated with a print of a long-legged spider.

The creature looked squashed under her glass, its legs stretching toward the pages printed from an online psychology journal.

“So how has the town reacted to the events of the last few weeks? It must’ve been quite a shock. ”

Dr. Silow eased himself into the rocking chair.

He rocked gently in the seat, his hands folded in his lap.

“Oh, yes. Those awful murders. First, there were the ones you two solved here in town. And just as we’re starting to recover, another member of our community commits more murders in Nashville. Terrible.”

The chair’s runners squeaked softly, rhythmic.

He was silent for a moment before continuing. “A thing like that can shake a community’s sense of self. What sort of town produces so much destruction? How did it find root here? When? And why here?”

Hagen was studying a large butterfly pinned above the fireplace. “You got any answers?”

Dr. Silow shook his head. “Some questions have no answers, Hagen. You’ve probably found the same thing in your line of work.

But just asking can help. I’ve been trying to encourage people to do that.

We started a series of discussions in the library just after you left.

I try to explain the effects of grief and shock, to rebuild people’s sense of security, their sense of who they are.

It’s not easy to trust after an event like this. Not easy at all.”

Frustration built in Stella’s gut. Dr. Silow’s job was to treat dangerous people. Even if he wasn’t the Administrator, she’d hoped for a bit more insight. “You treated Maureen before she killed Laurence Gill. And Mark Tully. And her husband. And you have no theories about why she did it?”

“Well, we know that she’d been...radicalized, if we can use that term. By Trevor,

apparently. At least, that's what I understand from?—"

"And you treated Trevor too."

Dr. Silow blinked. He lifted his chin and said nothing at first. He looked at Stella as though he'd found some interesting new bug.

"I did. Does that concern you, Stella?"

"It makes me wonder. You treated two of the killers. They're both now dead. And you can't explain what made them tick, what made them kill? What was going on inside their heads? You were supposed to be their psychiatrist ." Her fist thumped onto the arm of the sofa.

Dr. Silow's gaze flickered toward the movement. He stopped rocking in his seat. "You're angry."

"Yes, I'm angry. We have a pile of corpses. We get reports of new victims almost every day. And you didn't even tell us that you treated two of the killers. How do you explain keeping that information a secret?"

He rubbed the back of his hand. "As I said, I only treated Trevor very briefly, and he said nothing of any use. He was very resistant to treatment. "

"And you didn't think that information would've been of use to us?"

"I'm sorry, Stella. I?—"

"Bill, you're not a fool. Don't act like one."

Stella stood. She paced to the door, stopped, and turned around. Dr. Silow was

watching her. He sat with the chair rocked back, one hand gripping the other. He looked uncomfortable. She was getting to him, rattling him. She had to push on, see if she could shake something out of him.

“And don’t treat us like fools. We know someone is behind all these killers. Someone charming. Inspiring. Someone clever and manipulative. You don’t know who that could be, do you?”

The psychiatrist took a deep breath. He spoke quietly, softly. “Stella, do you think that person could be me? Is that why you came here today?”

“You tell us. You’re the person who’s had the most contact with these killers. Are we wrong to suspect you?”

Dr. Silow eased his chair forward. He placed his phone on the pile of printed articles and leaned forward, his hands on his knees, as he looked Stella in the eye.

“I understand you’re upset. And I understand you’re struggling with this case.

It’s very difficult, and I’m sure it must be very disturbing.

” He glanced at Hagen. “For both of you. But I can assure you, Stella, I had nothing to do with these murders. I didn’t inspire them or encourage them.

And if I’d had any reason to believe that Maureen or Trevor was a danger to themselves or to others, I would’ve informed the authorities immediately as?—”

“Would you?” Stella snapped.

“Yes, of course, just as I’m required to do.

I didn't realize it, and I was honoring their right to privacy.

" He took a deep breath. "We all have questions, including me. You have to ask who's responsible for these deaths.

I understand. That's your burden. I have to ask myself how I failed to prevent them. That's mine."

Next to the fireplace, Hagen shifted his weight. He'd said little during the exchange, allowing her to push Dr. Silow as far as she could. But Dr. Silow had held his nerve. Either he wasn't the Administrator or he was too clever and controlled for them. Stella still wasn't sure which.

Hagen spoke. "You were telling us about your trip to New York."

She looked around. "Bathroom's just next to the stairs, right?"

Dr. Silow nodded. "The light switch is outside, in the hallway."

"I remember."

She left Hagen to talk to Dr. Silow about his trip to New York, to prod around his relationship with Maureen and Trevor and look for any inconsistency. Any hesitancy, anything off, Hagen would tug hard in the hope that a single loose thread could unravel everything.

That would be Hagen's plan now.

Stella had something else in mind. Something better.

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Stella turned on the bathroom light and closed the door behind her.

The room had an unexpected feminine touch.

The curtains on the window were a shade of peach, and the tiles on the walls were decorated with floral patterns.

A faint scent of pine needles and roses emanated from a bowl of potpourri above the cistern.

Only a tarantula in a frame above the towel rack suggested that this room, too, was part of Dr. Silow's home.

Stella lowered the toilet lid, sat down, and took out her phone.

Dr. Silow's placement of his phone on the stack of printed papers had done it. The movement had taken her back to Meyersdale, to the Prairie and its half-drunk patron. To the barn with its disturbed resident ready to blow his brains out.

And to the phone on the pages in the middle of the floor of that barn.

Dr. Silow's device could tell them whether he was the Administrator.

SAC Tysen answered almost immediately. "What have you got? "

Stella spoke quietly, one hand shielding her mouth out of an excess of caution to avoid being overheard.

“A question. Who knows about the deaths of Charlie Caine and Brook Irving?”

“Don’t think anyone knows. We’ve kept them out of the press so far.”

“The town knew.”

“That’s small towns for you. Word of mouth is faster than a local newspaper. But I don’t think the news spread beyond the town.”

“What about the Dispatch group?”

“I’ve been looking through the data your colleague downloaded.

Irving told the group he made a sacrifice, but he didn’t give a name or upload a picture.

I suppose the rest of the group might’ve thought he was lying.

Just showing off, you know?” At the end of the line, Tysen exhaled hard.

“Better that way, I think. These murders have received far too much publicity already. We need to keep a lid on things.”

Stella turned the stud in her ear. Her idea was taking shape, hardening. Her excitement grew.

“No, not this time. I think we need to lift the lid a little on these murders. Give me a minute.”

Without waiting for Tysen to protest, Stella hung up and called Mac.

Her friend answered quickly. “Hey, Stella. Can I call you back? I’m in the middle of?—”

“In a rush here, Mac. I need?—”

Mac cut her off. “If you’re asking about the call tracing, I found just a single call between Dr. Silow and Trevor McAuley. It took place when Trevor was in Nashville. There’s nothing else.”

Stella knew about that call. Dr. Silow had told them. She was surprised there hadn’t been any other contact, but she was determined to do one more test .

“Listen, I need you to do something for me in exactly,” she checked her watch, “two minutes. Upload a picture of Charlie Caine’s body. Add a message saying that a sacrifice has just been made, another soul saved, etc. The usual stuff.”

“In two minutes?”

“Exactly.”

Mac was silent for a moment. “What are you up to?”

“Just an idea. Trust me.”

Stella hung up, checked her watch, and flushed the toilet. She knew whenever a murder pic was posted, the group got flooded.

When she returned to the living room, Hagen had hardly moved the conversation on. Instead of talking about the murders, Dr. Silow was telling Hagen about the new snowplow the town had just invested in.

“Much better than the old one. Doesn’t break down like that pile of junk used to, so we’ve been able to keep those mountain roads completely clear now. I think we’ll find this will be the best year for road safety in more than a decade.”

“That’s very good.”

Hagen sounded impressed. He looked up at Stella as she slid past his knees to her seat on the sofa. She lifted her glass. The spider on the coaster was free.

“I’m sorry, Bill. I think I got a little...you know.”

Dr. Silow smiled. His eyes softened. “That’s perfectly fine. I understand how stressful this case has been.”

Stella’s phone vibrated. So did Hagen’s, as he had also been sent a notification from the Dispatch group. And then, the dutiful followers started flooding the message boards.

She waited for Dr. Silow’s phone to sound or vibrate from atop the pile of pages. Nothing happened.

A log cracked in the fireplace. Dr. Silow’s chair creaked. Stella wondered whether he had a burner somewhere in another room, a second phone he used to manage the group .

She reached for her device, which was going off like fireworks on the Fourth.

“Sorry, I just have to?—”

“Of course, of course.” Dr. Silow lifted his hand. “Go ahead.”

Hagen checked his phone too. “Work stuff.” He nodded.

Stella opened the Dispatch group. There was the picture of Charlie Caine hanging upside down with his throat cut and his blood covering the floor.

The picture was familiar now. But seeing it in Claymore Township, where she’d seen Laurence Gill and Mark Tully in the same position, sent a shiver down her spine.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Hagen acknowledge what she’d done ever so slightly.

Message after message, mostly accolades, popped up on the board.

She’d wanted to associate these mountains with the best weeks of her life, those long days and nights in Hagen’s company with nothing to worry about but discovering a new trail the next day. Now, when she thought of this place, she’d always remember these swinging, bloodless corpses.

She hated the Administrator for that act of corruption alone.

Her phone vibrated again. A new message. From the Administrator.

Tomorrow you’ll receive a signal. Then and only then the sacrifices must begin! At the sun’s zenith. So says the tablet.

Dr. Silow sat, rocking gently in the chair in front of her. His hands were still folded neatly in his lap.

He hadn’t sent the message.

He wasn’t the Administrator.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

At the state prison, Ander watched through the double mirror as Stacy and Anja began the second interrogation of Tyra Scharf.

Officially, Ander had been taken off the case. Slade was the one to dismiss him. “In your condition, there’s no way you could be objective. Let alone effective.”

At the time—the day it happened—Ander had grumbled about what his boss had said. But he’d gone home, as ordered. He had to keep it together for Murphy and Demetri.

After he’d put the boys to bed, he’d found the big, expensive bottle of scotch his father had given him last Christmas.

Being a beer man, for the most part, Ander had left the scotch untouched except for an inch from last year’s Christmas toast. But that night, he couldn’t take the pain.

He needed to feel nothing. He needed to find a way to sleep.

Murphy and Demetri had eventually joined him on the couch, where they’d remained.

The following days were both a blur and a slog.

With Demetri’s nanny out of town for the holidays, Demetri’s dad, Sascha, had asked if the boy could come by and play with Murphy during the day.

Ander was home, and Demetri’s dad worked full time, so it had actually worked out.

And the boys provided a great source of comfort, both for him and for each other.

Keeping them busy had turned into an excellent distraction. But activities couldn't fill every moment of the day. Sometimes, they had to sit with their thoughts and feelings.

Demetri was taking it hard, as expected. In the times when he wasn't crying, he was unusually quiet, remote.

Ander wondered if he might need some help. He was in over his head, and Sascha probably was too, given he'd been so open to dropping off his toddler with Ander.

Although Ander was relieved that Alessandra's ex was comfortable leaving Demetri with them, he hoped that meant Sascha was open to all of them having an ongoing relationship.

Ander's parents had offered to fly in and stay with them for a while. But Ander had declined. He wasn't ready to face them yet.

A couple of hours earlier, Ander had been at home preparing dinner when the call came from Slade. His boss wanted to check up on him, first and foremost. After a brief, uncomfortable conversation, Slade arrived at the other reason for his call.

Stacy and Anja were going to take another run at Tyra Scharf, to see if she knew more than she was letting on. Slade wanted to let Ander know their progress.

"Can I sit in?" The question had been thick in his throat. He almost couldn't make the request.

The silence on the other end of the line had answered him, but he pressed again.

"Please."

“You know that’s a bad idea.” Slade stated this plainly, with no ounce of rebuke. Not for the first time, Ander wondered if Slade’s straightforward demeanor reassured or irritated his boss’s teenage daughters.

