

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

JEFFERY DEAVER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



DODGE

THE BROKEN DOLL

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OceanofPDF.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Broken Doll is a collection of four short stories that recount a harrowing few weeks in the lives of a half dozen characters in the rural Midwest. The stories can be read individually—each has a beginning, middle and end—but they also interlock; some plotlines jump from one story to another, and so do some of the characters (to the extent they survive, of course!). Because the narrative moves back and forth in time, I thought it might be helpful to show at the beginning of each story where each of the stories falls on the calendar, and the duration of each.

APRIL						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
			Dodge			
		Execution Day				
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
				The Pain Hunter		
				Sixty-One Seconds		
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

The phone chimes like a knife-tapped glass.

Not loud but enough to waken.

A text.

The message is simple:

Back off—Last warning.

Below is the black triangle of an attached sound recording.

A pause and then it downloads and plays.

First the scream, then the woman's voice. "No, please . . . No . . . Kill me! Please. Just—"

A final scream and the recording ends.

Wednesday, April 5

Today would be out of the ordinary.

He was looking forward to it.

Cautiously.

The twenty-nine-year-old deputy pulled his somber-gray squad car into the Upper Falls strip mall parking lot, slowed to a stop and looked around him, past the parents shopping now that the children were in classrooms, past DIYers loading paint and drywall into their pickups, past the skinny truant teens clustered together, aimless, faces sporadically obscured by dense masses of vaping steam.

A few glances his way.

Always, with the car. Always, with a man in a Sheriff's Office uniform, crewcut, unsmiling, brown eyes that "meant business," he'd been told, though by a drunk he was arresting for public urination so the observation was a bit suspect.

What's he up to? the people here would be wondering.

Shoplifters? A fight? An arrest was always good to video and upload to TikTok, even if it didn't result in nearly as many views or likes as one would want. Supply and demand.

Deputy Anthony Lombardi noticed the man waving, eight rows away.

He steered in that direction, then pulled into a space facing Dollar General.

Lombardi killed the engine and climbed out.

The two men met on the sidewalk in front of the store. Lombardi adjusted his service belt, a habit when he was uneasy. “Marshal Greene?”

They shook hands and Greene displayed an ID and a badge; it was a silver star, like what old-time sheriffs wore, in the movies at least. No need for Lombardi to flash anything; his Sheriff’s Office uniform, along with a name tag, said it all. There was the squad car too.

Edward Greene was of medium build—if he’d done a college sport, it would’ve been baseball. He was dressed in a dark suit, white shirt, pale blue tie. Neatly trimmed dark hair. Carefully shaven, as, Lombardi supposed, all marshals had to be. A serious face and still brown eyes—which most definitely meant business.

“Welcome to Upper Falls. Or you can call it what we do: just the Falls.”

“Looks like a lovely place.” Greene had a lilt to his voice situating his origins somewhere in the South.

Lombardi chuckled. “Parts are. Yessir.” He had been a Harbinger County Sheriff’s Office deputy since the army. Unlike some of his coworkers, even at this age, he was in basic training shape. One hundred seventy-three pounds on his six-foot frame. He had a full head of brown hair and a face that looked like that of an actor on a prime-time police or hospital show. Not the lead but serving a role to advance important plot developments every third episode or so.

“Now, Deputy—”

“Let’s make it Tony, how about?”

He said this automatically, then wondered, Was it okay to go first name?

Apparently so.

A nod. “And I’m Ed. I need a pitstop and refill. Where’s good for coffee?”

Lombardi stabbed a slim finger at Maggie’s.

He could use some caffeine too. He hadn’t fallen asleep until the wee hours because he kept thinking about the sheriff’s phone call at 9:00 p.m.—the special assignment.

Out of the ordinary . . .

They walked into the bright place, just past bustling hour, and were assaulted by a tidal wave of smells. Fry fat predominated.

Greene hit the restroom while Lombardi took a booth. When the marshal returned they ordered coffee. He asked, “Anything else? Uncle Sam’s buying.”

Lombardi was hesitating, as if eating would seem unprofessional in the eyes of a law enforcer who would be, the deputy felt, superior to him in all respects.

Then the marshal rapped the laminated menu. “How about burgers all around? You’re in a diner, you eat diner food. Though I’ll bet the mac ‘n’ cheese isn’t bad.”

“Burgers’re better. The mac can be gluey.”

Spry Kate, in her seventies, poured the coffee and took the order, then headed to the kitchen.

Sipping, Greene nodded. “Yessir. That *is* fine. Now, Tony, let me explain what I’m here for. And we’ll see where you stand.”

Odd phrasing. “All right.” And he stepped on the “sir” before it snuck out.

Lombardi lifted the mug. Greene too, like they were toasting. Ceramic did not meet ceramic.

“Did your sheriff brief you?” Greene asked.

“Some. There’s a manhunt. You’re covering this part of the state and could use somebody local.”

A nod. “Pretty much. Now, the Marshals Office, it’s sort of a grab bag. We guard federal judges and transport prisoners. Then there’s the Witness Security Program. What I do. You know, whistleblowers, people who testify against the mob and cartels.”

Lombardi and Jess liked their true-crime shows. He didn’t think there’d been a show about the US Marshals. It could be a good one.

Greene continued, “I got this one family set up, new identities, new home, after the husband testified in Chicago—he was a bookkeeper and got the FBI spreadsheets that brought down a big drug ring.”

Lombardi’s face grew still. It was clear where this was going.

The marshal’s hands encircled the mug. “An assistant in our department? She was kidnapped and gave up the location.” Greene hesitated. “Everybody breaks. Just a matter of time. Joanne worked for us six years. Married, children.” He stopped speaking before his voice cracked, which it was just about to do.

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah.” Nearly a whisper.

The burgers landed and, without ketchup or other doctoring, Greene started eating, small bites. The tough story about his assistant had dampened his appetite, it was clear. Still, he nodded his approval. “Place must be an institution.”

“For miles around.” Lombardi turned his patty yellow and red, then cut the sandwich in half, which he always did, and then ate too, slowly. He and Jess had talked about when the kids arrived: they’d make sure mealtimes lasted awhile. They’d talk about their days—their jobs and school, the news, everything. Like on *Blue Bloods*, at the end of each show.

Then: Stay on this, he told himself. Focus.

Wiping his lips with a napkin, Greene continued, “So, there it is. I lost a coworker, and my witness and his wife. I’d become friends with them. A lot of the people we protect,

they're assholes. Mob, petty criminals. But these were good, solid folk."

Lombardi started on the second portion of his burger. The fries were vanishing too. He ate them with a knife and fork to make them last. Maggie's was known for its fries.

"So I dropped everything. Told my bosses, this's all I'm working on, finding their killer. Didn't have any luck for weeks but then I get a lead from a CI . . ." He hesitated.

"Confidential informant."

"That the perp's here in Upper Falls. And he tells me something else. The killer's found out I'm full-time on the case now and's going to do whatever it takes to nail me. See, I have kind of a reputation: I never stop till the perp's collared."

"So he's gunning for you at the same time you're gunning for him."

"That's it, Deputy. Except for one thing: the killer's not a 'he.'"



"You seen this man?"

She flashed her phone at the bartender. He looked up with a vaguely out of alignment expression. He was a tall blond of an age somewhere between thirty and fifty. He clearly partook of the wares he sold.

He looked first at her gray eyes and then at the phone, his face ill at ease.

Constant Marlowe was still as a cat eying an unfortunate sparrow.

Studying the picture. "No."

"Look again."

He did. "No."

She lowered the phone. "I saw him walk out the front door here ten minutes ago." Her voice was low and more raspy than usual.

He wasn't happy that she'd snagged him in a lie with her trap. He decided to ignore her and returned to dunking glasses in a glass-dunking soapy water thing.

Marlowe said, "Let's try it again. The truth. I'm going to show you another picture, another man." She leaned forward a bit more. "And I don't have time for bullshit."

She was in fact on a tight timetable.

Was he wondering if he was in physical danger? Probably not. The gaunt woman was five six and 120 pounds and not toting a kitchen knife or ax, and the bartender would surely have some defenses against the creepy meth crowd wandering through Upper Falls like bit players in a zombie movie. At least there'd be a fish-knocking club under the bar, and likely a firearm.

Still, somebody'd once said she was a walking high-tension wire, and you never knew when crazy might rear. She'd be telegraphing some of this now.

"Look, miss . . ."

She displayed the shot. The dark-haired man in the image was in his forties, wearing a suit jacket and tieless white shirt. A good-looking, if nondescript businessman. He was gazing off to the side and didn't appear to know he was being photographed. The Chicago lakefront was in the background.

He studied this one hard. Maybe she'd go away. "No. I don't think so. I can tell you he's not a regular."

"No. He wouldn't be. He's not local. I'm just asking if you saw him here, or maybe around town."

He sighed. "No, lady. Haven't seen anybody like that. You know, it's policy you don't order anything you gotta leave." Clearly he was hoping she'd be forced out on this technicality. He took to studying the hot water once more.

Pale afternoon light bled through the smeared and fly-dotted windows of what called itself a tap room, in which were twenty tables and six patrons.

"When does the next bartender come on?"

“Okay. I really gotta ask you to go.”

“A Coke, Pepsi.” She put a fifty down.

Another sigh. “I can’t change that.”

“Not asking you to. Take a look at the picture again.”

He glanced behind her. “Keep your money. It’s on the house. Drink up and leave. Please. There’s a restaurant up the street. Out the door you turn right, you can’t miss it. Odie’s Café. Maybe you’ll have some luck there. And the pies can’t be beat.”

He looked back to the suds when her expression made clear she didn’t give a shit about pie.

Two stools down was a heavy man, who looked sixty but was probably younger. She walked up to him, showed him the phone and was about to speak.

“No, no, no.” A voice from behind.

She cut her eyes to the mirror, past the bottles of low- to mid-brand booze. It was as neglected as the windows. She saw the big man who’d spoken. A bouncer.

Marlowe turned, leaving the patron at the bar to gloom over his whiskey, and the bartender to soap and swizzle and rack. There was nothing else to clean. It may have been near lunchtime but none of the patrons were eating lunch.

She looked over who’d approached and thought: lumberjack. He was big, six one or so, and two hundred ten or twenty. He was in black jeans, flecked with dots of yellow—pollen time in the region. His black boots were scuffed. And the lumberjack impression was inevitable, as he was wearing an honest-to-God red-and-black plaid flannel shirt. He had a broad, creased face and his teeth were smoker stained.

Marlowe looked behind him at the table where he’d been sitting, along with two slighter men, one in dress slacks and a shirt, the other in jeans and a hoodie. They, like everyone else here, were white. And any coloration to the skin came from bottles, not the sun. She’d noted the beverages of choice. For a

tap room, Hogan's apparently sold a lot more hard liquor than draft beer.

Before he could speak again, she asked, "Who are you?" Belligerent. A quality she could toss but usually had no desire to.

"A manager."

He stood close, just inside that circle of comfort we can't define in terms of inches but all recognize. She didn't step back but just looked up into his face. Bourbon overcame his cloying aftershave, but just barely.

His brown eyes did the Scan: her dark-red and brunette ponytailed hair, her pale forehead, on which was a three-inch scar, her black leather jacket, which was unzipped, her white tee, dotted with a few faint stains, blue jeans and black ankle boots that might have come from the same Chinese cobbling factory as his.

His eyes returned, a brief hiccup, to her chest. Given her build, men's gazes often lingered. Constant Marlowe had spent thirty-two years on this busy earth. There were many, many other things worth getting riled about.

And here, beneath the Hanes tee, was the most unappealing of Nike sports bras. Who could figure?

"I'm looking for this man." She displayed the picture. He glanced but gave no reaction.

"Better you leave."

"I paid for a drink. Or tried to."

"Nup, better you leave, Little Lady."

No worries about this either. She called men "dicks" and "pricks" and "assholes" about as often as someone lobbed a corresponding phrase her way.

She clicked an exasperated tongue and walked to the other occupied table—two paunchy, gray-complected men—and held out the phone for them in one hand. The fifty, which she'd picked up from the bar, was in the other. "Can you tell me if you've seen—"

“No.” Lumberjack had followed and now gripped her arm.

He didn’t say the B word or the C word, insults that were as meaningless to her as the sentence, “Have a nice day.”

But he touched.

That made a difference.

Like a striking snake, she ripped her arm away, slammed her elbow into his forearm and knocked it back. He winced and blinked in surprise. The audience stirred.

“Rudy,” the bartender said. “Just, no. Don’t—”

Lumberjack Rudy’s palm shot out. “Yo, dog. Quiet.” He stepped back and stared down at her. A cold smile blossomed.

“That’s not going to do, Little Lady. Out you go.” His powerful fist encircled her biceps once more and this time he turned and shifted his weight to deflect or stop incoming elbows. He started to guide her out the door.

This stopped fast when her Smith & Wesson Bodyguard .380 appeared, jammed under his chin. She carried it in a battered leather holster, held taut between the Walmart jeans and the silver Victoria’s Secret briefs.

“Oh, shit.”

