

AN ELLA DARK MYSTERY--BOOK #12

GIRL,

LURED

BLAKE PIERCE

G I R L,  
L U R E D

(An Ella Dark FBI Suspense Thriller —Book Twelve)

B L A K E P I E R C E

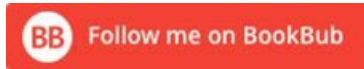
## Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSIE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising twenty-eight books; of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books; of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising six books; of the ADELE SHARP mystery series, comprising sixteen books, of the EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy mystery series, comprising six books; of the LAURA FROST FBI suspense thriller, comprising eleven books; of the ELLA DARK FBI suspense thriller, comprising fourteen books (and counting); of the A YEAR IN EUROPE cozy mystery series, comprising nine books, of the AVA GOLD mystery series, comprising six books; of the RACHEL GIFT mystery series, comprising ten books (and counting); of the VALERIE LAW mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the PAIGE KING mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the MAY MOORE mystery series, comprising eleven books; of the CORA SHIELDS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the NICKY LYONS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the CAMI LARK mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the AMBER YOUNG mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the DAISY FORTUNE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the FIONA RED mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the FAITH BOLD mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the JULIETTE HART mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), and of the new MORGAN CROSS mystery series, comprising five books (and counting).

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An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit [www.blakepierceauthor.com](http://www.blakepierceauthor.com) to learn more and stay in touch.



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# PROLOGUE

Mike swiveled his chair around to his second monitor, closing the little notification that told him there was activity down in row fourteen. At this time of night, the faintest sound of commotion was a crash of heavy metal, so he'd know if anyone was hiding out in here. He ignored it, instead turning back to more pressing matters.

Mike put his feet up on the desk and reasoned that there was no point paying for a night shift worker when this was the easiest part of the job anyway. He'd been the owner of Securicall Storage for twelve years now, and he'd gone through staff members like his wife went through wine bottles. Sometimes, it was just easier to do things yourself, not to mention he was saving on costs at a time when even the one percent had to cut corners.

One of his monitors displayed a grid of camera feeds. They were his virtual eyes, so he could sit in his office and kill the hours without needing to strain his ankles. His second monitor was running a Steven Seagal film that he'd managed to find streaming, and the film's 100-minute runtime would be enough to see this shift to a conclusion.

Here in no man's land, West Virginia, the law stated that someone had to be present at publicly open twenty-four-hour operations until midnight. Apparently, it deterred gangs from using these grounds as safe havens to meet up and exchange drugs. It was one of those laws that made no sense if you scrutinized it for more than a few seconds, because it wasn't like there weren't a million places around here that gangs could use as a backdrop for their drug deals. It was also one of those laws that most business owners didn't even know about, not until one of your goody-two-shoes ex-employees snitched on you. That guy had been weird as hell. No wonder Mike had fired him.

Mike ruffled a few papers with his feet, removing them from his peripheral vision so he could focus on the unfolding storyline on screen. Seagal was in shackles in the back of a military van, and he'd just told one of his captors that he used to be a hitman. Already the immersion fell apart because the old actor was around fifty pounds overweight and looked like he couldn't outrun a field mouse. Like he could sneak up on anyone. You'd hear him coming a mile away.

Mike ruminated on the idea for a moment, getting distracted by his own



thoughts, watching the visuals on screen but not really processing them. It wasn't until something flashed on his second monitor that he suddenly snapped back to reality.

He swung his feet off the desk and assumed the business position. On the grid, one of the feeds registered recent activity again with a little green flashing light. It was the camera on row fourteen, and of course it would be at the furthest part of the building from his office. He really didn't want to make the trip down there, not when he was trying to marry the final two hours of the night with this film's runtime. If he overshot the mark, he'd either have to stay ten minutes later or remind himself to watch the ending another time, which he'd never do. Another project left unfinished.

Mike peered closer at the camera but didn't see any moving parts. Probably a rat, or dust particles on the camera lens. Mike went back to killing the hours, but the green light flickered back up again. This time, Mike caught a fast-moving blur that tickled his eyeball. Gone as quickly as it arrived.