“I won’t say a word. Tyra won’t know I’m there. Stacy and Anja can have full run of the show. I just...I just need to do something. Even if it’s observing.”

This time the silence seemed more contemplative.

“Please,” he’d said again.

Slade caved.

Ander felt a kind of normalcy for the first time since it happened. He called a sitter. As soon as she arrived, he drove over to the state prison.

There she was, Tyra Scharf, on the other side of the two-way mirror. She smiled at Stacy and Anja as they took their seats opposite her. Try as he might, Ander couldn’t find the energy to be angry at her.

He just felt pity. And a deep, profound sadness.

A grief not only for himself but for all of humanity.

Stacy scooted her chair forward. The audio was on, so Ander could hear everything in the interrogation room. “Good evening. What’s new?”

Tyra smiled again, her lips closed, her contentment sealed in. She wasn’t showing off. Something had genuinely made her happy and warm inside.

Stacy rested her elbows on the table. She’d seen it too. Pride that came from a secret.

A piece of knowledge that fed Tyra's arrogance.

Was that why she'd waived having an attorney with her? She wanted to share what she knew?

"Something's on your mind. What is it?"

Tyra's smile vanished. "Nothing."

"It is. I know that look. Something made you happy. Something about the Administrator? You're really in deep with him, aren't you? "

The smile returned, not big or obvious, but with a satisfaction too powerful to suppress, too strong to stay hidden.

Stacy wagged a finger. "There it is. You see? You know something."

Tyra spoke quietly. "It's just...me and the Administrator. We've got this special connection, see?"

Anja sat up straight. "Thought so. Never heard of anyone having a special connection with the Administrator. You really must be his favorite."

Tyra arched her neck. She looked like she was enjoying this. "You don't know the half of it."

"Tell me."

Tyra leaned forward as much as the table would allow. "We've DMed."

Anja seemed as unimpressed as Ander felt. "Doesn't everyone do that?"

“Don’t think so.” Tyra flicked her head, a lock of loose hair straying from behind her ear. “And I got an answer. I knew about the prophecy before anyone, because I’m smart, worldly, and the Administrator knows it.”

The killer actually appeared to be turned on. It made Ander sick.

But there it was. Anja glanced at Stacy, who was on her feet and heading for the door. Anja followed.

Ander realized what they were thinking and hurried out into the hall to meet them. There was no need to ask Tyra what the Administrator had said.

Unlike most of the apps on Tyra’s phone, Dispatch automatically logged her out whenever she closed the device.

The warrant they had only covered the phone itself.

To access the app’s contents, they needed a second warrant—and cooperation from the app’s developers.

Like most tech companies, they dragged their feet, citing user privacy and legal red tape.

Stacy brought out her phone and made a call. She put it on speaker so Ander and Anja could listen in.

“Mac, has Dispatch responded to the warrant for Tyra’s DMs yet? She just confirmed she spoke directly to the Administrator. We need eyes on that thread.”

“I was just about to call you and let you know they delivered the login information after much kicking and screaming.” Mac sounded excited. “I’m logging in now. Hang

tight.” The line went dead.

Stacy blew out a long breath. “That’s good news.”

It sure was.

Ander paced. This would be their first one-on-one exchange from the Administrator. It might be nothing. Or it might be the thread that finally unraveled everything.

Moments later, Stacy’s phone pinged. She glanced at the screen.

“Mac found something. A couple weeks ago, Tyra messaged him about a tablet she saw at the Louvre while traveling with her dad and stepmom.”

Ander linked his hands behind his head so he wouldn’t punch the wall. “And...?”

She scrolled. “And he answered. Time-stamped a minute later. He told her the Louvre’s collection is trash. Says there’s better stuff in the U.S., but it’s all hidden in storage. He just...oh.”

Ander stepped closer. “What?”

“There was another message from him last Wednesday.” She read the next line aloud. ““I just saw something that’s better than anything you can find at the Louvre.””

Ander’s pulse kicked. “That’s it. That has to be the artifact. The one tied to the Day of Changing bullshit.”

The one that turned into a death sentence for my wife .

Forcing his thoughts from that dark path, he refocused back on Stacy, who was in the

process of placing a call.

“Mac, we need to start a calling campaign. Start with the universities of the experts we’ve already spoken to and see if there are check-in logs. We need to know who asked to see their tablets right before that message was sent.”

“Start with them?” Mac’s eyebrows were almost to her hairline.

“Then we’ll have to research museums, libraries, and universities with the resources to store ancient artifacts.”

“That’s...a lot.”

“Then we’d better get rolling.”

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

I yawned loudly and blinked away the sleep. My fatigue wasn't the book's fault. The account wasn't uninteresting. A description of the smuggling routes taken by traders in ancient artifacts.

With so much chaos in the Middle East, all kinds of opportunities had arisen.

Ancient tablets buried or hidden for years were finding their way out of the region.

Some were removed from illicit digs. Others were liberated from the storerooms of museums and passed from hand to hand before coming up for bids in auction houses in New York or Paris or London.

All kinds of new treasures reached new owners. All kinds of predictions and prophecies and stories, long hidden, were exposed.

Too late.

Those tales were roads that led nowhere. The end was coming. The last moment had been written in clay and sealed for millennia. Now I'd uncovered it. Nothing else mattered.

I slid the book away.

The whiskey in my tumbler caught the light of the desk lamp. A warm, amber glow that had probably helped make me sleepy. The single malt and the late hour. I picked up the glass and stood by my apartment window.

City blocks stretched out beneath me. Thousands of tiny twinkles. Orange streetlights, white apartment lights, the red dots of departing taxis and the cars of late-night revelers. Soon, all would be extinguished.

The tablet wasn't explicit about how it would happen. Maybe an asteroid. A tidal wave. A sudden bolt from the heavens destroying everything or perhaps just everyone it struck. Ancient texts were never very precise. They left plenty to the imagination.

I'd checked and double-checked my date and time calculations, and there was no doubt. However the Day of Changing arrived, it would come. Tomorrow.

I took a deep breath.

Only a few of us would remain. We would inherit the world.

The tablet said so, and this tablet was right.

There was something about the way the prophecy was written, the strength of the author's certainty.

I was sure that if I'd published it, if I'd made my translation available to everyone in my field, they'd have dismissed the piece immediately.

A fake, they'd have called it. An obvious forgery.

Too different from anything found before. They'd have laughed in my face.

So small-minded. They assumed that what they'd already seen was all there was. That the tablets still waiting in archives and warehouses and buried under the ground would only repeat what they already knew. They couldn't conceive of anything different.

And they were content with that belief.

I wasn't.

They deserved everything they'd get. Whether they bled to death, burned away, or disappeared in a sudden flash flood, they deserved it. All of them.

Sipping my drink, I let the alcohol scorch my throat.

Part of me was relieved the end was so close.

My path was so much larger than the traditional path of a teacher.

I wouldn't have to churn out the same articles, the same lectures, to simply keep the engine running until I was truly ready to retire and disappear like so many others.

My discovery precluded all that day-to-day minutiae.

My phone pinged.

I finished my drink and returned to my desk. An email from the editor of a journal in England. The revisions of an article I'd submitted were late.

Just another idiot.

Of course they were late. I'd written that article before I'd found the second half of the tablet. The piece seemed so pointless now.

If only the rest of my world was more open to miracles. I'd have given them a translation and an article that would've sent their jaws dropping to the floor. They'd have understood for the first time just how much power those ancient words could

still hold.

And they'd have feared me. And admired me. As they should have all along.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

Before dawn, Stella and Hagen dressed, packed, and drove to the FBI Pittsburgh field office to join Journey Russo and Lucas Sutherland on another interoffice videoconference at seven.

At noon, the Administrator would call for the sacrifices to begin as the world ended. Five hours from now.

They'd barely slept as they'd dug through messages in the Dispatch group, specialized research papers, and journal articles. And they had nothing.

Urgent cases had challenged them before.

They'd sought psychopaths who'd wanted to slaughter multitudes, stopped killers who'd threatened members of the team directly, and chased down murderers who'd killed people they'd known and loved.

Now it was like the weight of all those cases together had landed on Stella's shoulders.

This killer was already responsible for the deaths of so many. He'd caused Alessandra's death. And if they didn't stop him now, he could cause the deaths of hundreds more.

Never had a case been bigger or heavier .

And the clock kept ticking. Stella had felt useless as she entered the Pittsburgh field office.

Hagen squeezed her hand under the table. He felt the pressure too.

They joined the others as everyone popped up on their screen.

Tysen was first, in her office in Washington. Guy Lacross was also on the call, from Chicago. Journey and Lucas, of course, along with their SSA. And everyone from the office in Nashville—Slade, Mac, Stacy, Caleb, Anja, and, surprisingly, Ander.

Tysen rested her elbows on the table. “So the Administrator made direct contact with Tyra Scharf. Fill us in.”

Slade nodded at Stacy. “Agent Lark?”

She cleared her throat. “Yeah, Tyra talked a little. Said that she’d been in contact with the Administrator. We found a message that said he’d accessed the collection recently, prophesizing the Day of Changing. Mac?”

Mac pulled her chair forward. “The Laurel Mount library gave me access to their records already. I have requests out to others, but with the holiday coming up, people are moving slow. Anyway, I checked visitor entries the week before that message was sent. There weren’t many.

Seems those archives aren’t that popular.

In fact, only two people visited the archives on the exact date that the Administrator sent that message. ”

On the screen, Guy tilted his head. “Makes sense. Those things are really only used by scholars. Who were they?”

“Professor Andrew Whelan. And Dr. Alfie Napp of the?—”

“Of the Pittsburgh Museum of Ancient Art,” Stella finished for Mac. “Of course. That would make sense.”

Excitement pulsed through her. Maybe they were making this harder than it needed to be. The world of ancient history fanatics was small, comparatively. Trained translators were an even smaller percentage of the population.

They had the names of two people with access to the appropriate material. The odds of one of them being the Administrator were high.

And with a single message, one of them could stop hundreds of murders from taking place later that day.

Guy ran his hand through his hair. When he stopped, he still held a handful of locks. “Those are two of the biggest guys in the field. I just can’t believe either one of them would be involved in something like this.”

“You’d be amazed who gets involved.” Slade pressed his fingers to the table. “I’m surprised every time.”

Anja chimed in. “Before we dive in, let’s consider that the Administrator could’ve been lying on Dispatch about deciphering tablets. Are we really going to take his word for it?”

On the video feed, Tysen narrowed her eyes. “We can’t afford not to act. Let’s get moving. Knox and Russo, you two head to Laurel Mount. Talk to Whelan. Yates, you and Sullivan pay Napp a visit at the Pittsburgh Museum of Ancient Art. I’ll make the arrangements. We don’t have time to waste.”

“And then what?” Stella didn’t move. “We can make an arrest easily enough. These are two old guys. But how do we stop the mass murder that’s supposed to start in less

than five hours?”

Caleb spoke. “Make him tell them to call it off. Get him in the app and make him write a message to his followers saying he’s made a mistake. He’s in charge. Use him.”

“And if he won’t cooperate?” Hagen drummed his fingers on the table. “We don’t have time to lean on him.”

“You won’t need to.” Mac sounded confident. “If you can get his phone, you can get his password. I’ve been trying to crack into the account from my side, but the encryption is heavy.” She gave a crooked smile. “It’ll be miles easier if you can get his password.”

“Once you’re in, I can help.” The offer came from Guy. “I can pretend to be him and write some technical, lexicographic mumbo jumbo for you to explain why the translation’s all wrong. And come up with some excuse for being wrong.”

“Mac, work on breaking through.” Tysen bounced her fist on the table. “Agents Knox, Yates, Russo, and Sullivan, we’re relying on you to figure out which one is the Administrator. Go.”

The screen turned blank.

Stella checked her watch.

Time was running out.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

Stella spent the entire drive to Whelan counting down the minutes. According to the Administrator's latest post, the killings were supposed to begin at noon, just as the world was due to end.