Gasps from the patrons.

“No,” she said calmly.

He released her arm and stepped back, lifting his palms. “Just go your way. All good.”

She stepped back and looked around the room. The table men had stood. She said, “Sit,” and they sat.

The bartender looked at the phone.

Marlowe said, “You really want the cops in here?”

It was Rudy who shook his head, and the bartender returned to suds.

Cops were the last thing she wanted here too.

She looked Lumberjack over. He was no longer shocked or intimidated. The sneery smile had returned.

“You have a piece?” she asked.

“Sure don’t.”

“Tug it up, turn around.”

He hesitated, then decided her eyes meant she was wild enough to pull the trigger.

High-tension wire . . .

He grimaced and did as told. She pulled from his unpleasantly sweaty waistband the small semiauto, an Italian .25. Her Smittie was small too but in her hand it didn’t look silly—the way this weapon would in his.

She said to the bartender, “You have anything underneath?”

“Baseball bat is all.” His voice trembled. “Look, I don’t want any trouble.”

Keeping the gun on Rudy, she walked to the table he’d been sitting at and said to his two companions, “Stand up. Up with *your* shirts.” They did. Neither was armed. She nodded at the chairs and they settled.

She glanced at the other three patrons. And knew they were clean. You get a feel.

Looking Rudy up and down. Broad shoulders, meaty hands. Strong, yes. But a fair measure of his bulk was the sort that arises when you start drinking whiskey around noon.

She went to her backpack, which she’d set on the floor when she’d entered. From inside she extracted a gray bag that looked like a pocketbook a woman in the 1950s might carry, a clutch. It was made of carbon fiber, nearly impossible to cut open. Marlowe worked the combination lock at one end and unzipped it. Into this went his gun.

And then hers.

She sealed up the bag and clicked the lock.

Constant Marlowe, now in a mood, had just taken weapons off the table.

Rudy's face tightened, perplexed.

She then removed her jacket and set it on the barstool. On one arm was a tattoo of a hawk's head. On the other, the letters *D.K.*

"You touched me twice without consent. Now, I'm consenting." She balled up her fists, dropped into the stance.

"You're kidding." With a smile, Rudy glanced back at the table to where his friends sat. "She's kidding."

They were not smiling. He was a bully and she was unhinged. This could go bad in several ways.

"Seriously? I'm not going to hit a girl."

Too damn much talk in this world.

Marlowe moved in fast and launched a stunning uppercut with her left. His head snapped back and he tottered, while she danced away, out of range.

Rudy blinked. Astonishment held off the fury, though only for a few seconds.

His friends rose.

Both Rudy and Marlowe barked, "No!" They sat.

Now came the C word, snarled out.

She stepped back to let him rip off his lumberjack shirt. He too had a tee on underneath and, for that matter, his chest was noteworthy, though probably not as muscular as it had once been.

He plunged forward, swinging wildly.

She zipped away, back and sideways. She'd memorized the position of the tables.

Footwork, always footwork . . .

A high feint and, when his arms went up, she sent a forceful jab into the left portion of his gut. He grunted.

Rudy was clearly an enforcer but one who enforced with threats and guns and pipes. Never his fists, it was obvious. He hadn't been in a fight for a while, maybe he'd never been in a real one. Probably it was all push and shove and sneer and insult, like on the schoolyard. And watch all the boxing and mixed martial arts videos you want, you'll never learn a single thing from the tube.

His meaty paw caught her on the shoulder. It had mass and she staggered back. The blow ached; it didn't sting. In boxing the difference was significant.

He reminded her of a prison guard who'd thought her bulk and muscle were all she needed to put Marlowe down. They'd gone at it for a while, the blows furious, until Marlowe had gotten bored and finished with a series of lightning jabs. Ten minutes of battle and she wasn't the least winded, even though those were the days when she smoked.

Enjoying his shoulder success, Rudy tried it again. Could he possibly be surprised when, expecting it, she dodged and delivered a left hook to his jaw? Spit flew. Arms sagged.

When defenses are down, never, ever wait.

A combination uppercut and jabs to the abdomen.

It wasn't enough to incapacitate a big man, so she escaped out of reach quickly.

"Jesus." In fury, he pounced, trying some kind of weird Chuck Norris move. She easily stepped aside and Rudy backed up fast when she crouched again and swayed left and right, ready to strike.

He had strength but no strategy in a sport where strategy was vital.

Her blows concentrated on the face and solar plexus—the only two targets that would do any good. Hitting him elsewhere was like slugging a side of meat, wasting energy.

The one thing she had to be careful of—where he could do some damage—was grabbing her shirt, controlling her movement, and swinging at her face or getting her in a choke hold. He tried this several times. There was no rule that

prohibited grabbing and choking. No rules at all, other than hers: they couldn't shoot each other.

But she managed to avoid the groping claws.

His unfocused bounding and flailing were taking their toll. Rudy was now breathing hard and the lunges were slower. His behavior fit the pattern she was oh-so-familiar with: a man, twice her size, getting beaten by a "girl." He was embarrassed and furious, two emotions that have no business in a fight. They gave birth to an even worse liability: desperation.

Then, thinking once more of the urgency of her mission here in Upper Falls, she decided it was time.

Marlowe eased in, quarter turned to the right and when he tried to grab her—now a laughably predictable maneuver—she swiveled and came back with a roundhouse right to his nose.

Two back-to-back left and right jabs into the gut. Without the slick surface of gloves hitting skin, bare-knuckle fights were largely silent. This particular assault was punctuated only with his noisy grunts.

Rudy went down to his knees and Marlowe bounded back once more, though this time it was solely to avoid getting puked on. All things considered, the blows had been tame—she didn't want to rupture anything—but when they joined the whiskey the result was inevitable.

The utter silence that followed his retching was broken by words behind her.

"Well, that didn't last long."

The man stood in the back of the room. He'd emerged from a doorway. He was wearing a nice suit, a rich navy-blue one, and a light-pink dress shirt, open at the collar. Oxford shoes, brown. He was about fifty, squat and fat. Hair red, face round and freckled. He didn't get outside much either.

She went to the bar, pulled her jacket back on. "Water."

"Ice?"

Marlowe didn't answer but gave him a look. The bartender slid the glass toward her, ice-free, worried he'd

gotten it wrong.

She drank half down. Then opened the clutch bag, got her gun out and tucked it away. Rudy's went into her pocket.

The round man said to the two at Rudy's table, "Get him home."

They rose quickly.

Marlowe said, "Tell him his gun'll be in one of the trash cans outside. He can figure out which one."

"Yes, ma'am." Hoodie frowned, wondering if this word fell into the same bad-call category as "Little Lady."

They walked to Rudy and helped him up. The lumberjack was muttering something. Maybe explaining that she'd cheated, took advantage of the fact she was a woman. They helped him out the door onto Douglass Street, the main avenue in downtown Upper Falls.

The redheaded man in the back, nodding at the mess on the floor, said to the bartender, "Clean that up."

"Yessir."

He asked Marlowe, "So who are you?"

The bartender said, "She was—"

"I wasn't talking to you, Des."

"No, sir."

The big man sat at the just-vacated table. She joined him.

"I was watching." He nodded to the ceiling. A camera.

"You need better security guards."

A sigh. "Man is a trial. He's my half brother. From my mother's third marriage."

Marlowe had no interest in dissecting weird genealogy. "You're . . . ?"

"Wexler. Tomas Wexler." He added that he was the owner. "What did he do to you? Rudy?"

"He touched me."

“But you *were* bothering my clientele.”

She scoffed. The only thing these barflies would be bothered by was a short pour.

He seemed to get it and gave a faint smile of concession.

Out came her phone. “I’m looking for this man.”

Wexler glanced at the screen, shook his head.

She sighed, slipped the mobile away. She looked over the room slowly, left to right, up and down. “You own a place like this, I’m guessing you’re . . . connected.” Emphasis on the word.

“Some.”

“And I assume you and the police or deputies or whatever passes for law here aren’t best of friends.”

“That would be a correct assumption.”

“You help me find him, it’ll be worth \$5K.”

A reddish eyebrow involuntarily rose. Surprise vanished, replaced by business.

“Half up front. Nonrefundable. Give me his particulars and I’ll see what I can do.”

She reached into her backpack and dug around the cluttered interior until she found an envelope of cash. She counted out the bills and slid them over.

Wexler asked, “So, this man, what do you want him for?”

Rather than explain that she’d come to Upper Falls, Wisconsin, to murder him, Marlowe said only, “That’s my business. Yours is to take the money and not ask questions.”



“You don’t hear much about a woman doing that.”

“No, you don’t,” US Marshal Ed Greene offered absently. He’d apparently lost his taste for food. The remaining half of the burger and most of the fries sat intact.

Tony Lombardi wanted the rest of his own lunch but thought it would look bad, him scarfing down food. “Women,

breaking the law, you think of them abusing their kids or shooting a cheating husband. Not torturing people.”

Greene displayed an iPad.

On it was a security camera image of a woman in her early thirties. She had thick hair, red and brown, pulled into a tight ponytail. She was in jeans, a sweatshirt and a well-worn black leather jacket. Boots. Crouching at the door of a small warehouse, she held a pistol.

“Rival crew’s stash. She was hired to torch it. Which she did. Then shot one of the guards in the knee. Didn’t have to. She just did.”

“What’s her name?”

“Constant Marlowe. Not Constance. Constant.”

“Never heard of that,” Lombardi said. “That a scar on her forehead?”

“That’s right.”

She was pretty despite that. Maybe it made her prettier.

“What’s her story?”

“From what I hear, the wiring’s off. She’s just, well, *bad*. A sociopath. In juvie a half dozen times before she was eighteen. She was a boxer for a while. Good but she got banned—ignored the ref too much. At the gyms she made some contacts, mob and some of the bigger indie crews. She started doing odd jobs. It worked out: nobody suspects a woman’s going to kill. That’s how she got close to my assistant.

“So, the boxing? She can kick ass. And she’s a good shot. She parked three a few inches from my head at fifty feet when I was following up on a tip. Only it was a setup she’d put me together to take me out.”

“Fifty feet? A handgun?”

“Yep.”

Pistols were nowhere near as accurate as movies made them out to be.

Greene lifted an eyebrow. “I by rights should not be here now.”

Lombardi had never been shot at and he’d never fired his own weapon in his seven years with the HCSO. Drawn but not fired.

“Are you sure she’s after you?”

Greene was silent for a moment. “About a week ago I got a message late at night from her. A text. She told me to back off. It was her last warning.” He hesitated. Then: “And she attached a recording she’d made of Joanne while she was torturing her.”

“Oh, my Lord.” Lombardi’s gut twisted again and he wondered if he’d be sick.

No. Control it, Deputy. He did.

“Back off,” Greene whispered, shaking his head. Then he focused again. “Okay, Tony. This brings us to the crux of the matter. She’s decided to have our—what would you call it?”

The deputy suggested, “Showdown? Like in the streets of Dodge, some old Western.”

Greene smiled, pleasing Lombardi. “I like that. Gunfighters . . . Okay, we know she’s here in the county somewhere. The plan’s like any other manhunt. You and me, with a little luck, we find her. Call in backup from your outfit, tactical. Or WSP. We collar her and that’s that. But—”

“The wrinkle is she’s hunting for you too.”

“Right. Now, why I called your sheriff: I don’t know this area and I need somebody local. I want it to be you. I like the cut of your jib.”

Something about sailing, he believed, but didn’t want to ask. Obviously a compliment.

“But you have to know there’s a risk. I understand if you want to pass.”

So this was the we’ll-see-where-you-stand part.

Lombardi thought about his past week: three DUIs, one domestic, two shopliftings, a naked crazy man, processing a meth OD and a missing six-year-old found in eighteen minutes. Oh, and volunteering for the Benevolent Association's pancake breakfast, where he was pretty talented at the griddle.

"I'm in," he said. And surprised himself—and apparently the marshal too—by sticking out his hand to shake, as if they'd just come to mutually acceptable terms on a used car.



Some days he liked the uniform, other days he didn't.

This was a didn't day.

Marshal Ed Greene looked every inch the investigator. Which is what Anthony Lombardi wanted to be someday, of course. The man's suit was dark and rich, the starched shirt white as a cumulonimbus. The blue of the tie was like the sash worn by the European general in a movie he and Jess had seen recently.

As they walked into the parking lot, he wondered if he too should dress plain-clothed. But wasn't sure he should ask about it.

Jessica, last night: "You look nervous."

"Do I?" he'd replied. Feeling nervous.

"Don't be cowed. He should be thanking *you* for helping."

True, he guessed. He just wanted to make sure this out-of-the-ordinary day went smooth as planed oak.

He asked Greene, "I too obvious?"

"What's that?"

"The uniform."

Lombardi's suits were almost like new, since he wore them only for church and the occasional wedding or funeral.

Greene was considering the question.

“Probably better to leave it. My shield doesn’t mean much here. You, in uniform, kind of . . .” He sought a word. “Validates us.”

“Makes sense.”

The marshal said he’d drive. Lombardi in a uniform was one thing but rolling up somewhere in a marked cruiser could give Marlowe advance warning.