Row fourteen, the worst row. Something about activity registering in the furthest reaches of the building unnerved Mike, as though a sinister culprit might be aware of the distance between themselves and a night worker and was using it to their advantage. Mike sighed, pulled a crowbar from his drawer, and set out to investigate the source of his disturbance. Sometimes, homeless guys took their chances here. If they slipped in after midnight and left before eight, nothing was stopping them from living here as much as they wanted. It happened more times than Mike cared to admit, and he'd sometimes catch a few strays in the morning. But he couldn't fault those guys for using their brains. Why take their chances on the streets when they had an unguarded roof right here? If he was homeless, he'd do the same thing.

Mike shuffled his way noisily down the aisles. Hopefully his activity would scare any troublemakers away, or remind potential homeless guys to try again at a more opportune time. Mike had an obligation to kick any chance-lodgers out, even though it pained him to do so. The motion sensor lights marked his path down the staircase, through the bottom floor, eventually coming to the long and silent row fourteen.

A beam of unbroken light drew his attention to one unit in particular. Unit three hundred. Mike knew this unit well because he'd been the one to in-process the owner, take his details, making idle conversation while Mike did his credit check. Mike remembered joking about giving the guy a discount because he'd landed on a round number, but the joke turned out to be in bad

taste because the owner had recently lost everything he held dear: his wife, his house, his investments. That was why he was checking his belongings into a storage unit because he had nowhere else to go.

The door was slightly raised, like the owner had left in a hurry. Or it had been jammed. Mike cursed himself for hoping it was the former as that would cost him less money, then had to stop and invoke a little humanity. The belongings inside some of these units were all that some people had, people who were down on their luck and just needed somewhere to stash the relics of a once-happy life.

If it was up to Mike, the owners of these units could sleep here if they wanted to, but the legal requirements for overnight lodging were too complex and expensive. Mike could turn a blind eye to the odd night, but long-term sheltering was an area best left untouched. That was how drug dens were born.

“Hello?” Mike knocked on the door. “Anyone in there?”

No response. No panicked shuffling from within. He tried again.

“Just wanted to check if everything was alright.” Then after a moment of deliberation, he added, “It’s fine if you’re staying in there tonight.”

Still nothing. Mike gripped the handle on the door and went to close it, but curiosity got the better of him. The man who owned this unit had fascinated him during their brief exchange. What was his name? Something basic and corporate, as though an AI machine had built a middle-manager from the ground up.

David, that was it. He couldn’t remember his surname for the life of him, though. David had apparently made some bad calls and lost all his cash in a few backdoor schemes. Mike thought it odd that a stranger was so willing to tell his story despite the tragic details, but Mike guessed he was just desperate for any kind of human connection. He was probably the kind of guy who’d made such investments so he would have a story to impress people, but ended up telling that story with a different ending.

“David?” Mike asked, one last try. “I just wanted to check before I closed the door.” Mike spoke the words loud enough for the cameras to catch in case of any legal repercussions. Peeking inside storage units was a big no-no unless he had a good reason.

Curiosity itched away, prickling at his fingertips. What did a lost man’s possessions look like? This David fellow had apparently been pretty wealthy in a previous life. What if there were piles of money in here? He’d always

imagined that rich people hoarded gold bars and priceless ornaments, as absurd as the image was. One peek wouldn't hurt, right? If anyone asked, he could just say he was checking on the owner. After all, the guy was down on his luck. What if, God forbid, he'd opted for a permanent solution to his temporary problem?

Mike pulled the door a little, ignoring the mounting dread in his stomach, feeling as though he was about to cross some taboo boundary. Every fiber of his being told him this was a bad idea, but at the same time he felt he had a duty to look inside. The beam of light from within grew bigger, and first he noticed a mattress and a few pillows, but before he could really process the contents, something reached out and grabbed his leg.

"Jesus, God," Mike shouted and stepped back in fright. Down at his feet, something small and black and alive scurried in a circle.