She didn't believe the world was going to end. But she had no doubt the Administrator's followers would kill for him. She'd seen enough of that already.

Stella looked out the window. Somewhere out there were the hills of western Pennsylvania, where these murders had begun.

Or at least, where she and Hagen had first become aware of them.

The country had seemed so peaceful when Stella and Hagen had first arrived at the cabin.

They'd felt so secure. But they weren't.

Killers were being groomed, and no one was safe.

A mass murderer was also counting down to noon, preparing to slaughter by the dozens, even hundreds.

Stella had to stop them. She and Journey would try their best with Whelan, while Hagen and Lucas would deal with Napp in Pittsburgh.

They were down to just two suspects now, two old men. As long as one of them was the Administrator, sanity could prevail. They would bring him in, access his phone.

The right message delivered in time could be exactly what they needed.

If one of them was the Administrator.

If they could get the message out in time.

Too much was riding on far too little.

And if they were wrong, if neither of these men was behind the murders, there'd be no time to find the culprit before the sacrifices began.

Stella willed Journey to drive faster.

Finally, they pulled into the parking lot at the university.

Stella and Journey took the stairs to Professor Whelan's office two at a time, slowing only to catch their breaths. Stella knocked twice on the door and walked in without waiting for an answer.

The professor was sitting at his desk, exactly as Stella had left him.

A notebook lay open in front of him, beneath two open reference books.

His thick glasses rested low on his nose, and his back was bent way over as he wrote, as if his eyes were failing him.

His fountain pen drew large, looping letters on the page.

Professor Whelan didn't look up as Stella came in but flapped a hand toward the corner of the desk.

“Just leave it there, will you? There’s a good girl.”

“Leave what?” Stella closed the door after Journey circled in behind her. “And I’m not really a good girl.”

Professor Whelan jerked his head up. He pushed his glasses onto his nose and blinked, studying first Stella, then Journey. “Oh, you. You’re that...that...the FBI woman. And you look like another one of them.”

“Special Agent Stella Knox. That’s right. And this is Special Agent Journey Russo. I just need to?—”

“I thought you were my assistant with my coffee. Where’s your other colleague? The one with the face and the clothes. Is he not with you?”

Stella peeled off her coat. She laid it over the back of the seat in front of the desk and sat down. They needed to get on with their job, and fast. She didn’t even have time to enjoy the on-point comment the man had just made about Hagen.

Journey followed suit and sat. Except she didn’t bother removing her jacket.

“Agent Yates is busy. We just need to ask you a few questions.”

Whelan was wearing an old tweed jacket that had probably fit when he was still teaching but now hung loosely. He pushed back the cuff to check the time.

“Well, you’ll have to be quick. I have a call with some...podcast soon. About those murders, of course. Not sure what a podcast is, but there you have it. In this field, you can’t be too choosy about who interviews you. It’s the audience that’s the thing, you see.”

Stella studied Whelan. He didn't display any obvious signs of nervousness. The strength with which he jammed the cap of his fountain pen into place was more suggestive of impatience and irritation than fear. He wanted them gone so he could get on with the rest of his day.

She removed her notebook from her pocket, opened it slowly, and laid it flat on the table. He could wait. "Now, let me see." She turned to a clean page. "The archive in the library. Do you use it often?"

"You mean the tablets in the archive? I wouldn't say I examine them often. Occasionally."

"When was the last time you accessed the archive?" Journey leaned on her elbows.

He turned to her. "I really couldn't say."

"This month? Last month? "

The professor swiveled back to face Stella squarely. "Not...no, I don't think so."

"So when?" Journey asked. "You don't access them every day?"

"Goodness, no. Who has the time?"

"So when?" Stella echoed Journey's words. According to the archive logs, the man was a regular viewer of the tablets.

Professor Whelan removed his glasses and folded the arms closed. "I really have no idea. It would be in my calendar, I suppose. My assistant writes down all my appointments for me."

“Jodie? Is she here?”

“Yes, Jodie. No, she’s not in today. I can work in peace.” He laughed quietly.  
“Sometimes, the best assistance an assistant can provide is not assisting at all.”

Stella was confused. “Then why were you expecting her to bring you coffee?”

He scratched the tip of his nose. “Just confused for a moment. She usually brings coffee each morning, just like any good little assistant.”

Stella flashed a fake smile. She decided she didn’t like him very much. “Do you have your calendar with you?”

Whelan reached into his pocket and produced his phone.

“She puts it all on here. I don’t know how she does it. Let me see. The archive, you say?”

He tapped his phone, tutted, and tapped again.

Stella stretched her hand across the desk. “Can I help?”

Whelan hesitated. He gripped his phone for several long seconds before passing the device to Stella. “Probably faster this way. You’re young. You know your way around these things. They’re supposed to be calling from that pubcast thing in a few minutes.”

Stella took the device, an old smartphone, with a single camera lens on the back and a wide bezel around the screen. The kind of phone used by someone who neither cared about cell phones nor knew much about them.

“Sure, I can do that.”

Journey leaned close to get a good look at the screen as Stella opened the call history.

Whelan had received a call from his bank that week, three calls from Jodie, and regular morning calls from someone named Milly, who Stella assumed was either Professor Whelan’s daughter or his wife. She could think of no other reason a last name wasn’t listed and didn’t feel the need to ask.

The home page contained just one screen with no more than half a dozen apps.

Whelan jabbed a thick, bent finger toward the device. “Have you found the calendar thingamajig?”

“These things are quite a pain to use, aren’t they?” Stella tried to sound sympathetic.

“They are! Much too complicated. Don’t know what’s wrong with old-fashioned pencil and paper. And one of those old rotary desk phones. Always knew where you were with one of those.”

Stella checked whether the phone had the Dispatch app. Nothing came up.

“You don’t have Dispatch on this phone, I take it.”

“Dispatch? On a phone? Why would I send a dispatch if I have a phone? No, no, if I want to send a message, I call someone. Don’t need to bother with dispatches. Ladies, I’m not that old.” He chuckled to himself.

Journey side-eyed Stella.

There was no Dispatch on the phone in her hands, and the Administrator had to be

much more comfortable with technology than Whelan was.

And Professor Whelan was far too relaxed to be guilty of...

anything. This man should've been much more nervous at the sight of an FBI agent fiddling with his phone while another one watched on. Both armed.

Stella brought up the calendar and flicked through to last week.

An entry from last Wednesday read Library archive from four to eight.

That matched what Mac had found. Still, there were plenty more visits scheduled just before, so any of them could've been the moment when the Administrator found "something that's better than anything you can find at the Louvre." Or none.

It fit the timeline for the DMs between the Administrator and Tyra Scharf. But why was Whelan saying he hadn't gone there?

"Here." Stella showed the man the schedule on his phone. "You visited the archive last week, and in the second week of October. And before that in June. What were you doing there?"

Professor Whelan took the phone and studied the dates.

"Oh, yes. I guess I must've. Now I remember.

Nothing particularly unusual. Just looking for something to write about in the catalog, and I prefer to go in person as opposed to looking it up online.

Every now and then, I wonder if there's something important buried in those shelves that I missed.

Perhaps some inscription I hadn't noticed before, or an item that's become more significant in the light of something recently published. Do you know what I mean?"

Stella didn't entirely, but it didn't matter.

"And did you find anything?" Journey sat back and crossed her legs.

"No, no. Nothing at all. That collection's far too well researched. Waste of time."

Stella rose and picked up her coat. "I hear they say the same about the collection at the Louvre."

"The Louvre? Not at all." Professor Whelan dropped his phone back into his jacket pocket.

He hadn't looked at the screen, hadn't checked what Stella had searched for.

"I don't know who told you that, but they're talking out the back of their head.

The French have a marvelous collection. I'd give my right arm to spend a week foraging around in their basement.

But it's very hard to get approval. They keep it for their own researchers. Who told you it was a waste of time?"

Stella pulled on her coat. "No one important."

"Thanks for your cooperation, Professor Whelan." Journey stood and gave the man a quick nod.

Stella turned for the door. She was not about to wish him good luck with his podcast.

She hoped this little interruption threw him off just enough that he'd forget about it. He didn't need to be talking to the press about any of this, and he should've known that.

Whelan had given them exactly nothing. He hadn't even agreed with the message the Administrator had written to Tyra Scharf. They had no reason to connect him with the murders or make an arrest. All they could do now was to check in with D.C. and hope Hagen and Lucas were making headway.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

While Hagen and Lucas headed for the museum, local police hit Napp's house and found no one home.

That's vaguely promising.

Hagen figured the person calling down the end of the world would not do it from his living room. A criminal mastermind would be surrounded by ancient artifacts.

Narcissists did like to do things with a bang.

On the Saturday before Christmas, the doors of the Pittsburgh Museum of Ancient Art were closing early to the public, but a flash of their badges gained Hagen and Lucas entry.

"We're looking for Dr. Alfie Napp. Where's his office?" Lucas's tone brooked no refusal from the security guard on duty.

The guard, a young man of about thirty with close-cropped dark hair, gestured behind him. "Take a right after the ticket office, keep going, and look for a gray door at the end of the Egyptian Art corridor."

"Sounds easy to miss." Hagen wanted to tell the security guard to lead them there, but the guard was ushering the last of the patrons through the exit.

"There's a small plaque with Napp's name." The guard waved them on.

Hagen led the way through the empty exhibition halls. The lights had already been

turned down so that only small, bright spotlights shined on the pieces in their vitrines. The rest of the halls lay in shadow. The clop of Hagen's oxfords on the stone floor echoed loudly as he walked.

He never had enough time for museums. His father had preferred vintage car rallies to art exhibitions, and while Hagen had inherited an enthusiasm for vintage vehicles, he was rarely able to indulge his interest in culture and the arts.

No time to get excited about any hobby. Now, as he passed the worn, ancient stonework shipped from half a world away, the glittering Egyptian faience, and the painted coffins, he wondered if Stella would enjoy a weekend browsing these museums.

Maybe one day, when this was all over—if it ever ended—they could come back to the city and take in the sights. Maybe get some tickets to a show. She'd like that.

Though she might like the museum more with the lights on and people in the galleries.

"This place feels like a mausoleum." Lucas was clearly getting the same vibes as Hagen.

However, even though the space was dark and empty, Hagen felt eyes on him, and it gave him the creeps.

A stone hawk watched without blinking as he crossed the floor. A jackal-headed statue, ten feet tall, looked down on him. Black eyes painted on a sarcophagus seemed to follow him all the way into the passage behind the gallery.

Clear of the Egyptian art, the corridor stretched in both directions and was lined with doors marked Private .

“Napp.” Lucas pointed at the plaque on a gray door .

Hagen knocked once and entered quickly without waiting to be asked.

Dr. Alfie Napp’s office was much more comfortable than Professor Whelan’s bare room at the university. The herringbone parquet floor was polished, and a lamp in the corner had a bronze art deco stand that matched the museum’s architecture and cast a warm orange glow through the room.

Sitting at his desk in front of a cuneiform tablet perched on a Perspex mount, Dr. Napp looked less like a museum curator and more like a man about to head to the gym.

He wore black joggers and a fitted nylon shirt.

Hagen hoped he was in such good shape in ten years, let alone the twenty-plus Napp had on him.

Does he seem like the Administrator?

A magnifying lamp on the desk, shining on the tablet, lit the top of Dr. Napp’s full head of salt-and-pepper hair. His rimless half-moon glasses, the only acquiescence to age, made his eyes appear smaller.

He lifted his chin and lowered his pen onto his notebook to acknowledge the apparent intrusion.

“Agent Yates, is it? How are you?” He shook Hagen’s hand. “And a friend?”

“Colleague. This is Special Agent Lucas Sullivan.”

“What a pleasant surprise. Please.” He stretched a hand toward the chairs in front of the desk.

“How good to see you again, though if you’ve come to take up my invitation to see the collection, this isn’t a great time.