Good thinking.

The men climbed into Greene’s rental vehicle. It was a Chevy Malibu. Apart from the cruiser, Lombardi was never in a sedan. He and Jess owned SUVs. Hers was the bigger because she did the gardening and—when the kids came—she’d be the taxi.

As they pulled out of the parking lot, Greene asked where tweakers might hang out in the Falls. He wanted to talk to some. He still wasn’t sure why Marlowe was in Harbinger County but some of the crews she worked with were into meth distribution.

“There’s a trailer park a lot of ’em live in. And kind of a camp in a forest preserve. We roust them, they leave, they come back.” Lombardi thought those chained to drugs were, on the whole, sad people.

He gave the marshal directions to the park.

They were halfway there when the man’s phone hummed.

He glanced at the text, lifted a surprised eyebrow. “Well. Got a lead. Our data surveillance people just had a credit card hit. The name on the card was an alias she’s used before. A motel in Harvey. Nearby?”

“Town next door. Twenty minutes on the highway. Turn right, next light.”

“It’s the Western Valley Lodge.”

“Dive of a place—right by the railroad, which they don’t mention on the billboards. And it’s a meth quick mart. Girls too.” Lombardi’s heart began to thud fast. Audible to him. Was it to the marshal?

Of course not.

“Left, next intersection.”

“Might be a waste of time but . . .” Greene shrugged. “I’m the eternal optimist. When I first heard that, I was a kid. I thought it was *internal* optimist. You have children?”

“Not yet. It’s part of the plan.”

“Your wife work?”

“Teacher. She says maybe she’ll just buy one in her class. Easier, and they’re housebroken.”

Greene didn’t smile. Should he have said Jess “joked”? Greene wouldn’t really think she was serious about buying a kid, would he?

Then he told himself to relax.

Confidence . . .

“You have a family, Ed?”

“I do. My wife’s an administrator, Chicago PD. We have two boys. High school and middle. Into soccer. Well, and girls. But that goes without saying.”

“Your next right. How do you like working the city?”

“Well, never dull. But there’re issues. Everything we do, we’ve got to keep the press in mind. They’re always looking for us to screw up.”

“We’ve got one paper, the *County Gazette*. They dropped the Police Blotter page when they had to cut back. Now it’s ag event stories, local politics and classifieds.”

Greene looked his way. The handsome face smiled. “I detecting a little dissatisfaction? You thinking of moving to the big city?”

A shrug. “You never know. Have more chances to move up. And the pay’s better than here, gotta be.”

“It’s a balance. Parts of the city’re war zones. You go into apartments, you never know if they’re waiting for you. There’re plenty of Marlowes out there. Don’t give a shit if

they kill a cop. Fact is, sometimes they go out hunting for us. Gives them street cred. Plenty of weapons too. Hey, you ever serve paper?"

Lombardi said, "Warrants? Sure."

"Some advice. Best way to do it is kneeling in front of the door when you knock."

"Kneel?"

"Yep. If there's a shooter inside, they aim for your chest through the door. And you can't stand to the side either, since they've conned to that and fire there too. Keep low."

"Hm." Lombardi was scheduled to serve divorce papers on Harvey Engels and the man was never sober, and he sure did like to shoot his Browning 12-gauge at the moon. Lombardi'd remember the trick.

He told the marshal, "Give you an idea of policing around here, last year I collared a perp for kidnapping a cow."

"You mean, like rustling?" Greene smiled. "Speaking of Westerns."

"No, Jon Perry drove onto Elbert Sands's place at midnight with a transport and made off with a Hereford. Sands was four months behind on a debt."

"And he didn't put up livestock for collateral. So it had to be snatched."

"Exactly right. Jon could've got a judgment and had the sheriff levy on it. But he took the matter into his own hands."

Greene frowned. "Any Stockholm syndrome?"

When hostages form an emotional bond—sometimes even a romantic one—with their kidnapper.

Lombardi laughed. "That is a situation I do not want to even imagine."

The marshal looked around again, squinting at the woods. He'd been doing this frequently. The gaze was intense.

"You think she has a long gun?"

“Don’t know. I heard she did some shooting in the army. She was in for a year before she got kicked out. Dishonorable. Suspected of stealing small arms for the black market.”

“She could be targeting us?” Lombardi too looked around, spine shivering.

“She won’t know this car. But it’s a habit—looking. Ever since that text she sent.”

“Must get tiring.”

“Beats the alternative.”



Constant Marlowe was reflecting that motels like the Western Valley Lodge—old, cheap, built on funky land—always smelled the same.

Cleanser and something gamy, an almost human-body smell.

And not perfumed necks or wrists. From the nether regions.

Marlowe was presently rearranging furniture.

Her Honda was elsewhere, a half mile away, in an abandoned car wash bay. A lot was abandoned in the scuffed town of Harvey, adjoining slightly less-scuffed Upper Falls. Plenty of spots to hide a sedan, even one as orange as hers.

She’d been here for thirty minutes after making some stops on her way from Hogan’s Tap Room. Her jacket off, Marlowe muscled the low, wide dresser to a spot about twelve feet in front of the door. She then began filling the drawers with gallon jugs of distilled water. Eighteen of them. It was a trick she’d learned from a mob triggerman. While the barrier wasn’t wholly bulletproof, it could be counted on to deflect and absorb enough incoming slugs to give you some cover, confuse your attacker and buy you time to return fire.

Some might consider this excessive, even paranoid. But up against this particular opponent there was no such thing as too much preparation.

She examined what lay on the bed—the contents of her backpack, along with the recent purchases. Her eyes strayed to one small plastic bag, yellow. She debated. She wanted to indulge. Constant Marlowe had trouble with impulse control.

Like the time she parked a slug in the knee of that minder at a trafficker's warehouse. Which she did because she couldn't help herself.

The bag?

Later. Now, she had to remain vigilant. No distractions.

Every so often she would look out the window at a pile of junk across the parking lot. What she studied while doing this was the mirrored medicine cabinet door that she'd unscrewed from its hinges. Outside she'd propped it against a trash bag and aimed it in the direction of the front of the parking lot. She could glance through the slit between the two curtains, look at the mirror and get an early warning of cars coming this way.

Even five seconds made a difference.

On the floor behind the dresser she set out the magazines for her pistol—not the hidden Bodyguard but her big 9 mm. A total of forty-five rounds was at her disposal, plus one in the chamber.

She set the bedside lamp between the dresser and the door. She clicked it on and removed the shade. This would blind an attacker and illuminate him.

She looked at the yellow plastic bag again.

No.

Settling herself behind the waterlogged piece of laminated furniture, she gripped the SIG Sauer and flicked off the safety, waiting for her prey, thinking of how best to place the kill shot.



The motel was a worn-out place that wouldn't've been stylish even in the late '50s when it was fresh-paint new. Functional then, functional now. At the end of the day: uuuuuugly.

The rectangular structure, concrete with sea-blue trim, nestled in a valley surrounded by pine forest.

“She drives an orange Accord,” Marshal Ed Greene told Lombardi as he made a circuit of the parking lot. The place was not busy today. There were only a half dozen vehicles in the lot and no orange Hondas. An unfortunate tweaker, midtwenties, who’d have the teeth of a seventy-year-old, to the extent he had teeth at all, sat on a curb nearby. Waiting for a delivery, probably. Nearby was an emaciated, scabby prostitute, smoking.

On this very out-of-the-ordinary day, these crimes were not Tony Lombardi’s affair.

Greene parked under the overhang in front of the motel office and got out, hand near his hip, looking around. He bent down to the open door. “Keep an eye out. I’ll just be a minute.”

When the marshal went inside, Lombardi studied the area. No residential buildings. The road was home to commercial operations as tired as the motel. Warehouses, self-storage, a gravel and stone company, a car painting shop, a truck repair place specializing in big rigs. These businesses too seemed to belong to a different era. Pre-digital, pre-cable.

From nowhere, a thought hit him. Hard. Constant Marlowe was a killer and, it sounded like, a sadist. Definitely a sociopath. But she *was* a woman. His imagination unspooled. What if she wounded the marshal, or killed him, and it was up to Lombardi to shoot her?

Could he do it?

Oh, man . . .

The thought sat heavy and dark in his heart.

But only for a moment.

Of course he could. And he’d do it without hesitating. Because if she took him out too, think what that would do to Jess. And to Joseph and Anabelle Rose, future dreams though they were. He—

Greene opened the door and dropped into the driver's seat.
"Bingo. Got her."

Heart rate up again. "Yeah?"

"The clerk ID'd her picture. Her room's around back. I've got the key."

"They gave it to you, no warrant?"

A shrug. "Sometimes good citizens step up and do their duty."

Greene put the car in gear and drove forward.

"What if she comes back while we're in there?"

"Then the clerk calls us. I gave him my mobile."

"He did that too?"

Greene chuckled. "Well, that part cost me forty. Civic duty only gets you so far."

"You have a budget for stuff like that?"

"Of course. Don't you?"

"No."

"Tell your sheriff. You'd be amazed at what a little cash buys you."

"I'll do that."

Tony Lombardi was getting a whole continuing ed course in law enforcement today, all to himself. And free as air.



Another glance toward the early-warning mirror.

Yes, Marlowe saw a car approaching.

It was a dark Chevy Malibu, moving slowly toward the back of the motel, where her room was located. It turned into a parking space about three or four rooms away.

Breathing slowly now. Calm. Prepared.

Prepared to kill.

No car doors slammed. He'd left it open for the silence. An old trick. There was the faint sound of a footstep, gritty. Marlowe had decided not to stuff plugs into her ears; she needed to hear his approach and would just have to endure the stunning blast of the gunshots.

Her soul hummed with ecstatic anticipation.

Constant Marlowe lived for moments like this.

Come on . . .

And here he was.

A shadow appeared beneath the door.

He didn't move for a long moment. On the one hand, he would be thinking—as she hoped—that she was gone. On the other, he'd wonder if this was a trap and she was waiting for him.

Marlowe believed she and her adversary were equally intelligent, equally skilled at strategy and tactics.

Then something curious happened.

He was whispering. And someone whispered back.

Two people?

What was this about?

So, her enemy had backup.

The door lock clicked as a key card was pressed next to it. He'd sweet-talked the desk clerk into giving him a copy.

Her right index finger, tipped in black polish, slipped from outside the trigger guard to inside. This gun had a very light pull.

Five seconds passed.

Ten.

Her teeth were clamped tight, impatience growing to irritation.

Come on in, both of you. Plenty of ammunition to go around.

Another whisper? Hard to tell. Might have been the wind. The shadows beneath the door vanished. A moment later two car doors slammed, an engine started and the tire squeal announced an urgent departure, robbing her of the chance to run outside and empty her weapon into the back of his head.

Goddamn . . .

Marlowe exhaled long, closing her eyes, lowering her head in anger. She safety'd the gun, put it into her waistband and began to dig through her backpack.



“What was it?” Tony Lombardi asked.

The marshal didn't answer; he was concentrating on piloting his rental car quickly along the road the motel was located on. Squinting and glancing from the road ahead to the hillside on their left and back again.

He skidded the Chevy onto a badly maintained road that ascended steeply. At the top, he made another left and, after a short drive, stopped on the crest of the hill overlooking the Western Valley Lodge.

Greene climbed out and nodded for Lombardi to do the same. The men peered down at the motel.

“I want to see if her lights go on or a curtain moves.”

“You think she's there? But her car?”

“She could've parked it someplace else and hiked over here.”

Lombardi had never thought of that.

They stared for three or four minutes. Room 188 remained asleep.

“You asked me what it was, Tony. A feel. That it was a trap.”

“She was going to shoot us, just like that?”

“Wasn't going to give us a coupon for the buffet breakfast.” The marshal looked him over. “You all right?”

He wasn't going to fake it. "Sort of."

"Never get over it—being in a firefight or *almost* being in a firefight."

"So, what was it? That feeling. Where did it come from?"

The marshal said nothing for a moment. "I wish I could tell you. Experience, I guess. I've got a few years on you."

"Sixth sense?"

"Call it that." Greene shook his head. "Every time I think I have one up on her, she does something like this." He stiffened suddenly and leaned forward. "Wait . . . What's that? No . . ."

Lombardi squinted and saw a figure in dark clothing, backpack over the shoulder, hopping a fence on the far side of the motel. Likely a woman, given the ponytail and build. She vanished into tall weeds and brush.

"Goddamn it." Greene's eyes squeezed shut briefly in anger.

"How'd that happen?"

"Saw us leave and slipped out fast." The marshal was squinting into the distance. "And hell, we can't follow her, not in the car. We'd have to go all the way around the forest preserve. And she'll be long gone by the time we get there."

The men got into the Malibu once more. Greene sighed in frustration and piloted the car down the hillside. At the intersection he turned toward the mall where they'd first met.

After a few minutes of silence the marshal said, "She's got to stay somewhere."