The museum is closed now.” He checked his watch.

“And I’m afraid I have an engagement coming up. Maybe tomorrow?”

An engagement at the gym? Or an engagement with the end of the world?

Hagen took off his coat and settled into the seat. “This won’t take long. ”

Dr. Napp pulled on a single blue nitrile glove. Holding the tablet in place on its mount, he slid the artifact to the side of the desk.

Hagen removed his notebook. He flicked the end of his pen toward the tablet. The clay slab was square, with a curved, cream-colored surface, covered with the lines and dots and triangles that Hagen now found so familiar. Looked like the top edge had chipped off at some point.

“What does that one say?”

“This? You remember the tablets you saw at the Laurel Mount library when we met? I had this one brought over from there to study. It’s little more than a receipt, just like those ones.

That’s what most of these things are. It’s how people like me spend our careers, translating these...

these chicken scratches into lists of grains and barrels of ale.

” Dr. Napp chuckled. He peeled off the glove and waved his bare fingers in front of the inscription.

“A lot of learning and effort to understand this stuff for not much reward.”

He spread the glove on the desk beside his phone. “And once we’ve read these things, we put them on display for visitors to ignore on their way to the Egyptian mummies and Incan gold. And who can blame them?”

Lucas didn’t let Dr. Napp wallow in self-pity. “I’m sure it can’t be all bad. You must work on some interesting documents sometimes, some things that matter.”

“Oh, I do. In fact, I’d say that everything I work on matters.”

“Pretty proud of the work you do, huh?”

Napp lowered his eyebrows at Lucas. If Lucas was aiming for an emotional response from the scholar, he wasn’t getting far.

“It’s not all of note.” Napp seemed modest. “Most of the time, what I, and people like me, discover, decode, and produce is ignored entirely. Sometimes, I think I could translate and publish something absolutely earth-shattering, and no one would even know.” Dr. Napp eased himself back into his seat.

“Earth-shattering? Like end of the world shattering?” Hagen prodded.

Napp’s frown deepened. “End of the world?”

“Murder, mayhem. That kind of thing.”

Lucas and Hagen were falling into a rhythm, one piggybacking on the other. Hagen wondered if that was how Lucas and Journey were effective teammates.

But Napp didn't seem bothered by their dogpiling questions. "Ah, yes. You're investigating a murder related to cuneiforms. You and your partner mentioned that the other day."

Hagen eyed the tablet at the end of the desk. Something like that object, perhaps even that tablet itself, was responsible for the murders they were investigating. And could be responsible for many more to come.

"Looks like it. Someone placed a...some sort of prophecy online. Allegedly a translation of one of these tablets. And he's been inciting people to commit murder ever since.

He says that sacrifice will redeem people's souls, both the killers' and the victims', and ensure the killers' survival in the new world to come.

He's been very effective, this cult leader. You haven't heard anything about it?"

Dr. Napp's eyes widened. "Not at all. Prophecies aren't unusual on objects like these, though they're not very common. I haven't heard of anything new. And certainly nothing that could do something like you're describing. That sounds terrible."

"So there's been no talk among other curators? Professors? Experts? No one has been discussing some new horoscope that members of the public are taking seriously? "

"No, no. Nothing at all. Are you sure the translation is real? Perhaps someone's just making it all up."

Hagen wondered if Napp was being intentionally evasive. He tapped his pen against

his notebook. He had to think, to find a way in. Dr. Napp was showing no sign of nervousness. If he was worried about talking to the FBI just hours before his big moment, he was hiding it well.

He increased the pressure. “Yeah, maybe the whole thing’s fake.

You could be right. But it doesn’t look fake, and even a fraud would need some kind of knowledge base to be persuasive enough to convince the masses of some prophecy.

Personally, I’d barely heard of those things,” he jabbed his pen in the direction of the tablet, “before these cases started.”

Dr. Napp chuckled quietly. “Oh, I wouldn’t feel bad, Agent Yates. Plenty of people are unfamiliar with cuneiform, even though it was the earliest form of writing and people really should know about it.”

“But if few people do know about this stuff, an expert would be the likeliest culprit. You don’t agree?” Lucas leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees, a subtle tactic used to crowd an interrogation subject.

Dr. Napp removed his glasses. He rubbed both eyes with one hand. When he dropped his hand, he looked like an old owl wondering whether to bother hunting a mouse that night. Some prey was so small, it was barely worth eating.

“I’m afraid without seeing this translation, I really couldn’t tell.” Dr. Napp shoved his glasses back on and looked at his watch again.

Hagen noticed the timepiece was expensive, a Patek Philippe.

“Now, it is getting late. And as I said, I do have an appointment this evening. Perhaps

we could carry on...tomorrow? ”

“Do you think there’ll be a tomorrow?” Lucas tilted his head, curious.

Napp held the other agent’s gaze a moment. “We never know, do we?”

Hagen remained leaned back in his seat. He could be the good cop. The unhurried cop. “In that case, we won’t keep you much longer. Almost done. Where are you going, by the way?”

“Where am I going? I...have a dinner. With some colleagues.”

“You seem a bit underdressed.”

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Napp checked his outfit. “I exercised earlier. Does my workout attire bother you? I’d planned on changing.”

“No. Just an observation.” Hagen shifted in his seat.

“The dinner should be a good one. Though I’m sure you’d find it tedious. Ancient experts talking about ancient things.”

“That actually sounds like something I’m very interested in. There’s a lot to learn from experts.” Lucas shot Napp a bright smile. “Maybe we’ll go with you. Meet some of them.”

Dr. Napp’s eyes widened for an instant. “It’s invitation only, Agent...”

“Sullivan.”

“Maybe another time.”

Hagen lifted a finger, redirecting the man. “I understand you were at the Laurel Mount University library archives last week as well as a few days ago.”

“I’m there often. You just met me there.”

“I did. Do you do that often in general? Visit other institutions?” Hagen took point on the questioning now, letting Lucas loom over Dr. Napp to add pressure.

“As I need to. It’s one of the perks of working in a museum. You gain free access to

exhibitions, specialist libraries, and so on. We let each other skip the lines, and we request access to each other's archives. ”

“Have you studied the collection at the Louvre?”

“The Louvre? Well, they're very sensitive there.

I can view what's on display easily enough, but to see the giant piles they keep stashed away in the storerooms, I'd have to fill in a dozen different forms and make an appointment months in advance.

There's more than enough here to keep me occupied without wrestling with French bureaucracy. ”

“I hear they don't have much worth studying anyway.”

Hagen watched for Dr. Napp's reaction. A repeat of the direct message the Administrator had sent to Tyra Scharf would confirm he was on the right track. He'd push further, try to prompt the curator to react, to say something that would let Hagen slam the handcuffs on and bring the man in.

Dr. Napp laughed quietly. “Agent Yates, Agent Sullivan, I don't think you came here to talk to me about the warehouses of Paris.”

“I was just wondering what you think of their collection.”

“I don't think about it. I have enough material here to think about.

Far too much, in fact. Until some brainy student trains artificial intelligence to do the work for us, we'll probably be translating this stuff by hand,” he flicked a finger toward the tablet at the end of the table, “for thousands of years.”

Dr. Napp had changed the subject. Whether the shift was deliberate or just an attempt to avoid a conversation about Parisian storage rooms, Hagen wasn't sure. He tried a different tack.

"Artificial intelligence, huh? You sound like you're pretty comfortable with technology."

"I try to keep up." Dr. Napp pulled on the glove again and picked up the tablet.

He held the baked clay gently between the fingers of one hand.

"This was new technology once, a way of recording and transmitting information. The first cordless phone of the ancient world." He returned the piece to its mount.

"And it went the way of that three-pound brick of a device too."

Hagen watched Dr. Napp remove the glove and lay it between his phone and his art deco desk lamp. There was a meticulousness in the curator's movements, a precision that would have been useful as he tried to make sense of the lines and the marks on an ancient tablet.

Hagen pointed at his smartphone on the desk. "Do you use Dispatch?"

"The app?" Dr. Napp gave a small shake of his head. "I've heard of it, but no one uses Dispatch in my line of work. Many people in this field still send faxes."

"Do you mind if I take a look?"

"At my phone?" Dr. Napp's white eyebrows rose in surprise. He took his device from the table. "I suppose I should ask to see a warrant for this kind of thing, but I've really got nothing to hide."

He unlocked his screen and passed the phone to Hagen.

Hagen scrolled quickly through the apps. Most he'd never heard of. A cuneiform dictionary, some complex note-taking apps, a bunch of museum guides, including one for the Louvre.

He searched for Dispatch, but he knew even as he typed the word that he'd find nothing.

If Dr. Napp did have something to hide, he'd have cited his right to privacy, demanded a warrant, kicked up a stink about the FBI asking to see people's devices, and Hagen wouldn't be scrolling through his phone.

And the curator would have had the right to refuse.

It wouldn't have been a confession. It would've barely been suspicious.

But agreement was a pretty powerful denial.

"Thanks." Hagen slid the phone onto the desk. He met Lucas's gaze and shook his head.

Dr. Napp checked his watch and rose from his seat .

The movement was an invitation to leave.

Hagen dropped his notebook back into his pocket.

He hadn't learned enough to make an arrest, and he hadn't found the device that could cancel the slaughter.

He hoped Stella was doing better. If she was making progress, if Professor Whelan looked like a more likely suspect, Hagen could let Dr. Napp go and join her.

“Sorry. Would you excuse me a minute? I just need to make a quick call.”

“Of course.” Dr. Napp stood and slid his phone into his pants pocket. “But as I said, I really must get moving.”

“Won’t be but a minute.”

Hagen stepped out into the passage and called Stella. The line rang and rang, and Hagen remembered the poor coverage in Professor Whelan’s office.

He missed her then. He couldn’t remember the last time they’d been out of contact, and he didn’t like it.

“Hey, call me when you get a chance. I’m not getting anywhere here.

You picking up something from Whelan? Starting to think we’re either barking up the wrong tree, or we’ve cut down the list too much.

Maybe someone else visited the university library and we missed them.

” He sighed. “Feels like we’re screwing this up, Stella, and we’re running out of time.

” He held his finger over the end button but didn’t disconnect the call.

“And Stella? I’ll do whatever you want for Christmas. I just want to be with you.”

He hung up and returned to Dr. Napp’s office.

Napp stood behind his desk, a raincoat folded over his arm. In one hand, he held a blue cardboard box about half the size of a shoebox. He lifted the container.

“The tablet. I have to take it back to my storeroom before I leave. Why don’t you join me? We can walk out together. Save you trying to find your way back through the museum by yourself.”

Hagen exchanged a glance with Lucas, who gave the slightest of shrugs. A little more time with Dr. Napp might reveal something useful, a chance for the curator to slip up or the possibility of a loose piece of information that could send the agents off in a new direction.

But as he glanced at Napp’s expectant face and the blue box, somehow Hagen didn’t think there was a new direction. They were on the right track, but he couldn’t quite see where it led.

He grabbed his coat off the chair, and he and Lucas followed Dr. Napp to the end of the passage. The curator stopped in front of a door marked No Entry . He fumbled in his pocket for the keys.

“Would you hold this for a moment?” Dr. Napp gave the box to Hagen while sorting through the bunch. “You can always measure the complexity of someone’s life by the number of keys they’ve acquired. I seem to have picked up more than a piano.”

Hagen forced a smile. Out of the corner of his eye, Lucas’s head was on a swivel. Hagen had solid backup, allowing him to focus on the professor.

Lucas waved at a security guard down the corridor, and the guy waved back and walked away. Hagen thought he recognized the guard they’d seen at the entrance, but he couldn’t be sure.

Hagen held the box with both hands as Napp worked the keys. The package wasn't heavy, yet it contained four thousand years of history that would be lost with one careless slip of his fingers. The responsibility was much weightier than the box itself.

When the lock clicked, the door swung open to reveal a set of metal stairs leading down into darkness.

Dr. Napp dropped the keys back into his pocket. He took the box from Hagen and pushed a light switch just inside the door .

"Thanks. We should be quick. This light's on a timer when the museum's closed. It has a nasty habit of turning off when I'm halfway there."

He headed down the steps. Hagen followed. The steel staircase clanged under their feet. Dr. Napp pulled open the door at the bottom just as the light turned off, plunging them into darkness. A click, and the light came on again.

Dr. Napp lowered his hand from the switch.

"There. Just in time."

In front of them stretched row after row of metal shelves.

A section twenty feet long held a line of clay pots and ancient amphorae.

The items looked identical to Hagen's eye, the remains of a civilization's disposable food containers.

The next set of shelves held marble busts and pieces of ancient statuary.

Chunks of carved stone were laid out along one shelf to his right, but most of the

units were filled with blue cardboard boxes, only the labels on the front revealing their contents.

The air smelled of decades' worth of dust.

Doors stood closed at the ends of some of the spaces between the shelves, promises of more secrets to come. Dr. Napp strode into the area like he owned the place and paused in front of a double-armed amphora about three feet high.

"I think someone could spend a lifetime digging around in here."

"If you're into that sort of thing," Lucas muttered.

"And there's more through each of these doors. Every curator also has their own storeroom." He pulled the amphora forward and peered inside. "I think this one's a fake. I told the curator of Ancient Greece. She wasn't happy."

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

He rolled the jar back, and Hagen followed him between a line of broken ancient stones into a windowless passage that quickly turned left past another series of doors. A fluorescent light in the ceiling flickered. Hagen was starting to lose his sense of direction.

Lucas's footsteps fell behind.

Hagen glanced back. "You coming?"

"Thought I saw someone." Lucas waved him on. "Go on. I'll catch up."

Napp hadn't slowed, so Hagen was forced to catch up. They took a couple more turns.

"How many pieces do you keep down here?" Hagen spoke loudly to make sure that Lucas could hear which direction they'd headed.

He'll catch up.

"Oh, thousands. Hundreds of thousands, even, if you count all the coins and fragments of broken pottery. Here." Dr. Napp stood in front of another door as nondescript as the last and fished his keys out of his pocket again. This time, he found the key he needed quickly and turned the lock.

Hagen paused and looked back for Lucas, but Napp wasn't slowing down. Something was off.

He pushed his suit jacket back, making sure he could access his weapon quickly.  
“Lucas! We’re over here.”

Faster footsteps answered him.

“Come on.” Napp was pulling ahead.

They stepped into a windowless room about twenty feet deep and just as wide.

Shelves and what looked like a bunch of clutter lined the room.

Hagen noted a clay hippopotamus, a bronze sword, and carved seals in faded blue, green, and yellow.

Some of the clay pieces had been fashioned into the shapes of beetles.

The bottom shelves held a coil of rope, a ring light, and more blue boxes like the one Dr. Napp held.

Beyond the cluttered room was another, about the same size and shape, but far more sterile, reminding Hagen of a morgue. Dr. Napp headed inside.

Two large stainless steel tables and a single office chair filled the space at the far wall. A tripod stood folded in the corner.

Dr. Napp placed the box on the nearest table, opened the lid, and donned a glove to extract the tablet. He placed the clay slab on a Perspex mount beside a large ivory-handled magnifying glass.

“There. All ready to continue my work.” He kept his gaze on the tablet for a moment. It looked so small on that large surface, an object no bigger than Hagen’s notebook

and yet capable of causing so much harm.

Dr. Napp turned away and headed back to the first large room.

Hagen still didn't see Lucas.

"Here. Look at this." Napp approached the shelves.

"This represents most of the kinds of artifacts my department has to display. Seals for signing documents. Weights. This thing..." He lifted a short rod with a stone ball mounted on the end.

"This is an ancient mace. Or what an ancient mace would've looked like.

It's not much, is it? The Japanese collection has a twelfth-century Samurai dagger.

A beautiful thing. We have some lengths of old bronze and a rock on a stick. It's all so easy for people to ignore."

He placed the old weapon back on the shelf and stretched an arm toward the exit.

"Shall we? After you."

Hagen hesitated. In a moment, Dr. Napp was going to walk out of the museum and head off to his event.

And while he was there, the murders would begin.

All across the country, people who believed the chicken scratches on an ancient clay tablet prophesized the future would take their knives and make their sacrifices.

Strangers would slash people they'd never met.

Boyfriends would stab their girlfriends.

Wives would kill their husbands. All in the hope that they'd survive the end of the world .

Hagen had faced murder before. He'd dealt with violent psychopaths and stopped crazed killers. But he'd never faced violence on such a scale.

He had no reason to arrest the man in front of him and no confidence that would stop the coming slaughter in time anyway. He had no one in custody, and time was running out before a wave of senseless murder swept the country.

And all because of an old lump of clay.

“Do you mind if I just take a look at that before I go?” He pointed toward the tablet.

Napp waved a hand.

Hagen stepped into the morgue room and studied that tablet. It might've been the slab that contained the prophecy, or as Dr. Napp had said, it might've been nothing more than a receipt listing some government office's annual procurements. Hagen had no way of knowing.

He couldn't take his eyes off the object. So much death had already been caused by something so small and so plain. And so much more was about to come.

Dr. Napp remained by the door. “Please don't touch it. The material is quite fragile. Try using the magnifying glass. You'll find it helpful.”

Hagen took the magnifying glass and examined the tablet.

Some of the symbols scratched onto the surface looked familiar.

He was sure he'd seen similar patterns of triangles and lines on the bodies of the victims and on the walls of the rooms in which they'd died.

But he couldn't be sure, not one hundred percent. He hadn't memorized the symbols.

He leaned in closer.

Behind him, the floor creaked.

Hagen snapped a picture of the tablet. A quick flick of the screens, and he sent the shot of the piece to the Dispatch group .

Immediately after Hagen hit Send, shadow seemed to fall over him. "Dr. Napp?—"

Too late.

The blow to his head landed hard. A sickening thud. Pain detonated through his skull.

He staggered back, vision splintering, the magnifying glass shattering against the floor. Blood rushed in his ears.

As he crumpled, the last thing he saw was Napp looming over him, mace in hand, his warm smile gone.

Just cold, clinical efficiency.

And behind Napp, another shadow moved—a second figure, stepping into the room.

Not Lucas.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

Though the aircraft was small and looked like it should've been taking tourists for a ride through the Grand Canyon, it was big enough for her, Journey, and a pilot and would get them to Pittsburgh much faster than traveling by car.

Professor Whelan had been a bust. Stella had no reason to believe the professor was the Administrator and plenty of reasons to believe he wasn't.

What he'd said to Stella didn't match what the Administrator had told Tyra Scharf.

There was no Dispatch app on his phone. And Stella struggled to believe Professor Whelan understood technology well enough to own a second device on which he ran a chat group.

He might've been a good actor, but nothing about him set off alarm bells.

Except, perhaps, for the way he treated his assistant.

Stella had called Tysen as soon as she'd stepped out of the office. But when the call failed to go through, she'd remembered there was little coverage in that part of the building. She couldn't call now, but she could at least check for messages.

She buckled in and took out her phone

Notifications flashed on her screen. Recent messages on the Dispatch group but also a voice message from Hagen.

Journey pulled out her phone to reveal the same Dispatch notifications. They'd been

streaming in all day, except for that hiccup in the dead zone at Whelan's.

Stella smiled to herself. Hagen didn't usually leave voice messages. He wasn't even a big texter. He preferred to call, and if Stella didn't pick up the phone, he'd call again later. Assuming she didn't phone him first.

She hoped he had good news. "Anything from Lucas?" she asked her partner for the day.

Journey shook her head. "But maybe that's the call we're waiting on. What does it say?"

Stella scanned the transcription of Hagen's message—the helicopter was far too loud to hear it. Hagen wasn't getting anywhere with Napp either. It seemed like they were both barking up the wrong trees, as Hagen had put it.

They were running out of time to stop that evening's massacre. They had no suspect and no way to tell everyone to put down their knives, and they were coming up on having no time either.

"We there yet?" Stella asked into her headset, trying not to sound impatient.

In the cockpit, the pilot lifted a thumb. "You can see the city now."

Both agents raised their thumbs back in acknowledgment.

Journey reviewed the Dispatch messages while Stella called Hagen. She knew she probably wouldn't be able to hear him, but she wanted to see if he'd pick up .

The line rang and rang, but there was no answer. She texted him instead.

Strange. Hagen wouldn't have been out of touch, and he always answered his phone. She lowered the device. Another notification from her account on Dispatch popped onto her screen. Journey's too.

They both opened the app.

Stella scrolled down and saw, under the account Mac had created for Hagen, a picture. A tablet sat on a small mount next to a magnifying glass—and beneath it, comments were populating like mad in live time, asking whether this was the tablet that predicted the end of the world.

Some members believed it was. They were thrilled.

At last, they could see the prophecy for themselves now that the deadline was drawing near.

Their comments were filled with exclamation marks and excited emojis.

Others replied that it couldn't be the one.

The picture had been posted by a group member, but only one person had access to the real tablet.

And there was no reply from the Administrator himself.

Stella's stomach clenched. She understood immediately what was happening. Hagen had mimicked her play in Claymore Township. He'd posted a picture to check if Napp would respond, meaning he wasn't with their killer.

Or if he heard a vibration—or a damn string of them—that would mean he was in the presence of the man they needed to apprehend. Was that why he wasn't answering

her calls? Were they facing off with the mastermind even now?

Next to her, Journey was calling Lucas again. “He’s not picking up.”

Stella leaned toward the pilot, though he could hear perfectly well through the headset. “You need to get us to the Pittsburgh Museum of Ancient Art. Now.”

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

The FBI agent lay on the floor of the storeroom. Blood leaked from his temple and formed a small, spreading puddle under his head.

I took the weapon from his holster, walked over, and laid it carefully on the table.

Only half a second had stood between that man on the floor and my right-hand man winding up in handcuffs. If he'd moved just a little slower, hesitated for just an instant, Yates would've drawn that gun, and Napp would've surrendered or even died right there.

I'd known who Hagen Yates was immediately at the university. Him and Stella Knox. They'd stopped Maureen King, the woman who, according to reports in the press, had been my most dedicated of students.

The blood spreading across the floor was the very same the Nashville newspapers said Trevor McAuley had tried to spill in return for his reward. He'd almost succeeded too.

Making Hagen Yates my sacrifice would be a beautiful act. He didn't deserve redemption, not after all he'd done. But his sacrifice would redeem me. Just like the others .

All those people who'd had the intelligence to believe what was written on that tablet, who'd already redeemed themselves and the people they loved...some had done what was necessary. Others would do it now, after me, after my act of valor, as this world ended.

My hope had always been that my leadership alone would be enough to give me a place in the era to come.

The tablet was silent on the form that world would take, though.

There was no way to know whether the coming age would be like this one, just cleansed of those too stupid to understand and too blind to see.

Or whether, after the Day of Changing, the new era would be something altogether better.

But I wanted my place in it. I deserved it. At the very top. This would secure it.

Queen of the new world. Head priestess and highest empress. The old world could burn, and I would rule over its ashes and build my empire on its ruins.

No one had contributed more to the old gods than I had. No one had caused more blood spill in their honor.

When those two FBI agents had walked into Whelan's office, I'd had such a burning desire to sacrifice them. At least one of them. I swore to myself that I'd do it if I got the chance.

And when Hagen Yates stepped into the museum—on the day—I knew the gods had smiled on me. They wanted me to sit alongside them. Of course they did.

The blow had made a sickening crunch as it struck the side of his head. The thumps he made as his chest bounced off the back of the chair and then again when his head hit the ground...just as awful. How incredible to be this close to the action.

I watched the stream of blood snake down Yates's cheek, adding to the pool on the

concrete. Such a beautiful color. A deep, glorious red. So much ancient poetry had been written about that liquid of life, so many old stories.