It was Lombardi's turn to be the expert. "Not a lot of options in the Falls. Motels mostly. Bed and breakfasts. A few Airbnb's. Hm, you know, Ed, we got a dozen or so abandoned farmhouses in the south county. I don't know if she'd know about them. But, this weather, all she'd need is a sleeping bag. I can radio in, get some addresses."

"That's good thinking."

The deputy kept from smiling.

“I’ll check motels,” the marshal said. “And call my credit card people again. She won’t use the same alias but she’s got others.”

The marshal gripped the wheel firmly. His anger was thick. He was probably thinking about Joanne, the assistant Constant Marlowe had tortured and killed.

Fifteen minutes later they were back at the strip mall and parked near Lombardi’s squad car in front of the Dollar General.

The men decided they would work in their respective mobile “offices” and meet up at Maggie’s in a half hour to compare notes. Maybe some cake or pie would be in order.

Lombardi climbed from the car. He turned and bent down. “Hey, Marshal? Ed?”

The man looked up.

“Appreciate you letting me work with you.”

“Appreciate you helping. You make a good partner.”

Lombardi tried not to let the pride blossom in his face. He wasn’t sure he was successful at this.

He got into his cruiser and started the engine. He lifted the mic and called in to Sandra, one of the office’s administrators, asking her to pull together a list of foreclosed farms.

Lombardi then sat back, thinking about what he’d learned today.

Kneeling in front of the door when serving warrants, not closing car doors when you didn’t want to announce your presence, using credit cards to track suspects, setting up a fund to pay for information, remembering that a suspect might park their car in a place that police couldn’t easily get to in their vehicles . . .

At this last thought, something began to nag.

What was it?

Think . . .

Oh, okay. What to make of this? The marshal had said Marlowe would hike through the forest preserve to get to her car.

Well, it *was* a county preserve but how did he know that? And that it wasn't just a forest?

He'd said he didn't know the area.

And something else: Greene hadn't asked directions back here to the mall or used GPS. It was a complicated route from the Western Valley Lodge. Lombardi himself would have used the nav system.

Then, something even stranger arose, more troubling.

The two of them had found Marlowe. Why not call in a tactical team to stake out the room or, if she was in it, do a dynamic entry to take her? Which Greene had said they'd do.

For some reason the marshal had wanted to be at the motel alone with Lombardi and Marlowe.

He debated only seconds. Gut churning, Lombardi logged onto the computer mounted in front of the cruiser's dashboard. He googled "US Marshals Office, Chicago." The site came up quickly and he clicked on "Personnel." When the page came up, he began scrolling through names.

Lombardi was then aware of a shadow outside. He turned to his left and saw, no more than three feet away, Ed Greene, or whoever he was, looking at the deputy's computer screen.

The man's lips were pressed together in disappointment
...

Their eyes met. Neither man moved for a moment.

As Tony Lombardi's hand lurched forward, the man lifted his Glock and shot him in the face.



Constant Marlowe pulled her old orange car to the curb in a part of the village of Upper Falls that was much better than the

neighborhood surrounding the Western Valley Lodge, where her trap had failed so spectacularly.

A touch to her back waistband to orient herself to the location of the Smith & Wesson—it sometimes shifted as she drove—and then she stepped through a thicket of untrimmed brush. She stopped at the edge of the parking lot. Quite the scene unfolded before her, a full-on carnival, illuminated in the approaching dusk by the whipsaw lights of the emergency vehicles.

Dozens of people stood in clusters on the exterior side of the yellow police tape. They were staring toward the Dollar General store, from which the hind end of a Sheriff's Office cruiser protruded, surrounded by an ice field of glass shards. A multitude of cell phones were at work, taking pictures and videos. Dozens of law enforcers were present. She focused on two: both gray-uniformed men, one older, one younger. They stood beside an HCSO cruiser. On the side were the stenciled messages: CALL 911 IN EMERGENCY and WE SERVE AND PROTECT.

The elder of the pair was decked out with significant gingerbread on shoulder and chest—bars and pins and insignia.

He was the one Marlowe walked up to. "Sheriff?"

The man looked down at her from his six-four stature. His face was outdoorsman wrinkled and he was of a physique that featured thin legs and a belly that swelled a few inches over his belt. His hair and drooping mustache were gray, a shade between that of his outfit and the paint job of the cruiser.

His expression was both weary and cautious. "Press?"

"What?"

"Are you a reporter?"

"No."

"You know something about the incident here?"

She held up a wallet containing on one side her employer picture ID and on the other a gold badge. "Special Agent

Constant Marlowe, Illinois Department of Criminal Investigations. And in answer to your question, yes, I do.”



“The man who shot your deputy is Paul Offenbach,” she said to Sheriff Louie Braddock.

She and the sheriff were sitting in the front seat of the cruiser. His large hands were atop the steering wheel, thumbs hooked beneath and eight fingers rising and falling as if he were playing ragtime.

It had taken a few minutes to verify Marlowe’s identity. Braddock had contacted the IDCI headquarters in Springfield to get confirmation. The agent in charge confirmed that there was a Constant Anne Marlowe on the force. But he didn’t know anything about her going to Wisconsin. She was presently on a leave of absence.

He texted a picture, which matched, but Braddock, not quite satisfied, had run her prints. Finally claimed identity aligned with corporeal form.

“Said he was a US marshal. Name of Greene.”

“Offenbach does that. Assumes identities. How far did his credentials hold up?”

“Good enough. There’s an Edward Greene in the US Marshals Office in Chicago. My deputy got suspicious and was on their website when he got shot.”

“How is he?”

“Hit in the face. There’s an answer.”

“He’ll live?”

“They say. Though I would cast some doubt on his returning to his chosen profession. Which he loved.”

“How’d that happen?” A nod toward the damaged cruiser, atop the bits of shiny glass.

Braddock explained that he’d interviewed the deputy as best he could. The officer had said—well, written down—that

just as he saw the gun, he went not for his own pistol but the gearshift and hit the gas.

“Man fired a few more shots, missed, and then, with all the people around, took off.” He swiveled his long, stern face her way. “Now, time to hear *your* story, Agent Marlowe.”

“Offenbach’s a career criminal out of Chicago. Independent, but he works with crews there and along the lakeshore up to Minnesota. I’ve been after him for a couple of weeks. He and two men stole a truck with a million worth of opioids and fent. Vandalia County.”

“Right over the border. We work with their Sheriff’s Department. High-speed pursuits this way, high-speed pursuits that way.”

“Did you know a Cynthia Hooper? Deputy there.”

“No.” His cowboy face was still. “And I caught that verb.”

“The robbery hadn’t been reported yet. She sees a van off the road and goes to check it out. Probably just thought it was an accident. The three perps’re still there. Offenbach tortured her and killed her.” With some effort Constant Marlowe controlled the rage.

“My Lord. Why?”

“Because he’s a sadist. He enjoys it. Cyn and I worked together, drug task-forced, her outfit and mine. She was a friend.”

Marlowe heard Cynthia’s lilting voice, some of the last words she’d spoken.

So there’s something I want to bring up . . .

“Well, I am sorry.”

“Last night I get a call from one of my CIs. Offenbach’s here in Harbinger. I drive up.”

The sheriff was thoughtful now. “Leave of absence, hm? Didn’t feel your comrades in the Land of Lincoln were doing enough to track him down.”

Hardly a need to confirm.

“This morning I start walking around town, flashing his picture, to see if anybody’s seen him.”

The sheriff gave a coy smile. “But maybe it was more than looking for leads. You were playing bait, hoping he’d come after you.”

Again, no need to corroborate.

“He’s into the narco trade, so I was talking to some of your tweakers, dropping twenties. Thinking he might be where they hang. They said they never saw him, and I believed them. But the name Wexler came up.”

A troubled look momentarily flickered in the sheriff’s eyes.

“I went into his place. Hogan’s. Had a slugfest with one of his boys.” She shrugged. “I needed to make them believe I wasn’t law.”

“What happened with Wexler?”

“Paid him twenty-five hundred down to give me Offenbach.”

“My, you got yourself some budget.”

“From my savings. Personal.”

“Oh.”

“Either Wexler’d do what I asked and give me Offenbach or he’d dime me out to him and pocket two fees. Turned out to be the second. I spotted one of his men following me from the bar to the Western Valley Lodge. He got word to Offenbach where I was staying.”

“Western Valley? Had a complaint about damaged rooms and a missing guest not an hour ago. Seems you’ve had a busy day in Harbinger County, Agent Marlowe.”

She gave no reaction, “So Offenbach—playing the marshal—shows up. Somehow he got the key—”

“That’d be Wexler. Nearly every business in town, he speaks, they jump.”

Constant Marlowe cast anger the way other people threw off shadows on a bright day. She controlled herself once more. “I was ready for him. He was about to walk in. But changed his mind. Got spooked, I guess. Took off before I could do anything.”

““Do anything’?” With this the sheriff looked at her the way he would probably regard a DUI who claimed he’d had only two beers before driving into a street sign.

She clarified, “Arrest him.”

And Sheriff Braddock became the second person in the space of a few hours she lied to about her intention to murder Paul Offenbach.

A loud roar of a diesel engine. The tow truck was lifting the cruiser’s rear. Tiny bits of glass fell like glittery hail.

“Your deputy . . .”

“Tony Lombardi.”

“How’d he end up in this?”

“Offenbach’s story was he was hunting for you because you murdered his assistant and went on to kill a couple in the Witness Protection Program. And Tony said, that is, *wrote*, before he went into surgery, that you sent him a text and a tape of somebody screaming to scare you off.”

Jesus . . . Marlowe steadied her center. This wasn’t easy. “No, Offenbach sent *me* the text.”

“And the recording was your friend?” Braddock added in a whisper, “Being murdered.”

She nodded. If she’d answered aloud, the words might have become a scream.

“Almighty.”

With a clattering grind, the tow truck dragged the cruiser free.

“This’s not the sort of thing we see round here, crime-wise. Don’t think you see it *anywhere*.”

“Offenbach’s unique. Pure sociopath. But add to that he’s brilliant. He’s a chess player, paid half his college tuition that way. He plays four or five games at a time. Sometimes blindfolded.”

“You can do that?”

“I guess.”

“You know a lot about him.”

A nod.

Braddock asked, “Why didn’t you contact us?”

“I work best alone.” Which was true but left out more than it told. “Your deputy, he have a family?”

“A wife. And they’re peas in a pod. Do everything together. Fish, hunt, cycle . . . that’s the *proper* kind of cycling. Harleys. Jessica’s with him now and woe to any nurse that tries to pry her away.” One hand left the wheel briefly to smooth the mustache. “What was the point of it? Faking he was a marshal?”

“I had to guess, he wanted a cop as a human shield.”

“What?”

“Offenbach’d find me. He and the deputy’d move in and then he’d step behind Tony, make him a shield. He knows I’d hesitate. That’s all you need for advantage. A few seconds. He’d take me out, and then him.”

“Dealt with some pretty downward individuals in my day but never anybody like him.”

Braddock glanced—for the third time—at her scar. It had happened when she was at a match in Trenton. Boxing gloves don’t cut flesh like that. The scar was from after the fight was over, outside.

The sheriff’s fingers flipped up and down atop the wheel. She wondered if he actually did play a keyboard.

“I’ll need you to stay around. If we find Offenbach you’ll be a material witness.”

“You won’t find him. He’s gone now.”

“You know that for a fact?”

“He tried for me and he blew it, and now you and WSP’ll be all over the county. He’ll fall back—go underground. Chicago, or one of his places in Florida or offshore. He’ll set up another trap for me someplace else.”

“We’ll take that under advisement. I assume the Western Valley Lodge isn’t your real accommodations. Where’re you staying, Agent Marlowe?”

“We’ve got each other’s phone numbers.”

“Ah. Probably best to keep information like that close to your vest.” A shake of his head. “Jugs of water in the dresser. What was *that* all about?”

She gave him a nod. “Night, Sheriff.”

As she walked to her own car, she kept an eye on the nearby woods, which would be a good place for a shooter to set up shop.

Because she knew as well as she knew it was a cool spring evening scented with jasmine that Paul Offenbach had gone nowhere.

He was still in or around Upper Falls, Wisconsin, and here he would remain until one of two things happened. He killed her, or she killed him.



He sat on the porch of a rambling house, a century old, in the low hills in unincorporated Harbinger County.

A twenty-five-year-old Macallan Scotch beside him, Paul Offenbach was looking over the view, rolling and gentle, well on its way to April budding. In his sure hands, a penknife made the circuit of the inside of his pipe. While the smoking implement certainly had to be cleaned with some frequency, scraping wasn’t necessary.

He simply enjoyed the sound. It was like blade on bone.

Offenbach had come to the house frequently when young and the four-thousand-square-foot structure held fond memories for him. Also, nice, it was largely untraceable. So, with no living relatives in the Midwest any longer, Offenbach had used it as a safe house and for storage and as a staging area for jobs in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin. Here he had several million untraceable dollars and two dozen weapons. No drugs. After the Old Bennett Road robbery in Vandalia County, Illinois, he'd sold the entire stash immediately. Narcotics were far too easy to—literally—sniff out.

The scraping put him in mind of the deputy, Cynthia Hooper, he'd learned her name was, who'd stumbled on the Sprinter he and his crew were breaking into on Old Bennett Road—to her misfortune, and his delight.

Scraping, the sound of the razor knife on bone . . .

Offenbach used to wonder—with concern—why he got such pleasure from pain: eating chocolate pleasure, drinking single-malt pleasure, orgasmic pleasure. While someone else might enjoy hearing the moans and whispers of their lover during the throes of coupling, he slipped into an ecstatic reverie at the sound of screams, the smell of blood, the gasping begs to stop . . .

But Paul Offenbach had realized long ago that his love of hurt was not a fault, not a crime. How could it be? He was simply being true to his nature. A shark wasn't bad when it dined on a dangling limb. According to these rules of the world, irrefutable, Offenbach was in the right when he created pain.

He eased back in the comfortable chair and lifted his phone again. He listened to the recording he'd made of Cynthia Hooper.

No, please, don't . . . Why? It hurts . . . Just kill me . . .

He'd made several copies, in case one was accidentally erased.

He scanned those rooms that he could see from where he sat. He would miss this place. Now that he'd been identified as the mastermind of the Old Bennett Road drug van heist and as the shooter of earnest and insecure Deputy Tony Lombardi, it was time to leave the country.

Though not before finishing up what he'd come here for.

Completing the mission.

His plan—mapped out like a game of his beloved chess—had nearly worked.

He wanted to hunt down Constant Marlowe outside Illinois—in a place where she'd have few allies. Wisconsin was good. Harbinger County made sense given his connections.

A contact would get her the message that he was here, and Marlowe would believe it was legit because it would come from one of her trusted confidential informants.

There was no risk she'd talk to the county deputies up here. In fact, she'd avoid them at all costs; her goal was to murder, not arrest, him.

Offenbach decided he'd front that he was a law enforcer—US marshal seemed good; he had quite enjoyed *The Fugitive*. He'd bought the badge and ID card for two thousand. Expensive, but they were the real thing and, if scanned, which he doubted the Sheriff's Office would even know how to do, the barcode was genuine.

He had borrowed the name of a real marshal in the Chicago office, Edward Green, who, his contact told him, was out of the office on assignment in Indiana.

As for the bio—married, with two children, well, *that* was a joke. Paul Offenbach had relationships with women but they invariably involved some deal making—with hefty bonuses paid when the evening went rougher than planned. He occasionally lost control when it came to that sort of playtime.

The man in Chicago who had turned Marlowe's confidential informant—and who was extremely well compensated by Offenbach—also provided a picture of

Marlowe breaking into a warehouse. It was not, however, a rival gangs' facility. She was the lead tactical agent in a raid of a human trafficker's hideout. (Several things he'd told hapless Deputy Lombardi were true: Marlowe did shoot the guard in the knee. And, no, she didn't need to.)

Then it was on to Upper Falls to meet the deputy, have an excellent hamburger and seduce the unfortunate kid. He'd used charm, informal mentoring and a southern accent, which he'd found tended to make people trust and believe you.

The text he'd received as they were driving to the meth site was not from any computer credit card outfit—if such a thing existed. It was from Tomas Wexler, who was being paid \$10K to help him find and eliminate Marlowe. One of Wexler's men had tracked her to the Western Valley Lodge, where a clerk would hand over a key to her room.

He and the kid were all set to go. He had pictured the scene so clearly he could taste it. Open the door. If she was there, he'd shove Tony in first and when she hesitated to shoot a uniformed law enforcer, he'd kill her and then put two into the deputy's head.

If she wasn't inside, they would wait and play out the same scenario when she returned.

Such a perfect plan . . .

But it hadn't worked out that way.

Just before they'd gone inside, he'd noticed on a pile of trash a perfectly good medicine chest mirror. It was partially covered, but, judging the angles, he realized it would give her a view of any cars approaching.

They retreated, to make new plans.

But no new plans were possible.

Because of his big mistake.

Supposedly a stranger to town, how did he know the route from the motel back to the strip mall?

And Lombardi probably wondered too why the marshal hadn't called the sheriff or the state police and requested a tac

team at the motel.

So, it was goodbye to the poor Tony Lombardi.

Though die he did not.

But in a way Offenbach enjoyed this outcome more.

A shattered face . . . Think of the pain.

He checked the news from northern Illinois. He'd been following a trial in Vandalia County. The authorities there believed they'd caught one of the two men present with Offenbach at the site of the robbery and murder of Cynthia Hooper three weeks ago. The evidence was weak but the myopic pit bull of a prosecutor, a man named Evan Quill, had pushed forward with the trial anyway.

Interesting to see how *that* circus would play out, Offenbach reflected.

Inhaling the whiskey, thinking of the house once more. Young Paul had come here as often as he could to escape from his junior mobster father. Paul hadn't minded the man's criminal career—he himself had paid for much of his college education running numbers in the Windy City. It was the man's personality: he was a narcissistic bully, who never once touched Paul, his brother or their mother but abused them relentlessly with his sarcasm and insults. The words landed like whiplashes.

Still, he had his father to thank for starting young Offenbach's own criminal empire; he'd blackmailed philandering Dad to start his own operation—a story he had never told to another soul on earth.

Other memories about the house: The bedroom on the third floor where he and his cousin, Sarah, had played, among other things. The expansive dining room where the family guests had boisterous meals. The musty basement smelling of heating oil, where—when older and he had the place to himself—he'd tied a drifter to a set of box springs and started experimenting, finding that this aroused him far more than Sarah, or any female, ever could.

In one way, he was regretting that Constant Marlowe would die. There was an appeal about her. In some respects she reminded him of himself. No interest in rules. No interest in following orders. Blunt, physical. He'd edited her bio for Tony Lombardi but much of what he'd told the deputy was close to the truth. She was a former award-winning prizefighter, with hundreds of titles under her belt. Nearly undefeated. She hadn't been banned from the sport at all—in fact, she'd been much in demand by promoters through her retirement. She still kept at it, boxing in recreational leagues, like the Illinois Public Safety Boxing Club, where she'd take on other women cops and firefighters. She especially liked fighting female prison guards. The job attracted large, tough women; Marlowe, the word was, didn't like things easy.

Yes, she'd been in the army, and there'd been trouble, though it had nothing to do with peddling stolen arms, and her discharge was honorable. The reprimands were always for the same thing: if she learned of any soldier—enlisted or officer—guilty of harassment, and if the victim had been bullied to silence, Constant Marlowe delivered her own justice. Curiously, afterward, when asked about the bruises or the broken wrist, the men invariably reported that the injuries came from a motorcycle or rock-climbing accident.

Ah, Constant . . .

A shame to say goodbye.

But speaking of being true to your nature . . . Offenbach concluded he'd never met anyone more self-destructive than she was.

Suicidal probably.

Tomorrow he would simply help her fulfill that destiny.

How exactly he'd accomplish that he wasn't sure. But this was one thing he'd found about himself. When confronted with a problem, he would sit back, smoke his pipe and let the ideas emerge. They would. Time. That was the key. Just the right amount. He'd made good money playing fast chess, but the games were always in the Rapid category, ten to sixty minutes per match, never Blitz or Bullet, in which the entire

contest had to take place under ten minutes and under three, respectively. He knew perfection required planning, but that too much planning could derail the oh-so-vital element of improvisation.

Winning the game after losing your queen, money laundering, meth, bribery, shipping girls from Colombia to Indianapolis . . . murdering your nemesis. As difficult as those challenges were, Paul Offenbach would always find a solution.

He turned the chair so the last slice of sun was visible over the hills, filled the bowl of the half-bent taper pipe with Astley's No. 2 and flicked a blue flame from his hissing butane lighter—the same one he'd used on Cynthia Hooper, he now recalled.



Constant Marlowe walked along a path that wound from the parking lot to the entrance of Saint Francis Hospital in the northern part of Upper Falls.

The institution was situated on about four acres of land, well tended, though lacking in colorful petals; commonplace grass predominated. All pleasant, neat, easy on the eyes. But the corker was the narrow river running fast along the eastern edge, fed by one of the waterfalls that gave the town its name.

This cascade, discoloring to rich brown the rock it poured along, was modest, about twenty feet high. The more impressive chutes, tourist fodder, were downstream.

Inside the immaculate hospital, Marlowe was directed to the ICU, on the ground floor. Once there she located room 5, in front of which sat a blonde in her late twenties, solidly built, talking on a cell phone. She wore a navy-blue form-fitting dress. Flesh-colored stockings, too. Marlowe could not remember the last time she'd donned that particular accessory; she'd received a pair as a gift six months or so ago. They sat unopened. Somewhere.

The woman wore an ID badge on a lanyard around her neck, showing her picture and bearing the words LANGSTON HUGHES MIDDLE SCHOOL.

A county Sheriff's Office deputy sat across from her, guard duty.

Marlowe showed her ID and he nodded.

The caller put her phone away and turned her pretty face toward the agent with a questioning look.

Marlowe introduced herself to Jessica Lombardi.

They shook hands.

"How is he?"

"It'll be a long haul. But we'll get him better." Her eyes were determined and her jaw set, and Marlowe remembered what Sheriff Braddock had said.

Woe to any nurse that tries to pry her away . . .

"How's the coffee here?" Marlowe asked.

"Only half as dreadful as you'd think."

"Let's take a chance."

They walked up the corridor filled with the unsettling scents of houses of healing. In the cafeteria Marlowe bought two large cups. "To eat?" she called to Jessica, who'd taken a table by a window, overlooking the stream. She shook her head.

Marlowe joined her and sat. The sugar packets and pods of half-and-half were wasted.

The women sipped.

Jessica's sharp hazel eyes looked at the walls. "Did you know that orange paint like that makes you eat faster?"

"I didn't."

"Our lunchroom at school? Same color. Wasted the paint job. Kidums have twenty minutes. So they better scarf it all down before the bell." Her voice caught. A moment later she said, "Tony was lucky." Jessica explained that the bullet had hit his cheek and gone clean through. Missed everything vital, though it had come close and if he had not accelerated as fast

as he had, he would have died when Offenbach fired the other shots, which missed him entirely.

“God was looking out for him.” Her eyes were on Marlowe’s. Not the scar. “You like being police as much as Tony does?”

“Suits me.”

“Him too. You’re a detective.”

“Pretty much.”

“That’s what he wanted to be. *Wants* to be. He’d be good.” A glance at Marlowe’s naked left ring finger. “Some men have skill by the bucket. They just need to think a little more highly of themselves.”

A nod in response. Then Marlowe said, “You know that somebody was helping Offenbach.”

“I heard. Wexler.” She grimaced.

The coffee was, in truth, not bad. Hunger pinged. But later. “When Sheriff Braddock mentioned Wexler, he gave a reaction, just like that. But didn’t say anything more. What do you know about him?”

Jessica’s lips tightened and the gaze aimed at the brash walls grew cold. Marlowe could just imagine her confronting an out-of-order middle schooler who was armed with a joint or graffiti spray can. “He’s awful. Tony was telling me what he does. Those people in the woods, on meth? We know he sells to them. And there’s been talk about trafficking in Milwaukee. Women and girls. Disgusting,” she spat out. “And he’s got a half brother, Rudy, who’s a mean bully.”

Though a very bad boxer.

“The Falls used to be a nice place. But Tony said that people like Wexler’ve moved out of the cities. They’re in the small towns now. Less police to hassle them.” Concern blossomed in her round face. “Tony can’t talk, but he writes things. He said there was a woman Offenbach was here to kill. Is that you?”

“That’s right.”

“It didn’t work out. So *both* of them, Wexler *and* Offenbach, can’t be real happy with you. You’ll be careful?”

Watching your back for threats from two people isn’t a lot harder than from one.

Marlowe asked, “Why is Wexler still free?”

Jessica scoffed, disgust in her face. “The word is that he’s really smart and keeps himself insulated from the dirty work. Tony says that. But I don’t know I agree with him. Sheriff Braddock’s been around. He knows his business. No, it’s that Wexler owns half the real estate in the county, and a dozen businesses. He hires people for good jobs, people who could only get work that involves asking what kind of side dish do you want. Gets people jobs in the county government—whether they’re any good or not.”

Marlowe recalled that when Wexler told the motel clerk to hand over the key to Offenbach, he jumped to.

“Tony was on patrol one time and found some meth on a man works for Wexler. The guy was hanging around the high school and that just burned up Tony. But the sheriff let him go. Could’ve been a felony. Tony called him on it. Braddock said, ‘Look, we got water moccasins here. A more dangerous snake you will not find. But we let ’em be. They eat rats and cottonmouths. And to kill one you gotta go into a river or pond, their territory, and that is one job we are not prepared for.’” She sighed.

Marlowe decided Braddock wasn’t a corrupt man but, despite the grizzled gunslinger look, he was weak and didn’t want to risk a plum job in a pleasant enough town by taking on a danger like Wexler. Oh, there’d be justice of sorts for Braddock: the sheriff would have to process crime scenes where high schoolers died with a needle in their arm, and he’d head home to dinner, with his only company on the drive his hot shame.