I checked my phone. Just forty-nine minutes before the end.

The moment was almost here, and I now had the perfect example to set for others.

Two perfect examples, actually. Two handsome federal agents bleeding to death in the basement of the Museum of Ancient Art would be the trumpet announcing the apocalypse.

The sound would echo across the country.

It would tell the world that they should've paid attention. But now they were too late.

This would start the sacrifices my followers would make across the country as the old age ended at the stroke of noon, according to the prophecy. The agents' bloody corpses were a stronger message than anything I could've conjured up using old-fashioned words, basic English.

I needed to move fast now.

"Alfie."

Napp stared at me.

"Put down the mace and help me. Now."

He returned the mace to the shelf, then crouched next to the agent. "I'm not used to physical violence."

“You could’ve fooled me.”

I placed my fingers on the side of the agent’s neck. He was still alive. At least for now. “He’s got a pulse, so you haven’t jumped the gun on your sacrifice. It’s all going as planned.”

Napp smiled, gripping Agent Yates’s under his armpits and lifting him.

We dragged his unconscious form up and into the old, heavy seat.

The man was lean, but muscle was heavy, and I hadn’t done any heavy lifting in...

well, had I ever? Not really, but Napp was in fan-fucking-tastic shape for any man at any age.

He was a big help. I’d chosen right with him as my sidekick .

As we got Yates situated so he’d stay in place, his head lolled back in the seat, causing blood to streak in multiple trails across his cheekbone, curving around his sculpted jawline.

Some splashed on me, too, but I didn’t mind.

Much more blood would flow. Soon enough, my hands would no longer be clean, and they were only going to get dirtier.

I pointed at a coil of rope on the bottom shelf, left from the crates used to ship artifacts, and Napp retrieved it.

I ran the line around Yates’s limp body until he was trussed up like a spider’s prey.

Napp tied the knots. Even if the agent regained consciousness before the end, he wasn't going anywhere.

Fifteen minutes later, his partner was at his side again. Everything was even more perfect than I'd planned.

With nearly half an hour to spare, I turned on the ring light and took the tripod from the corner of the room, its metal legs clicking open with a satisfying snap.

“As the sun begins its descent, so too will the old world.”

I glanced at my watch. It was nearly time for everything to change.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

“Thanks for the lift.” Stella unbuckled and hopped out the door. The rotor downwash whipped her hair around her face as she stepped onto the field.

Journey followed close behind. “Twenty-eight minutes.” She matched Stella’s pace as they jogged across the outfield toward the looming silhouette of the Pittsburgh Museum of Ancient Art.

The museum was a grand neoclassical building, its stone facade illuminated by spotlights that cast dramatic shadows across the columns.

Stella scrambled up the broad steps leading to the entrance, but she hit the brakes as soon as she could see through the glass doors.

A large sign declared the museum closed for the holidays, but she didn’t see a single security guard.

She tried the doors and pushed them open .

Inside, the hallways lay quiet as a grave, not a single patron in sight. No one had locked up.

Why wouldn’t the place be locked up?

“Where’s security?” The security desk inside the entrance hall was empty. No guards, no personnel—just silence.

Journey put her hand on her weapon and did a slow circle of the entrance area. “I

don't like this."

"Try Lucas again."

Journey released her weapon and dialed her partner. But she never stopped scanning the area.

Stella pulled out her phone and dialed Tysen. "Ma'am, we're at the museum. Security desk is abandoned. Requesting immediate backup."

"On the way, Knox." Tysen was all efficiency. "Situation?"

"Building entrance appears abandoned. Yates and Sullivan aren't answering. But that could be the reception in places like this."

"Could be. Hold position. Backup en route."

"Understood." Stella hesitated to defy a direct order...but she wasn't about to leave Hagen alone in the depths of this museum. The Administrator was preparing for the ultimate end-of-the-world sacrifice. They only had twenty minutes. For Stella, the decision was easy. "We're proceeding inside."

Journey hung up at the same time as Stella. "Still no answer from Lucas. What'd Tysen say?"

"Hold position."

"I don't see that happening."

Stella gave her a quick smile and headed to the security station. "There's got to be a map or something around here. We can't go into this place blind."

The entrance hall was dimly lit, with only emergency lighting casting long shadows across the marble floor. Display cases containing Roman artifacts lined the walls, the glass reflecting the agents' cautious advance .

“There should be monitors too.” Journey circled the security desk.

Inside, a bank of monitors displayed feeds from throughout the museum. They flicked to different locations every five seconds or so. A detailed floor plan was tacked to a corkboard on the desk.

“There.” Journey pointed to a spot marked just beyond the Egyptian corridor. “Napp’s office.”

Stella nodded. “Let’s check it first.”

“Hold up.” Journey leaned toward the monitors. Stella looked over her shoulder, and her stomach dropped out from under her.

A security guard was carrying an unconscious—she hoped he was unconscious—Lucas down a hallway. In the background, various old bric-a-brac stood on shelves. Probably priceless, but to Stella, it just seemed like clutter. The space looked like a storage area.

Journey pointed to the feed. “The camera stamp says Area Seventeen. Where’s Area Seventeen?”

Stella had to admire Journey’s cool in this situation. The woman’s voice was calm and steady. Stella’s hands shook as she yanked the map off the corkboard. She scanned the floor plans methodically. The space looked like storage.

That’d be the basement. They’d start there.

“Here.” Stella found it almost immediately. “We’re going to need keys or a badge or something. Maybe both.”

Journey was already opening drawers. She found a ring with maybe a hundred keys and two employee badges in the lost and found box. “Let’s go.”

“I didn’t see Hagen in that security footage.” Stella led the way, following the map like an Eagle Scout.

“Wherever Lucas is, Hagen will be there too. Lucas wouldn’t leave his partner. Even if the whole place was on fire. ”

They reached a heavy steel door marked Basement Access — Authorized Personnel Only . Stella tried the handle. Locked.

Instead of starting with the huge round of keys, Journey swiped one of the badges. A red light greeted her.

“Let’s hope our next guy has access.” Stella wanted to beat the door down with her bare hands.

Journey swiped, and the second badge got results. A bright-green light glowed, and the bolts giving way sounded like heaven.

The two of them descended the stairs, weapons drawn. The temperature dropped noticeably as they reached the basement level. A long corridor stretched before them, lined with additional hallways that branched off in multiple directions like a labyrinth.

“This place is a maze.” Journey moved carefully down the hallway.

“Napp has a research room. Should be down the east corridor, then north at the second junction.” Stella had a good image of the area in her mind, but she hadn’t expected the amount of stuff filling the space.

Crated artifacts and conservation equipment crowded in. She saw a small stone hippopotamus. The air smelled of dust and chemicals.

The door to Napp’s research room was open, and a flood of bright-white lights, like those used for television, glowed.

Inside, shadows shuffled, and low voices murmured.

Stella recognized Napp among the three separate low voices, all masculine.

One of them was probably the security guard they’d seen carrying Lucas on the footage upstairs.

Approaching the room would be dangerous. If she could see inside, they could see outside. According to the map, there should only be one entrance, which meant Napp and his people were cornered.

Journey seemed to be coming to the same conclusion. She crept to a far corner, behind a shelf. Stella followed her to regroup, taking careful, silent steps while keeping her gaze moving.

She and Journey stood so close that Stella could smell Journey’s coconut shampoo.

Journey nodded to Stella’s pocket, where her phone was. “Dollars to doughnuts he’s streaming what he’s doing right now. We can assess from here. Stay low. I’ll cover. You check.”

Stella flipped her phone to the Dispatch app and watched a muted stream on her screen. She swallowed the bile rising up in her throat. Hagen and Lucas were bound, face down, on two large tables that looked almost like those used for autopsies.

Both men were shirtless and tied to tables, their almost identical broad backs stretched out. Hagen's "Vindicta" tattoo crossed his shoulder blades. If he was conscious, she couldn't tell. Blood covered his head.

Beside him, Lucas was definitely out. From the angle of his head, she could tell that his eyes were closed, and a gash still leaked blood over his temple. There were also telltale signs of prong marks on his back ribs. They'd used a Taser to get him under control.

Two men in security guard uniforms stood beside each table. Napp's lackeys. The front doors were unlocked because the security guards had been busy kidnapping federal agents.

As Stella watched her screen, Hagen's head lolled, and he groaned quietly—she could hear it emanating from the room.

Stella wanted to shout for joy and relief and hope. He was still alive.

Napp held a small square slab up to the camera as he spoke. His voice sounded strange coming from inside the room eight feet away. "My friends, this is the moment. This is the time for which we have all waited. And this...this is the tablet."

He pushed the clay block in front of the lens. The piece was so small and simple—an old hunk of scratched-up mud—yet it had caused so much destruction.

"This is the prophecy that foretells the end of this world. On this day, it says, shall fall a great disaster. Only those the gods deem worthy, only those who have paid their

price in blood, shall live to see the birth of the new era. So it is written, my friends. And so it shall be.”

Napp nodded to one of the security guards.

The man, average height with a brown buzz cut, stepped forward beside Lucas. He held up a knife. Even from the tiny screen, Stella could tell the blade was sharp.

She kept her voice low. “Three men. One near the door. Two on either side of the room. At least one armed and approaching Lucas.” She sprang forward, with Journey on her heels.

Napp’s voice grew louder as they approached, and she turned down the volume on her phone.

If he heard them or was concerned with their presence, he didn’t break his cadence.

There was a tension in his voice, a touch of unrestrained excitement.

“This is the last day. These are the last minutes. I’m sorry more people couldn’t be saved.

But they should’ve listened to us. To you.

They should’ve paid attention. It’s too late now. ”

Stella had reached the doorway. Napp stepped back from the camera.

Behind him, the security guard had started carving on Lucas’s back.

“Federal agents! Weapons down!”

The guard paused and looked up at Stella as if he didn't fully understand what he was seeing. He lifted his hands and dropped the knife. Blood oozed from Lucas's broken skin, but his body rose and fell with breath. He was alive.

Napp, rather than obeying, lifted a bronze blade curved like a sickle. The color on the edge was brighter than the dark metal that made up the rest of the weapon. It shined like new.

"Welcome, Agent Knox." He lowered the blade to the back of Hagen's neck. "Now, as we approach the last minutes of this world, I will make my sacrifice. And then, as the world ends, you all will make yours."

Stella raised her weapon.

But before she could place her finger on the trigger, her entire body sizzled as bolts of electricity shot through her.

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

Hagen opened his eyes. From his prone position, he could see very little, and what he could, he didn't recognize. Gray lines ran along the walls beside him. They seemed to rise and fall in waves. A bright-white light burned through his pupils and set his brain on fire.

He groaned and closed his eyes. His head was screaming in pain.

From his brief glance, he knew he was in the morgue room. The space was large, at least twenty by twenty, and well lit. No clutter or strange artifacts. This room was for clean study.

He was on one of the stainless steel tables, as if he were a tablet to be explored.

Or carved into.

Somewhere far away, Stella's voice shot through his awareness.

"Federal agents! Weapons down!"

He waited for gunfire or screaming. But it was quiet.

The light burned less with his eyes closed, but he still felt like his head was exploding.

Every movement of his neck seemed to start another detonation in his temple.

Something sticky was glued to the side of his face.

And he couldn't shift his arms. They were pinned down.

Whenever he tried to move them, something dug into his skin.

A new kind of pain, duller and less severe than the fiery throbbing in his head, but uncomfortable nonetheless.

Someone was talking.

The sound came as a drone, a distant echo as blurry and unfocused as his vision. He couldn't make out the words, but the voice and the intonation were familiar.

He blinked again and resisted the urge to shake the confusion out of his head. That would have hurt far too much.

His stomach roiled. He wanted to throw up.

But he heard Stella's voice. And someone else's.

The world slowly came back into focus. The first person he saw was Stella, down on the floor, her body stiff as a board. Someone who looked like a security guard bent over her and lifted her gun away. The prongs and wires of a Taser came from her rib cage.