But for Constant Marlowe, no. Justice of sorts wasn’t enough.

She was not, however, the sheriff of Harbinger County.

The woman started to sip coffee but put the Styrofoam cup down. She crossed her arms and gazed out the window. “And you know the worst of it? About Tony?”

“What’s that?”

“He shouldn’t even be here.” Her face revealed more disgust than anger as she nodded up the hall. “He wasn’t supposed to be the deputy going to meet the marshal. Braddock was going to give it to somebody else. Pete Jacobson. But he said he couldn’t do it. He had to take the day off. His mother was sick, he said. But he lied. He skipped work so he could go gambling, a poker tournament. The sheriff called Tony for the job.”

She sighed and her face went still as stone. “Tony wasn’t sure about it. Wasn’t sure he could do it—work with some big fancy US marshal. I talked him into it. I told him he could.”

Marlowe wondered if she’d cry. Close. But no, she controlled herself, merely shook her head. “I guess you want to see him but he’s probably still sleeping, I’m afraid.”

Marlowe said, “Let’s wake him up, why don’t we. I don’t think he’ll mind.”



She hid her orange Accord behind a dumpster in the parking lot of a metal fabricating company on the west side of Upper Falls.

Constant Marlowe then walked fifty yards to her motel, carting her backpack, green quilted rifle case and a plastic bag containing purchases from a deli.

Cozy Staye—the weird final *e* maybe an attempt to Olde Englishize—was her real residence here, her base of operation. She’d checked in last night—after a fast drive from Vandalia County.

She reached for her key and found she still had Rudy’s gun, that little .25, in her pocket. She’d forgotten to leave it in a downtown trash can, as promised. Had he gotten coated with the dregs from discarded coffee cups and soda cans and yogurt cups as he dug?

Hope so.

The motel, horseshoe shaped, was in need of several new layers of bile-yellow paint. The parking lot was five years late for hot asphalt. The neighborhood was populated with some folk not of the finest moral stature, it seemed. You checked in at a window of thick Plexiglas in need of Windex, and it was there that you received towels and your TV remote control. The vending machine had one of the most impressive clasps and locks Marlowe had ever seen.

Inside her room, she set what she carried on the bed, chained the door and angled the desk chair under the knob; without any such measures, it could be kicked in by a sturdy twelve-year-old.

Marlowe opened her backpack and removed the yellow plastic bag whose contents had so tempted her as she waited for Offenbach at the Western Valley Lodge.

No distractions . . .

Now, she was free to indulge.

From the bag she lifted out the package of Oreo cookies. She preferred the ones with double cream filling, though the deli had only the regular ones. They would do just fine.

Marlowe enjoyed three with a small bottle of whole milk, before her phone hummed.

A caller ID number popped up on the screen.

Hell . . .

Don't answer.

Then decided: better to know where she stood.

“Yes?”

“Constant.”

Richard Avery was the assistant special agent in charge of the IDCI's Chicago office. He had a distinctive voice, light and melodic. She'd always wondered if he sang in a choir.

“I just heard from Downstate. You're in Wisconsin?”

She'd known that news of Sheriff's Braddock's phone call to check her credentials would eventually make its way to Avery, who was her ultimate supervisor.

"That's right."

She'd hoped to stay in the brush until Offenbach was dead. But that plan had derailed after Deputy Tony Lombardi was shot.

"Explain."

She tried to keep impatience out of her rough voice: "I got a tip Offenbach was here. From one of my CIs. Marcus Washington. South Chicago. You know him. He's given us good stuff before."

Avery, who was about fifty, looked the part of a special agent. Broad shoulders, atop a torso that narrowed to thin hips and legs, with a powerful chest and a taut gut in between. A law degree and some prosecuting experience figured on his résumé. Though he wore nice suits and adroit cuff links, he wasn't above strapping on a body plate and kicking in a door to collar a suspect. She believed that, like her, Avery far preferred raids to paperwork.

But administrator he had become. And now was a time for administrating.

"You're on leave of absence. You can't be investigating."

She didn't ask, And why not? Her silence, however, did.

Avery's voice softened. "I know how you're feeling, after . . . what happened. But we've got interstate protocols. They work. Up there, in Wisconsin, you're out of jurisdiction. And a county deputy's been shot? Are we in any way . . . ?"

Right up front, Marlowe had asked herself if she could have anticipated that Offenbach would enlist a young law enforcer to be his shield. She'd answered no, and that was the end of it. It angered her now that he was concerned about ass-covering.

"No, we're not," she said sharply. Marlowe had earned more than a few complaints in her years at the DCI, and most

of those were for a simple reason: she had zero patience for politics, incompetence, misguided ambition . . . well, the list of infractions was long.

Avery would now be deciding: Why bother to wag fingers, especially with Constant Marlowe? He'd said and asked what he needed to. Time to move on.

"Anything pan out? Offenbach?"

"All the leads've dried up."

"You think he's there?"

Once you lie, better to stay the course.

"Doubt it. Too hot for him here. You shoot a uniform, you know how it is."

"You're coming back to Chicago?"

"Hopewell first, to see how the trial's going."

One of the suspects in the Old Bennett Road heist was on trial in Illinois for felony murder in Cynthia Hooper's death. There was no doubt about Offenbach's guilt; they had a video of him at the scene. But as for the man presently on trial, neither his innocence nor guilt was clear-cut.

"Where're you staying? Is it safe?"

"I'm in cover. It's good."

As melodic as ever, his voice managed to turn gruff. "If you're on leave of absence, act like you're on leave of absence. Watch TV, jog, go do whatever one does in wherever you are. Don't go traipsing off after him."

"Night, Richard."

She disconnected and looked at the bag that contained the deli sandwiches she'd bought. They went into the fridgette. She'd eat them tomorrow or she'd throw them out. Probably it'd be the trash. She had two more Oreos.

Removing the rifle from the case, she pulled the bolt out and sighted down the bore—from the stock end, of course. Clear. No reason for it not to be but you always made sure.

The weapon smelled of oil and Hoppe's No. 9 cleaner and, wafting sweetly from the rich wooden stock, Pledge furniture polish.

She had an affection for long guns. In the army she'd been a sniper and had taken those skills with her when she joined the Illinois Department of Criminal Investigation's tactical team. The gun was a Winchester Model 70. On the market since the 1930s, it was a workhorse for hunters. It was called the "rifleman's rifle" and could be used for any game; it came chambered in calibers from flat and fast .223 up to the punishing .338. Hers took one of the bigger rounds, the .308.

This particular 70 had been the gun her father taught her to hunt with, and she'd inherited it—along with a slew of debt and a sizeable store of methamphetamine—when he met an unfortunate but inevitable end. He was fifty, she twenty-five.

Marlowe had little time for sentiment, and if, for instance, she had to bail out of a bad situation and leave the gun behind, so be it. What she liked about this weapon was not its history but that it was as familiar in her hands as a lover's neck and shoulders.

It was also accurate as sin.

And one other attribute: it had been bought by her father years ago with no documentation. It was untraceable.

Because the bullets were large, the magazine, which was not detachable, could hold only three. But Constant Marlowe had never needed excessive ammunition. If she had to kill with a long gun, one round had always done the trick.

The bolt went back in, and, finger on the trigger, she pushed it forward and then down so there'd be no tension on the firing pin spring. She returned the weapon to the case.

Marlowe stripped, showered. She dressed in boxers and a tee, then spent lengthy time drying her abundant hair.

Placing her SIG, safetied, on the bedside table, she slid under the covers but remained sitting upright. She placed a call.

"Hey." The voice was as baritone as Avery's was tenor.

“You’re not sleeping.”

“In bed with a pizza,” said Evan Quill.

The man had OCD and for him to dine in bed meant he was beyond exhausted. This happened with every trial he’d ever run, as long as she’d known him.

Quill was prosecuting the case she’d just alluded to: the man accused of being a conspirator in Cynthia’s death.

Maybe innocent, maybe not . . .

He asked, “You still in Wisconsin?”

“Yep.” Then she told him, “I got a call. Richard Avery.”

“And?”

“Heard I was up here, on quote ‘vacation.’ Wasn’t happy, but he won’t dare do anything about it.”

“I read about the deputy up there who was shot. How is he?”

“Point blank, face. He’ll live. But still . . . Oh, Quinn, I almost had him. He sensed my trap. How does he do that?”

There was a pause.

“I’ll start drafting extradition papers to get him back to Illinois if he’s collared up there.”

This reminder of proper procedure probably wasn’t his chiding her for wanting to circumvent the judicial process and deliver a writ of execution personally, rather than drag him back for trial. He was the sort who would be thinking logically and methodically of tasks that lay ahead in the lengthy process of the law. Unlike her, Evan Quill didn’t improvise and he didn’t break rules.

She asked, “And the trial?”

A hesitation. “Gone to the jury. I’m confident. He’s got no defense—some bizarre alibi that he was plotting to murder a pervert.”

“What?”

“Yep. And a mysterious stranger on Route 28 who really did it.”

“The man on the grassy knoll.”

Quill said, “There’s one in every case. You sure Offenbach’s still in Harbinger?”

“I’m sure.”

He didn’t respond for a moment. She sipped milk and asked, “Any thoughts, how long the panel’ll be out?”

“You want to flip a quarter?”

“Be careful, Quill.”

Did he laugh at this? Couldn’t be sure. He said, “I’ll be in court. Armed guards.”

“You won’t be in court forever . . . And you never know how Offenbach’ll come at you.”

“Need some sleep. I’ll call tomorrow.”

After another pause, he said, “Wait. Ask you a serious question?”

“Hm?”

When she heard his words, she laughed loud. And gave him an answer.

Then they disconnected.

She plugged her phone in to charge and snapped the lights out. She lay down in bed and stared at the bumpy ceiling, hoping for sleep, though guessing it would be some time in coming.

“I’m aching.”

Marlowe points out: “You just ran ten miles this morning.”

The women are in Stanley’s Restaurant off Route 44, one in a beige uniform, one in jeans and a leather jacket and scuffed boots. They are the same age, though Marlowe seems older. Maybe that’s because of the rugged outfit. Maybe

because of the gray eyes, which are burdened. This is true even when her lips arc into a smile. This is rare.

Vandalia County Deputy Cynthia Hooper waves for two more beers. Stanley's chills the mugs Antarctic, so that the first several sips require a napkin around the icy handle. They arrive and the women wrap and clink for a second time tonight.

Drinking is fine; they're off duty.

Marlowe is impressed with her friend's prowess at long-distance running. She herself now allows: "I run. But only when I'm being chased. Or chasing."

Hooper offers: "But now I know if it's chased or chasing, I can make it a full ten miles."

Marlowe nods in concession to the logic.

Hooper then says, "So there's something I want to bring up."

Sounding serious.

Marlowe sips and waits. She's not good with solemn conversations. Avoids them like hornets.

"I'd really like it if you'd be my daughter's or son's godmother."

"Well, you know I will." Marlowe tilts her head. "Is there some news you want to share?"

"Oh, my Lord no. Not yet."

"So, what about the middle step?"

"A man? I'm working on it. That position is still help-wanted. But you know? Last week I lit up Bernie Fromm. Speeding. He's got a nice smile. And that guy is built, I'll tell you. He told me a joke while I wrote him up."

"What was it?"

"The joke? Okay." Hooper sips and sets her palms flat on the table, as if the gag might escape if she doesn't hold on. "You have to ask me two questions. The first is 'What do you

do for a living?’ The second is ‘What’s the hardest part about it?’ Go ahead.”

Marlowe frowns. “I’m supposed to ask you?”

“Right, go ahead.”

“What do you do for a living?”

Hooper replies, “I’m a comedian.”

“And what’s the hardest—”

“Timing.”

Marlowe, surprising herself, laughs hard. “Anybody telling a joke getting cited, he goes straight to the top of the datable list.” She then asks, “You sure you want your kid to have a godmother that’s a cop?”

“Oh, cops’re a dime a dozen. I want her to have a godmother who’s a badass.”

Which requires another mug clink.

Hooper says, “Let’s order. I can’t stay late. Early watch tomorrow.”

“Anything good?”

The deputy scoffs. “Not hardly. There’ve been complaints of kids four-wheeling behind a development.”

“Where?”

“Old Bennett Road. You ever hear of it?”

“No, never have,” Marlowe says and opens the menu.

Thursday, April 6

Detective work is about unraveling puzzles, often in the most unlikely ways.

This was one of the things Constant Marlowe liked about it.

As she walked into the ancient redbrick building on Hammett Street in downtown Upper Falls, she wondered if the solution to the hunt for Paul Offenbach would be inside.

Today, in a nearly identical outfit to yesterday's but with a black tee, she climbed the stairs and at the metal detector perplexed the guard when she announced she was armed and displayed her IDCI badge. "Official business." She steamed past him, leaving the near-retirement-age fellow to decide if making trouble was *worth* the trouble.

In the Recorder of Deeds office, she used the same two words with the clerk, an enthusiastic woman in her midtwenties who warmed immediately to the intrigue and said, "Whatever I can do. You bet." Marlowe wondered if she'd salute.

"Here's what I need: any record of property in the county owned by Paul or any other Offenbach."

Her visit last night to Saint Francis Hospital had been partly to have some words with Jessica Lombardi and offer sympathy to Tony, which she'd done when they had wakened him.

She'd also wanted to ask him a few questions.

Let's wake him up, why don't we. I don't think he'll mind

...

He'd been more than willing to help, writing down in loopy, morphine-slacked handwriting that the deputy had realized Offenbach was phony because he claimed he knew nothing of the county when in fact he seemed quite familiar with the geography.

Maybe he'd owned property here at some point, Marlowe speculated. Maybe he still did.

And if so, maybe that's where he was hiding out.

Because of the age of the county building, Marlowe had the idea that the records woman would lug out huge, dusty tomes of maps on crisp, yellowing paper.

But computers had come to Harbinger County the same time they had everywhere else. The blonde—she was born to define "pert"—sat on a stool before her terminal and with lightning strokes, despite long, turquoise nails, typed in the request.

In minutes, the results were in, and it was clear that the puzzle wasn't going to be solved here.

No record showed an Offenbach, Paul or otherwise, owning property in Harbinger County or anywhere else in the state.

"Can you tell me what this is about?" the woman asked, and Marlowe knew from the shine in her eyes that she was a fan of true-crime shows.

"An investigation."

Which wasn't quite the level of detail the woman wanted.

Then she added, in a whisper, "Between you and me, it's classified. But big."

The clerk's face beamed.

Marlowe asked, "Is there a Vital Statistic Department here?"

"Yes, Officer . . . Detective?"

"It's agent."

Even better.

"Second floor."

Upstairs, Marlowe met the woman who presided over this operation. She was pleasant enough but unconcerned about criminal conspiracies and wanted to get back to a stack of birth certificates. Maybe nine months before, a period of bad storms had taken out the power for a few days and kept Harbinger couples inside with not much else to do.

This official let Marlowe do her own searching and after a brief lesson on how the computer system worked she was turned loose to dig.

With far less impressive fingertip velocity than the *Forensic Files* clerk's downstairs, she typed in her request.

The only hit she had was that in 1939, Emma Offenbach, a resident of Harbinger County, married Nigel Cotter, also a resident, and became Emma Cotter.

Was this gold, or not?

It was back down to Deeds to find out. Now the target of the day was property owned by Nigel Cotter. “From the late thirties to date.”

“I’m on it, Agent.”

The cerulean nails tap-danced once more and soon there was an answer.

Cotter had sold a house in 1940 and bought another the same year. It was located at 1 Trail Ridge Road. When Cotter passed in 1964, the house went to another Cotter, who kept title in his name . . . until it was transferred to an Illinois limited liability corporation ten years ago.

“Will there be a big arrest, like they show on *Small Town Homicide*? They’re reenactments but they’re still pretty okay. You watch it?”

“It’s a good one.”

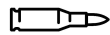
Constant Marlowe did not own a television set.

She stepped into a dim corridor, tugged out her phone and called a contact in the Illinois Secretary of State’s office. Two minutes later her friend said that Marlowe had been right in her assumption: managers of the LLC owning the house at 1 Trail Ridge Road were in Nassau, the Bahamas.

In the same building where Paul Offenbach had an office.

The puzzle was almost complete. One piece remained.

The most delicate of all.



“Travis.”

Offenbach nodded to the solidly built man, midthirties, in jeans and a gray tee. The garment was tight, showing off muscles and a potbelly. His hair was dark and thick, and his face round. Offenbach had known him for several months and in all that time he’d never seen him sporting an intentional beard, as Offenbach did from time to time, just stubble.

Maybe lazy.

Maybe a look.

The two men were outside a dilapidated shack on narrow, winding Trail Ridge, which was surrounded by pine and oak forests and dense tangles of a thousand species of plants. The men were two miles from the terminus of the road, where the Offenbach-Cotter family house was located.

Travis had just driven up from Illinois in a commercial van, the logo on the side reading HENRIETTA'S FLORIST, surrounded by colorful bouquets. This was at Offenbach's request. He wanted a vehicle that would blend in, not a Tony Soprano black Escalade, his wheels of choice in Chicago.

"What's the plan?"

Offenbach pointed the way the man had come. "Go back to 22, turn right toward Upper Falls. About four miles, there's an outlet mall. Park there, facing out. You need a good view of the highway. Watch for an orange Honda Accord, coming this way."

"That'll be her?"

He didn't answer. Who else would it be?

"Call me so I'll be ready."

"And if somebody else's with her?"

Offenbach was a smart man and connections and deductions came instantly to him. He had to remind himself that the rest of the world was not like that. He offended people from time to time. And offended people could be dangerous. He'd had to kill several of them. "We go forward anyway."

"All right," Travis grunted. He climbed back in his florist van and returned to the highway.

Offenbach walked inside the shack. Closed the door. The groaning of rusty metal was loud.

He looked around, inhaling hot air aromatic of dust and mold. The interior was about eight hundred square feet and largely empty, though a card table sat in one corner beside an old office chair, the upholstery ripped as if shredded by a bear's claws. The other decorations: hypodermic needles,

broken meth and crack pipes, and rocks thrown through the windowpanes, all of which were shattered. What was there about human nature that could not allow a single piece of glass in an abandoned building to remain intact?

The shack was at a bend in Trail Ridge and the front window offered a perfect view of his shooting range—exactly where Constant Marlowe would be driving on her way to the Cotter house.

Last night, after the whiskey and pipe, he'd gone to bed without a solution to the problem.

Now he had one.

A half hour ago Tomas Wexler had called.

“Offenbach. Listen, Marlowe made your house on Trail Ridge.”

“How?” It was supposed to be hidden beneath layers and layers of legal documents.

“Digging in Public Records. I've got somebody works there. My niece. She's a ditz but she does what she's told. Always lets me know if somebody from out of town's nosing around.” A pause. “For this, Offenbach, I get points off my next delivery?”

He had agreed.

Now, he'd go with the simple solution. Marlowe would have looked over a map and seen that there was only one way to his family's house—straight up Trail Ridge. Her plan would be to drive close, then pull off the road and hike up, undetected, through the brush.

But she wouldn't get that far.

When she slowed for the curve here, he would open fire with his Bushmaster assault rifle, modified to be fully automatic.

Your destiny, Constant . . .

Suicidal probably . . .

He'd be doing her a favor.

As he slipped a magazine in and chambered a round, he happened to think of the comic books his father had owned. These were not about superheroes but soldiers in World War II. Big American GIs fighting Germans and Japanese inked into embarrassing ethnic stereotypes. The lieutenant or dogface heroes were forever letting loose with their tommy guns. The artists had written the sound in angled, boldface, all-cap type.

BUDDA BUDDA BUDDA . . .

So, kill his nemesis. Take the millions waiting for him in the house and then get to a private airport where a pilot who was making a great deal of money would spirit him off to a dirt field in Ontario . . . and onward from there to a new life.

He checked the stubby black gun. He had an extra magazine in his pocket. Unnecessary—the field of fire was a mere thirty feet away—but its presence reassured him.

He moved the grizzly-ripped chair to the window, which was partially covered by a tattered drape that was gray but had probably started the decade white.

Aiming out the window, he reminded himself to grip tightly. With the gun in full auto mode, the muzzle rose like a basketball player about to dunk.

He set his phone on the sill so he could see the screen. It was on silent and he didn't want to miss Travis's call. Just then, two things happened at once: the left panel of the curtain flew violently inward and there was a loud snapping bang from the floor.

This was followed by a third occurrence: a rolling boom of a long gun in the distance.

Offenbach dropped the assault rifle and flattened himself on the filthy and fragrant oak boards beneath him.

A wave of disgust. Marlowe had figured the whole damn thing out. She'd probably looked at Google Maps and found both his house and the shack. She understood that this was a perfect ambush spot.

Another crack as a slug dug wood out of the floor closer to him. Another boom of thunder.

He grabbed his phone to call Travis and tell him to get to the top of the hill where Marlowe would be shooting from. He would also ask angrily, by the way, why had he let a goddamn bright orange car get past him?

And then: he closed his eyes briefly, hearing a creak from the ancient floorboards.

He turned.

Constant Marlowe was aiming her gun, a small semiauto, at his head. Her phone was in her other hand. She said into the device, "I'm good. Thanks. You can go." She put the mobile away.

Who was the sniper?

Hardly mattered.

Endgame. He had tortured and killed her friend and now she was going to do what she'd come to Harbinger County for: to murder him.

She'd won.

Offenbach sighed.

Okay. Pull the trigger. Get it over with. As death approached, his thoughts were not on his mother, certainly not on his father, nor one of the many women he'd had over his years. Cousin Sarah made a fleeting appearance. Then he pictured chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov.

He braced, wondering how long he would be conscious after the slug hit.

But she didn't shoot.

Her gravelly voice: "Toss your sidearm to me. And you know how to do it."

He pulled the Glock from his belt with thumb and index finger only. And pitched it to her feet.

She placed the semiauto on the chair and tucked her own pistol away in her front waistband, where she could draw it easily if need be. She collected the assault rifle and dropped the magazine, then ejected the chambered round. She used the tip of this bullet to push out the two pins holding the upper to the main receiver of the weapon. The gun separated into two pieces. She threw the pins out the window into the brush and the gun parts to the floor.

The assault rifle was now just a conversation piece.

“Stand up and pull up your shirt. And turn in a circle.”

He did as she’d asked.

“Now your pant cuffs.”

He complied; he never wore ankle holsters.

He reflected, So there *is* another way to get to Trail Ridge Road, other than from Route 22. It probably involved Marlowe hiking several miles through forest and underbrush. The foliage was dense here. It would have been a tough trek.

And what was *this*?

He squinted, watching Marlowe take something from her jacket pocket.

Offenbach was confused, thinking, Why would she be carrying around a small gray purse?



Constant Marlowe had never seen Paul Offenbach up close. Doing so now, she thought he was smaller than she’d expected.

But this was not uncommon in her line of work. Often the mental picture of your prey swells in size during the pursuit.

Which doesn’t mean they are any less dangerous when you finally go nose to nose.

The guns were tucked away in the locked fiber pouch. Her jacket was off, as was his. The two stood six feet apart in the middle of the shack, which was lit by sunlight streaming

through the windows and cracks in the walls. Dust motes and pollen spores floated slowly around them.

She occasionally wondered why she was drawn to hand-to-hand combat, why she carried the gray pouch everywhere. One person said it might be because she was testing herself. Another had suggested that, being a woman, she had the advantage of surprise.

She'd been amused that it was *men* giving these opinions.

In fact, the answer was that fists were simply more satisfying than guns, knives . . . and, if she were being honest, handcuffs and Miranda warnings.

In this particular instance it was because she intended to beat Cynthia Hooper's killer to death. In the motel she would have been content to shoot him. Now she had the chance to make him feel what her friend had.

Her fists balled, her center of gravity low, she swayed back and forth, ready to meet an attack.

Offenbach was calm—eerily calm. He slipped into a martial arts stance. A real one, not like Rudy's weird mock-up. Marlowe had never had the patience to learn any such skills. The training took forever and sparring was, for her, more like dancing. To be a boxer, you did jump rope and calisthenics and punching bags; you ran. Then you got in the ring and you hit and hit and hit.

Coming in fast, keeping his fists centered and head down, he drove her back with a series of carefully aimed blows. She blocked most, though took a stinging connect in the chest. Breastbone at least, not solar plexus. But he didn't withdraw fast enough and she landed an uppercut on his chin.

His head snapped back and he barked a faint cry and his eyes instantly teared. A hand went to his mouth.

Maybe martial arts *senseis* don't teach one of the first rules in street fighting: keep your tongue from between your teeth.

Offenbach's face returned to calm and he spat blood.

Her serene eyes matched his. Hatred abounded in both quarters but there was not a breath of distracting anger between them.

They collided once, twice, three times, forearms deflecting forearms, some blows landing. He was strong and had speed behind his lunges.

Unlike Lumberjack Rudy, he didn't try to grab her shirt. His choice probably was not a playing-fair issue. She guessed he believed that trying the maneuver would tie up one of his hands for the grip, which meant losing a defense barrier, exposing his face to a chain of vicious, lightning-strike blows.

His aim was good—and he nailed her chin once—but she knew how to roll to trick the energy, and the blow did little damage.

Boxing was about learning, and she was seeing that he had a limited number of punches in his repertoire. Marlowe soon memorized them all and lined up several defensive responses.

Again and again she danced in, deflected or took a sloppy blow and delivered her signature triplet left-right-left, which had earned her hundreds of points and a number of knockouts. Some of these were technical, some were wholesale unconsciousness—no more satisfying moment exists in the world of prizefighting.

More blood eased from his mouth. More moisture from eyes and nose. His breath came in gasps as he grew winded. She had stepped back often, making him charge her, which used far more effort. For the first time in the battle his eyes were uncertain.

He eased back, gathered himself and spit more blood on the floor. He held up a hand.

Ignoring it, she charged in fast and landed a solid right on his chin once more.

He glared angrily.