"Well, well. Just in time, Agent Knox."

Hagen blinked against the voice. A woman. He was sure of it. But hadn't it just been Napp in the room? Napp and the security guard toadies?

Napp's voice boomed in joy. "If it isn't the world's greatest administrator!"

Hagen lifted his head as much as he could. Pain roared behind his eyes, but he forced himself to look.

Jodie Laird. The adjunct professor and Whelan's administrative assistant.

Hagen had been a fool. Stupid. He should've seen it coming, should've been prepared. All these cuneiform experts were sixty-plus years old and couldn't be bothered with a technological application like Dispatch.

Laird had access to everyone's research. They trusted her. She was ambitious.

She must've been waiting patiently like all seasoned predators did. Even her moniker, the Administrator, was a dig at the "experts" around her. They and their research were nothing without her.

A shudder passed through Hagen, powered by anger and frustration. He blinked once, twice. His eyes focused, but he had to put his head back down, facing the side.

Stella was coming around, and she was not happy. The security guard lackey had barely managed to secure her weapon before she came roaring back to life. But even though the guard had a grip on her, her words were aimed at Jodie.

"You crazy fucking monster."

Hagen strained against the ropes, but they didn't give. He bent his wrists and searched with his fingertips for a knot to undo or a loose thread to pull. There was nothing. Napp's ropework might not have been efficient, but it was effective. Hagen wasn't going anywhere.

"Tsk, tsk, Agent Knox. Patience is a virtue."

“And murder’s still a felony. Let’s not pretend we’re picking virtues now.” Journey’s voice came from somewhere on the other side of the room. It sounded like another of Laird’s goons had a grip on her.

“I don’t know you.” Laird stepped forward, ignoring Napp as he continued talking to the Dispatch audience. She stopped in front of Hagen, speaking over his head to a spot beyond Lucas, presumably where Journey was being restrained. “But you seem like a pain in the ass.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” The words were slurred, but Hagen recognized Lucas’s voice .

Hagen twisted, ignoring the nails hammering behind his temples. Lucas was tied face down in the opposite direction. Blood from too-familiar scratches lined the other agent’s bare back.

From the corner of his eye, Hagen could see a tripod with a smartphone set up near Lucas’s head. Napp droned on to the camera, talking about the words on the tablet, the prophecy inscribed on its surface, and the new era about to be born.

After Napp’s long introduction, Laird stepped toward the camera, taking her place in the spotlight.

Her voice changed, becoming quiet but commanding.

“The tablet is clear. Blood must flow. Sacrifices need to be made. So many have proved your loyalty to the tablet and its prophecy. You will be rewarded. To show you that your faith is not in vain, I, too, will make a sacrifice of the very people who have come to hunt us.”

Hagen had never heard anyone sound so committed and so insane at the same time.

He dug a fingernail into the rope and picked at the fibers. They didn't give. Beside him, Lucas's feet twisted at his restraints too.

But he also saw a shadow pass over Lucas's back. One of the security guards—the same bastard who had let them in the museum—stood over the agent. A sharp blade glinted in his hand.

Laird stepped away from the camera.

She moved to Lucas and lifted his head, exposing the agent's throat to the viewers. Hagen strained at his ropes. He remembered the exsanguinated victims who'd plagued his thoughts for the last couple of months. He'd be damned if Lucas became one of the faces to haunt his dreams.

“You touch one more hair on him, and I will kill you with my bare hands!” Journey twisted against the guard who held her, but he had her in a headlock, and she didn't have the space needed to get leverage.

Laird looked into Hagen's eyes, seeming to understand the pain she was about to cause and relishing every moment of it. She glanced at her watch and smiled. “And now my sacrifice begins.”

## Page 42

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

The ache in Stella's muscles slowly dissipated, and absolute fury replaced it. Laird bent over Lucas, the knife flashing in the ring lights Napp had used to make the scene perfect for streaming.

Stella was too low to see everything, except that no one was watching her now. From her vantage point near the floor, she saw Journey's legs kicking, trying to throw her captor off balance, all while yelling what she was going to do to Laird if she did anything else to Lucas.

In front of her, Stella watched Hagen's forearms clenching as he tried to loosen the binds around his wrists—the ropes trailed to a support pole beneath the metal table, but the table was bolted to the floor, presumably to prevent any priceless artifacts from teetering off the edge.

He'd never manage to get his binds untied in time.

Hagen twisted, searching for her. They both knew she was the only one in a position to do anything. But even now, bound and bloodied, he was, she could tell, more worried about her than himself and Lucas.

The security guard who'd tased her stood just over her head, but he was ignoring her—probably assuming she was still out.

But people didn't understand that tasing was far from permanent.

The effect lasted just long enough to allow you to get control of the subject.

Then it faded. The security guard had lost control of her already.

Her gun hung loose in his hand—again, a distinct lack of training from this guy. She also spotted a utility knife in his belt. Probably for doing quick repairs throughout the museum. Tighten a bolt here, turn a screw there, open a box here.

She needed both her gun and the knife.

Now.

Laird ignored Journey and the other three federal agents in her vicinity.

She spoke to the phone live streaming everything.

“The ancient letters were inscribed four thousand years ago. They’ve survived the sacking of cities and the fall of empires.

But the words live on. They live because they’re built on truth, the glory of the world to come.

As soon as I’ve made my sacrifice, you’ll make yours.

And as the sun begins its descent, this age will end. So it is written.”

“You know what’s impressive, Jodie Laird?” Hagen called out, drawing the Administrator’s attention away from the camera. “How you managed to get out ahead of all those professors. Finally got the recognition you deserved. After years of being ignored.”

Smart move, Yates.

He was distracting her, buying Stella a couple of seconds. She wasn't going to waste them.

Laird took the bait. "They never listened. I was just their administrator. The assistant. The nobody who organized their papers and scheduled their meetings. But I was better than all of them. I understood what they couldn't see."

Stella caught the edge in Laird's voice—the bitter resentment of someone who'd been overlooked and underestimated for years.

This wasn't about the end of the world. It was about power. Control. Being the expert who everyone finally had to acknowledge.

"You really believe that crap?" Hagen grunted.

"You really believe the world's about to end?"

It's just a bunch of scratches in the mud.

You can't honestly expect anyone would be dumb enough to fall for your garbage.

"He turned his head—the only body part he could move—and gave a You buying this ? look to the lens.

Jodie dismissed Hagen. "Nothing can stop what's coming. So it is written."

That distraction was all Stella needed. She surged upward, her elbow slamming into the guard's chin. Bone cracked. His grip faltered.

She twisted his wrist hard— pop —and the gun dropped. He howled in pain, but Stella was already moving, yanking the utility knife from his belt and shoving him

aside. He hit the floor, cradling his wrist, dazed but down.

Ignoring his screech of pain, she cuffed him. “Stay put.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She dropped low, slicing through the rope on Hagen’s right arm. He didn’t waste time—yanked free, grabbed the knife midair as she tossed it, and went to work on the rest of his bindings.

Across the room, another guard—taller, meaner—swung Hagen’s service weapon toward Lucas’s table.

Stella fired. The guard hit the floor.

The blast echoed like a cannon in the tight space.

“That was almost my face!” Lucas yelled. He’d managed to duck his into his shoulder.

“But it wasn’t,” Stella reassured him.

Journey drove her heel into her captor’s shin. As he staggered, she flipped him hard. He hit the concrete with a thud and a grunt. Then he was still. He’d have a nasty headache when he woke up...if he woke up.

Snagging her Glock from him, she rushed toward the streaming phone and faced the blinking lens. “Sorry, folks. No end of the world today. It’s now two minutes past noon, and we’re all still alive. Please desist from all murders and sacrifices and go hug your families.”

As she fired at the camera, Napp roared and charged at Stella, an ancient mace raised high.

Stella ducked. The weapon whistled overhead, smashing into the wall behind her.

Hagen's left arm came free. He dropped under the table and sawed at Lucas's ankle ropes. One foot loose. Then the second.

But Napp wasn't stopping.

He swung again—wild, frenzied—catching Hagen square in the back with the mace. Hagen grunted, staggered to his knees, but didn't stop cutting.

“Get back!” Stella warned, gun raised, but Napp was a man possessed.

Journey ducked a blow meant for her shoulder and grabbed a second weapon from the downed guard at her feet.

One of the swings smashed into Lucas's rope and left hand. He screamed, but the blow had hit him sideways. It would bruise but not bleed. The rope, however, slid enough that he could wiggle free.

All Lucas's limbs were loose except for his right hand now. He scrambled to get some purchase on the stainless steel beneath him.

Laird darted in from the corner and yanked him off balance, dragging him in front of her and holding her knife tight to his throat.

And just like that, the chaos snapped into a standstill .

“Let's all just calm down,” she said.

“How about you calm down?” Journey held her retrieved weapons level and steady.

Napp was not calming down.

Hagen launched himself from beneath Lucas’s table and miraculously managed to dodge Napp’s wild, desperate swings. Apparently, training didn’t come with the ancient weapons.

Stella couldn’t take a shot at Napp—Hagen was in the way. She saw flashes of metal and Hagen’s “Vindicta” tattoo as they struggled.

Journey was securing one of the security guard’s wrists.

“I’m pretty sure waving ancient weapons around violates museum policy.

” Hagen was only armed with a utility knife.

But he didn’t need it. He managed to get close to Napp, which gave the other man no way to swing.

Using a move similar to the one Stella had used on her security guard, Hagen twisted the heavy mace away from the professor.

Even though Napp was in good shape, he was no match for Hagen’s fitness level and training. The older man lifted his hands and fell to his knees, surrendering.

“Amateur hour’s over.” Hagen pinned Napp face down.

“You useless bastard!” Laird didn’t seem to understand that the fight was over. She held Lucas before her like a shield.

Lucas was bleeding from his forehead and back.

Taking out a petite, inexperienced woman like Laird shouldn't have been too much of a problem, but he didn't seem to have the strength to even stand upright.

He wobbled down to his knees, his right hand twisted up in the bindings against the table, and Laird knelt behind him.

Because of the tangle, Laird wouldn't be able to get very far. Her human shield was trapped. An awkward standoff .

"You're done, Jodie." Journey tracked the pair with her weapons.

Stella did likewise. "Your killer countdown is over. The time you gave for the end of the world has passed. No one is listening."

Laird sneered. "You're wrong. I know what I translated. I know what I know. You people don't have a clue."

"Just like they didn't have a clue when you were running the department, right?" Stella kept her voice soft. "You were the one who kept everything together, and no one noticed. No one appreciated your intelligence. Your expertise."

Laird paused—a moment of recognition, of finally being seen.

"All those PhDs." She remained tucked behind Lucas.

"Not one of them could see what was right in front of them. I taught myself cuneiform. I spent nights studying while they played academic politics. When I found the tablet, when I understood what it said..." Her voice took on a reverent quality.

“They would’ve buried it. Called it a curiosity. But I knew its power.”

“And now you have blood on your hands.” Lucas blinked heavily. “Was it worth it? Just to be the expert?”

“Lucas, you okay?” Journey sounded a bit stressed for the first time since Stella met her.

Lucas offered a weak smile. “It’s just a really shitty day at work is all. For a couple of us, apparently, eh, Jodie?”

“Jodie?” Stella repeated. The woman had gone strangely quiet. The only body part Stella could really see was her hand, and the knuckles were going white. The shaking blade nicked Lucas’s neck.

He flinched. “That hurt.”

Lucas reminded Stella more of Hagen with each passing moment.

Stella kept her weapon up. She remembered Maureen King, who’d stabbed herself rather than surrender. All because of Laird’s translations and machinations. So many dead. “Jodie, I need you to drop the weapon. It’s done. All the sacrifices. All the death.”

“It’s not done.” Laird peeked up over Lucas’s shoulder. “The end might not have come for the whole world. But it’s going to come for him...right now.”