Did he really think she'd give him a moment's rest?

This was not a refereed match.

No rules, except for the guns.

He began, flailing, to force her back. Fine with Marlowe. She avoided his fists and watched his energy evaporate.

“You know I’m a very rich man.” The words were spaced out by hard inhaling and exhaling. “How’d you like to be a rich woman?”

Constant Marlowe rarely said a single word during a fight. And never listened to any, except those like “Enough” and “You win.”

As he paused, waiting perhaps for a response, she struck like a hungry rattlesnake: leaping in low and when he lifted his left to block the blow, he realized too late it was a feint as she drove her left fist into his jaw hard. Spit and blood flew.

The slug would have resulted in a bad bruise—had he survived the fight. Which Marlowe was determined he would not.

A flash of fury in his eyes. Then, snap, calm was back.

They pummeled some.

They backed away, they circled.

They attacked.

The money gambit hadn’t worked. The great chess player, the great planner needed a new tactic.

“You want to know what I used on her?” Gasps. “Hurting people can be complicated. I think simple is better. Don’t you want to know?”

She came in fast but he blocked both blows, though she could feel his arms had grown weaker. Flailing does that. Compact movement is the only way to fight.

“A razor knife. And the lighter I use for my pipe. It’s like a little blowtorch.”

Marlowe noted that he was favoring his left shoulder.

“After you slip something metal under the skin, you can heat it up with the torch. Or you can just raise blisters with the flame itself. Depends on your mood.”

Marlowe observed too that his right ankle was weaker than the other.

“My, that woman could scream . . .”

Left shoulder, right ankle . . .

The body is a funny thing. Even before you feel the pain of a damaged foot, your wiring tells you exactly how much it's going to hurt if you move a certain way and does what it can, all by itself, to take over your movement and keep you free from pain.

Marlowe now ducked and moved in to Offenbach's right. To spare his damaged ankle, his body shifted weight automatically to his left foot and instructed the left arm to rise, steadying himself.

When she drove her blow not into his body but his left fist itself, she was prepared for her knuckles to meet bone. He was not.

Two of Offenbach's fingers snapped—left ring and pinkie.

He barked a guttural cry. Unfair, somebody might say, to target a hand. But one could also put into that category distracting your opponent with details of torturing her friend.

His left arm useless, Offenbach now came in fast and low, then just before jabbing with his right, stopped and kicked hard. He aimed for her groin, as if momentarily forgetting the different physical structures of the two sexes. Marlowe let the blow land. It hurt but didn't paralyze.

Ache, not sting.

She grabbed his foot and twisted.

Offenbach went down on his face.

He lay stunned.

She could easily have dropped a knee into a kidney, paralyzing him. Then rolled him over and done the same to his

throat, concluding her mission in Wisconsin.

Marlowe did not do this, however. It wasn't her boxing instinct that said you sportingly let your opponents rise and collect themselves before reengaging. No, it was that the fight had lasted only five or six minutes and her intention was to make him suffer for the same amount of time Cynthia had: at least a full ten.

He lifted his head and, when he realized she wasn't attacking him from behind, took a moment to rest.

Or that's what she thought.

In fact, Offenbach had been scanning the floor of the cabin, it seemed. He crawled forward fast and scooped up a handful of hypodermics and broken drug pipes, not caring about the damage to his own palm and fingers. He flung the handful hard. She dodged most but a shard from a shattered glass bong struck her on the cheek. She ignored the diversion and when he rolled to his feet and charged, she deflected his roundhouse.

In the ring, Marlowe was known for her unrelenting attacks.

And this was how she now advanced on Paul Offenbach.

Jab, jab, uppercut, driving him back.

His defense was in shambles. Her vicious left hook connected squarely with his chin, snapping his head back. Her right drove into his midsection—not always a good strategy in the ring with a pro, who'd do daily sit-ups to tighten the muscles into boards. But that was not Paul Offenbach. The blow was aimed perfectly into soft tissue, and air exploded from his lungs.

He dropped onto his back, gasping, paralyzed.

“Uh, uh, uh . . .” His arms were spread out like he'd been making snow angels. Fingers curled, chest rising and falling.

She straddled him.

No banter, of course. No final words.

Marlowe gripped his hair and tugged back to fully expose his throat. He tried to lift his arms; they weren't responding.

Their eyes met and she lifted her right fist, which some reporter had described—ironically now—as her “killer weapon.”

Her arm had not yet descended when a voice from behind her barked, “No!”

Two gray-uniformed men lunged forward, gripped her arms with fierce pressure and pulled her off.



“Truck driver called in about gunfire somewhere around Trail Ridge.”

Sheriff Louie Braddock was standing with his arms crossed, dead center in the dusty pull-off in front of the dilapidated shack. Constant Marlowe wondered what the structure had been used for. If a residence, it would have been less than appealing even when fresh.

“He said he thought it was a rifle. You know, boom, not a snap. Isn't season now, so we had to check it out. You know anything about a long gun around here?”

“Do not, Sheriff.”

He looked toward Paul Offenbach, cuffed and being looked after by some medics.

“So he didn't leave town.”

“Appears I was wrong.”

The sheriff scoffed.

Marlowe glanced toward Route 22. Deputies had stopped traffic temporarily. At the intersection sat a florist's van, black and dusty. Henrietta's Florist. The dark-haired driver stared at the excitement, frowning.

“You'll want him extradited down to Illinois, and I'd have to talk to our DA but I think she'll agree to you folks having him first. We have him on attempted murder here and the weapons charge. You've got the full monty.”

“Thanks. I’m a friend of the DA in Vandalia. We’ll make sure he comes back here for the Lombardi trial.”

Braddock said, “If I know your state law, Agent Marlowe, he’ll get life in Illinois, and attempt here’ll buy him sixty years. That man is not seeing the outside of a cell ever.”

The Motorola on the sheriff’s hip clattered with a staticky transmission. Loud.

“Sheriff, you there?”

“Kelly, I’m still on Trail Ridge. Offenbach’ll be in for processing. Give it thirty, forty—”

“Sheriff. There’s a situation.”

The dispatcher’s voice sounded unsteady. Usually they were calmer than this. It takes a certain type of person to do 911 work.

“Go ahead.”

“It’s Tomas Wexler. He’s dead.”

The sheriff said nothing for a few seconds. “Okay. Why don’t you keep going here?”

“Shot. He was on Clement Road at a light. Looks like somebody pulled up and shot through his side window.”

“Just like Tony got shot,” Braddock said, half to himself.

“Six rounds. Small caliber. Looks like a twenty-five.”

“Where on Clement?”

“That stretch along the preserve. Near Osceola Trail.”

“So, no cameras.”

“Not a one.”

“Anybody see anything?”

“Not so far.”

Braddock asked, “When’d it happen?”

“Pete thinks an hour ago, two maybe.”

“I’ll be there when I’m finished up.”

“All right.”

He turned to Marlowe, looked down at her eyes, ten inches below his. “You heard?”

Hard not to, with that volume.

She nodded.

“I’ll be blunt with you, Agent Marlowe. Where were you the last two hours?”

“Don’t recall, other than trying to find him.” A nod toward Offenbach, who happened to be staring at her with a look that radiated not a shred of emotion. Dead eyes, she thought. Dead eyes.

Hands on hips, Braddock surveyed the shack and the tangle of brush and vines behind it. The growth reminded her of the land bordering her own property, which was halfway between Chicago and the Wisconsin state line. The house was a bungalow, many years old. As for the yard itself, front and back, she’d had the grass removed and replaced with gravel, atop plastic sheets to stifle weeds.

“If I was to check firearms records, would I find that you’ve ever bought a twenty-five-caliber handgun?”

“Never have. No stopping power. Only three-eighty, nine and forty-five ACP.”

“Ah . . .” Braddock’s eyes took in a hawk making leisurely circles overhead. “Shooter was smart. Probably stayed inside his vehicle. All the ejected brass ended up there, so he didn’t have to worry about wasting time picking them up off the ground.”

“Makes sense,” she said. Many a killer had been caught because of fingerprints left on the cartridges ejected from their semiauto weapons. They wipe the gun but don’t think to clean the brass.

Braddock said in a low voice, “I’m going to take your statement about what happened here, Agent Marlowe. And then I think I’d like you to get out of Harbinger County.”

She shrugged. “No reason for me to stay.”



“You’re a good shot,” Constant Marlowe said to Jessica Lombardi as the woman handed over the green rifle case containing the Winchester 70. “You placed them right where they needed to be.”

The woman said, “We take deer for food. Tony has a ragout recipe that—I was going to say it’s to die for. Bad choice of words.”

The two women were standing in the parking lot outside the hospital, near the cascade that was truly lovely, even if it was a lesser one.

The water, clear as polished window glass, fell and fell, shattered and regrouped and changed into rainbows whenever the sun was freed by gaps in the staunch clouds.

Marlowe put the rifle and ammo box into her trunk and closed the lid.

After she’d learned from Tony about Offenbach’s prior connection to Harbinger County, and about the Cotter house, she’d come up with her plan.

She knew from Jessica that Wexler had people inside county offices. They’d know to call him if anybody came in inquiring about Offenbach and any property he or his family might have owned. Or at the least if an out-of-towner started asking odd questions.

Marlowe supposed it was True Crime Girl, which was a disappointment. But she’d learned long ago what you see isn’t always what truly is.

Wexler would have called Offenbach to report Marlowe had made the Cotter house.

The men would set a trap for her on Trail Ridge, knowing that she’d sneak up to the house to kill him.

A trap that she’d use against them.

Marlowe had then gone to Jessica—the last piece of the puzzle. She recalled that Braddock had said both Tony and

Jessica were hunters. So she'd asked, "Will you help me get the man who shot Tony?"

"Offenbach?" Her daunting eyes had glowed. "You bet I will."

There had been a pause. Marlowe had added, "When I say *get*, I don't mean arrest. Do you understand what I'm saying?" She had noted that Jessica wore a cross and some of the flower arrangements in her husband's room bore the symbol as well.

Jessica didn't hesitate. "Tony and I're religious. We go every Sunday. I teach Bible school. The 'thou shalt not kill'—it's the sixth commandment in our church. It means you can't kill the *innocent*. No rule against murdering the evil. What do you want me to do?"

Now, eyes on the tumbling water, Jessica said, "It didn't turn out the way we wanted. Him being alive."

"Agreed there. At least he'll spend the rest of his life in a small concrete box. That's something."

Justice of sorts . . .

Marlowe sloughed off disappointment again.

"I've got something for you."

She walked to the passenger-side door and opened it. She lifted a thick manila envelope off the seat and handed it to Jessica.

"What's this?"

"Don't open it here." They weren't alone. Staff, discharged patients and family members were walking between the parking lot and the hospital.

A frown of curiosity appeared in the round, freckled face.

Marlowe said, "It's two hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"*What?*"

"I got to Offenbach's house on Trail Ridge before the deputies. He had a go bag. You know what that is?"

“We watched *Breaking Bad*.” Jessica offered it back “But we can’t take it.”

“It’s laundered. Offenbach would never have traceable cash.”

“I don’t mean that. It’s just it’s not ours.”

Marlowe had anticipated the reaction. She had a plan for this too. “There’s something called the crime victims reparation fund. Every state’s got one. Consider it’s from there. Tony’s rehab’s going to be expensive.”

Jessica stared down at the envelope.

“If you don’t want to spend it, use it to start the fire in the barbecue when you’re cooking your venison burgers.”

The envelope disappeared into her purse.

“You staying around here?”

“No, I’m going back to Hopewell. Vandalia County.” She explained about the trial of the man who might have been one of Offenbach’s associates at Cynthia’s murder.

She added, “The facts aren’t clear. I don’t want an innocent man to go to jail. I don’t want a guilty one to go free.”

Marlowe walked around to the driver’s side of the car, the orange paint glowing like lava in the sunlight.

Jessica said, “That trial? It’ll be over soon?”

“It’s gone to the jury. They could come back today. Could be next week.”

“Tony and me? We’ll pray that God sees that justice is done.”

Constant Marlowe nodded her thanks and sat down behind the wheel, thinking, And maybe, just maybe, She would.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

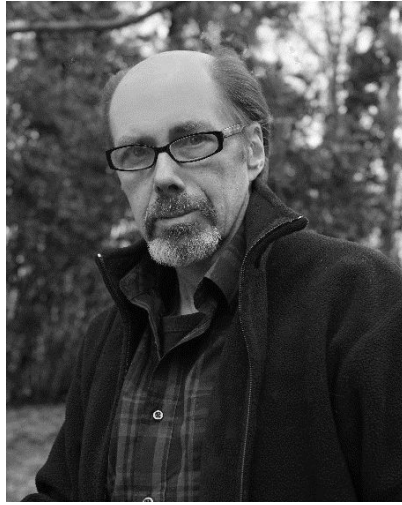


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Jeffery Deaver is the *New York Times* bestselling author of forty-five novels and eighty short stories. His books are sold in 150 countries; have been translated into twenty-five languages; and have received or been short-listed for dozens of awards, including the Edgar, Anthony and Shamus.

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