“You know this isn’t who you are. You wanted respect, not blood.”

Laird moved the knife. But the part of her head poking up over Lucas’s shoulder was enough for Stella to take a shot. She refused to see another person—someone she

knew and respected, no less—have their blood spilled.

And she made the decision.

Instead of Laird's hand, she focused on the lock of brunette hair drifting in front of Laird's forehead. Exhaling, she fired.

She wasn't alone.

Two shots rang out—one from Stella and one from Journey.

Lucas reacted instantly, reaching for her arm to stabilize the knife as the woman slid to the floor.

Stella took in Lucas's face. His eyes were wide. His mouth hung open. He looked right at her.

"I can't believe you did that." He pointed at Journey. "You, I believe." The finger returned to Stella. "But I didn't realize you were crazy too."

Before she could respond, a howl came from behind them.

Napp, currently pinned beneath Hagen, was scrambling to get up. But Hagen might as well have been a boulder.

"You killed her! Is she dead? You shot her!"

Stella holstered her weapon. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Journey kneeling beside Laird's sprawled body .

"She's as dead as your stupid theory." Journey seemed less concerned about the dead

woman than freeing Lucas from the table.

Stella glanced at Laird's body, feeling an unexpected pang of regret.

In another life, with different choices, Laird's brilliance might've earned her the recognition she'd craved through legitimate channels.

Instead, she'd chosen a path that ended here, in a basement storeroom, surrounded by the ancient artifacts she'd dedicated her life to understanding.

Stella didn't let herself dwell on Laird's fate too long. The pair of security guards still alive needed proper cuffing, which they allowed without protest.

"But...she said...she said we'd be free. Today. She did the translation. I did the translation." Napp's voice broke, his eyes wide with disbelief. "She promised me we'd be saved!"

Stella shook her head at the raving man as she cuffed him as well.

"They were much smarter in those days." Napp's words tumbled out, desperation edging his voice. "Knew things we've never understood. They saw what was coming. Oh, yes, they did. And they left a warning for us all. But we were too foolish to look, too arrogant."

Stella looked at the man with something like pity. "Sorry, Dr. Napp. The ancients were just as mistaken as the rest of us. They were right about one thing, though."

Hagen arched an eyebrow at her.

"For some of us, the world after today is going to look very different."

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

Stella slipped an arm around Hagen's waist and pulled him close. A large bandage covered the stitches on his temple.

Both Hagen and Lucas had suffered some nasty wounds from their adventure. Lucas, however, had been attended to at the hospital by, of all people, Journey's sister, the efficient head of the Evidence Response Team. Michelle had then reprimanded both Stella and Journey for their partners' wounds.

Stella liked her and the whole Pittsburgh team.

She was relieved for them too. They didn't have to say goodbye to one of their own, despite the close call.

She and Hagen stood beside Alessandra's grave at Nashville City Cemetery. Her casket hung inside a metal frame above the opening, ready to be lowered. The rain rolled over the lid and left wet traces on the polish.

Rain rattled off the umbrella they shared, but an occasional breeze blew drops into his face that ran down his dressing and dripped from his cheekbone.

Despite the cold that kept Stella shivering inside her coat, she was grateful for the weather. Hagen wouldn't have wanted anyone to notice his tears. Only she could see that the redness in his eyes and the moisture on his face had nothing to do with the bruises on his skin.

Stella didn't want the funeral workers to place the casket in the ground. The earth was too wet. The weather was too cold. Alessandra shouldn't be down there in that damp

mud.

She pushed the thought out of her head and ran her gloved hand up Hagen's side. His presence, so close and so warm, made her calmer. Alessandra was at peace now. Her journey had ended. The living would carry the pain of her passing.

Ander stood directly opposite them, holding his son's hand.

He'd found what he wanted in Alessandra but kept it so briefly.

Now he was alone again, with one more scar to carry.

A cold breeze blew, and he tilted his umbrella to better protect Murphy.

Demetri was next to Murphy, holding his hand.

The toddler's father was just a few feet away, letting his young son find solace in another kid, his older stepbrother.

At the head of the grave, the priest was reading the blessing, but Stella wasn't listening.

She was back at her brother's funeral, remembering his smile and worrying about her mother. Losing a husband was bad enough, but a son? No parent should ever have to carry that kind of grief.

And then Stella was at her father's graveside, surrounded by men in uniform with stern faces and strong handshakes.

They'd had a touch of fear in their voices.

Stella had heard it when they'd talked to each other, an awareness that a bullet just like the one that had taken Sergeant Knox could be waiting for them somewhere out there.

She even remembered the sight of Joel Rameriz at the funeral, and a sour taste rose in her throat. Stella hated him for corrupting that memory.

But her father could rest in peace now, and she was free of his killer. So was Hagen free of his father's killer. And they had each other. That light would never burn out.

The priest closed his Bible. Metal poles holding the straps turned and squeaked as the casket eased its way into the hole and out of sight. Rain continued to fall.

Ander lowered his chin and sobbed quietly.

Slade, beside him, laid a hand on his shoulder.

His face was ashen. Alessandra was the second employee the office had lost this year in what had to have been the worst of Slade's career.

Everyone around the grave that morning on the day after Christmas—Stacy, Anja, Mac, Caleb, Slade, Hagen, and Stella—knew they could just as easily have been inside that casket.

They'd spent more time in the field, looked down the barrels of more guns, and disarmed more killers with knives than Alessandra Lagarde ever had. Even Mac, who spent her time in front of her screen, had faced her own dangers.

It should've been one of them. Not a mother and a wife with so much to live for.

The coffin landed with a wet crunch, and the priest hugged his Bible to his chest. He

held out his arm, inviting the mourners to leave the grounds. Slowly, her hand in the crook of Hagen's arm, Stella walked through the rain to the cars.

Slade walked alongside her. "I guess I should congratulate you on solving the case. You stopped them just in time."

He was only mostly right. One of Laird's followers had moved early, and another had gone through with his plans despite Journey's appeal. A woman in Wichita had slashed her boyfriend to death, and a tour guide in Hawaii had sacrificed a tourist at the base of Kilauea.

Hagen peered past the umbrella. "Those idiots still killed so many people. And we didn't save Alessandra."

"They would've killed a lot more if not for you." Slade's voice was firm. "We could've had hundreds dead." He squeezed Stella's shoulder, but she was in no mood for congratulations.

As the Dispatch group had filled with messages, asking what was going on and trying to figure out what had just happened to the Administrator, Guy had used Hagen's account to explain that he was an expert.

That the tablet was a fake. There was never a real prophecy, and the end of the world wasn't coming.

It had all been a figment of one insane woman's imagination.

Activity in the group had died away.

On the side of Oak Street, as they reached their cars, Ander gave Demetri a hug, and the sweet redheaded boy left with his father.

Ander then accepted hugs from Anja, Stacy, Mac, and Caleb before they climbed into their vehicles.

Holding Murphy's hand, he made his way toward Stella, Hagen, and Slade.

Slade gave Ander a solid pat on the back. Hagen hugged him and kept hugging him as though he was afraid to let go. When Ander pulled an arm around Stella's shoulder, she couldn't help but cry into his neck.

"I'm so sorry, Ander. I'm so sorry."

She rubbed his back and looked at Hagen over Ander's shoulder. In time, Ander would build his life again, as they had after their losses. At least, she hoped he would.

Ander forced a joyless smile as he let go of her. "See you back at the house." Then he made sure Murphy's seat belt was secure before climbing into his car and pulling away.

Slade let his umbrella rest against his shoulder. "This will be the last one of these I go to, the last agent I lose under my command."

Hagen gave a short nod. "Let's hope so."

"I say that after every tragedy. Maybe one day it'll ring true."

They walked to their vehicles together .

"I heard Tysen's offered both of you places in the CIRG in D.C. Bigger jobs, bigger crimes, bigger investigations. That's what she told me anyway." Slade faced them squarely.

“Bigger cases than the one we’ve just cracked?” Hagen cocked his head.

“I don’t think they get much bigger than the cases we’ve had this year, Boss.” Stella looped an arm into Hagen’s.

“Tysen thinks they do.” Slade looked up at the sky. The rain was easing up, and he lowered his umbrella. “So what are you going to do?”

Hagen took a deep breath. “Not sure. Tysen told us to think about it over the next few days. We’re going to be at my sister’s ranch. Better late than never for the holidays.”

“You’ll be with your family too?” Stella smiled warmly at Slade.

“You two are changing the subject. But yes, I’ll be enjoying the company of loved ones. Grateful that I can.”

They both understood that.

“We’ll be in touch by the end of the week. You’ll be the first to know what we decide.”

“Sounds like that’s as good an answer as I’m going to get. See you both at Ander’s in a few.”

Hagen and Stella stood there, arm in arm, as Slade drove off.

They stood together, watching the rain ease and the sky begin to lighten, as if even the weather had decided to let them breathe. Not everything had ended cleanly. Alessandra was gone. Too many lives had been lost. There were questions that would never have answers.

But maybe that was the truth of life—it didn't always offer closure or tie things up in a neat, shiny bow. Sometimes all you could do was hold close the people still standing beside you and choose to keep going.

Today, it was enough.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:13 am*

Stella watched with a grin as Hagen tossed her luggage into the 'Vette and slammed the trunk. Good thing she was a light packer, or they'd have had to take separate vehicles. Hagen hadn't overpacked, but his stuff was all spread out inside his luggage compared to hers.

Stella squeezed Hagen's arm, and he pulled her into a hug that ended in a soft, sweet kiss before they separated and got into the vehicle.

After they'd both climbed in, Hagen started the engine. "You know your mom and stepdad are going to beat us there."

Flying her mom and Jonathan to the ranch had been Hagen's idea. Stella's mom had agreed immediately. They'd all be together for a belated Christmas.

"They'll have plenty of time to get to know each other, then.

And anyway, you deserve this." Stella smiled, and her cheeks grew warm.

She didn't want to be emotional—the trip hadn't even begun.

But Hagen deserved everything she could give him.

She wanted him to have it all, to love their life together.

And she was just reminded of that. Again .

"I deserve what, exactly, Stella? You?" He pinched his arm and smiled. "I'm still

processing.”

“You deserve a joyride. Your favorite thing.”

Bubs let out a little bark from the back.

They both laughed.

“I think someone,” Stella nodded to the tiny back seat, which looked even smaller with Bubs sprawled out on it, “is ready to go.” She turned around and gave him a little head scratch.

“I love you, Stella Knox.”

Okay, now her eyes were hot with tears. She turned to see that Hagen’s were too.

“I was so afraid I was going to hurt you by...”

She touched his arm. She knew what he meant. If they hadn’t gotten him out of that museum basement alive, it would’ve all but killed her.

But they had made it out. She’d pulled it off, and they’d caught their killer.

So many people, including one of their own, weren’t so lucky.

She loved Hagen with all her heart. She loved their life and couldn’t remember the last time she’d ever felt so in sync with another person, so safe inside the world they were creating. “I love you, too, beautiful.” She touched his bruised and bandaged head ever so lightly.

“Hey,” he kissed the tip of her nose, “we’ve got to call Slade by week’s end. But for the next few days, I’m going to be thinking of nothing but family.” He took her hand

and kissed it before revving the engine and reversing out of the driveway.

They weren't taking any new job, no matter how enticing the offer. They weren't leaving Nashville, and they both knew it. Though they were on their way to spend quality time with their birth families, they had another just as significant—a family that would be waiting for them when they returned.

They shared a knowing smile. Then Hagen put the 'Vette in drive, and they shot down the road.

A streak of cherry red.

The End

You saw it all. The chaos, the pain, the loss. The fight to make it out alive.

But I'm still standing. And so are the people I love.

That's enough. That's everything.

Now it's your turn—go live boldly.

Love hard. Be the storm when you have to.

And when the dust clears?

Stand tall in whatever peace you've earned.

I'll be doing the same.

Love, Stella