Not a human hand as his first impulse told him. Just a rat.

"Damn thing," Mike said as he caught his breath. He'd seen a million of these things in his life, so why did they still shock him whenever he caught one? They usually found their way in through the river at the back of the building, probably scampering through the plumbing system and taking residence in some of the more barren units.

This must have been the culprit, Mike realized, laughing away the distress. The cameras must have picked up this little intruder. That's why he couldn't see anything noticeable on the cameras short of a little black smudge.

"Waste of time," Mike said. He lifted the door up a little further to summon the momentum to push it down and lock it in one swift movement, and as the door opening reached his eye level, Mike froze in place. All his energy suddenly depleted as he stared at the unit's contents, illuminated by the golden glow of the bulb hanging from the ceiling.

Old furniture. An air conditioning unit. Piles of books. A guitar.

And David. The same man who'd shared his woes and promised to keep quiet if he ever needed to sleep in here. The man who'd handed over a year's deposit in cash with tears in his eyes. The man who Mike had felt sorry for, wondering just how a successful man could be reduced to such despair.

David was here, flesh and bones and a tattered old suit jacket over a black t-shirt.

Kneeling in a pool of blood, elbows resting on a wooden chair, hands locked together in prayer.

Mike clutched his hand to his mouth but screamed anyway, more than

loud enough for the cameras to pick up.

# CHAPTER ONE

Ella Dark's apartment had been scorched from floor to ceiling in a blazing inferno about two months ago. Refurbishments had now restored the place to somewhat livable, but soot still lingered in the air, a reminder of what had once gone down here. If nothing else, it reinforced the notion that while her battles hadn't been without scars, she'd still come out on top.

She found herself lost in the blank canvas that was her living room wall, freshly painted but still bearing the marks of a fire beneath. A few more coats and it would be back to normal, the landlord said. Ella still saw a seared rectangle of various shades of black, at the center of which was a vague circle, moving and rotating and inviting her inward. Perhaps a doorway to another realm. A world of death and despair, where blood lined the streets and murder victims replayed their dying moments over and over again. A primitive world where severed heads sat atop barbed wire fences and esoteric cults worshipped giant, faceless creatures. Maybe they even had law enforcement in this imaginary universe, but the horrors were so vast that the police just let the monsters run amok.

Ella abruptly ended this effort in creativity with a shake of her whole upper body, like a dog having just returned from the rain. She wasn't sure where the daydream had come from, but she reminded herself of the old saying about staring into the abyss. Best not to dwell on her subconscious musings, she thought, because there wasn't much positivity going on back there at the moment.

Instead, Ella began sorting through her things, piecing together the fragments of her charred belongings to see if they were fit for repair. Most weren't, so they went in the trash pile. She had the foundations of a livable space now: furniture, kitchen necessities, doors that didn't leak when it rained. But now she needed the little things. The books, mementos, and framed photographs.

But her attention kept darting towards the four objects lying on the living room table. One week ago, she'd done battle with a serial killer the press were now calling the Key Master. Not the most inventive name they ever came up with, but accurate given that he'd turned out to be a career locksmith. During her final showdown with this human monster, the two had destroyed all the belongings in Ella's dad's old building. Blood had been

shed, old relics had been destroyed, and new ones had been unearthed. Ella had found a rusted lockbox stashed away in a secret compartment of her dad's treasured cabinet, and so she'd taken it to a key-cutter friend of hers to break it open.

The contents had not been what she expected.

In her wildest ideas, she thought she might find a letter from her dad to an old lover. Maybe some childhood photos. Perhaps some of Ella's baby hair or something belonging to her mom.

No.

Nothing of the sort.

Because inside the lockbox had been a matchbox, a cigarette lighter, a cigar, and a tiny bag of tobacco.

For seven days, she'd pored over the belongings like they might hold the secret to her father's mysterious death. In 1995, as a naïve five-year-old girl, Ella had found her father dead in his bed. She replayed the moment nightly, although the details differed with each imagining. Sometimes her father was dressed, sometimes not. Occasionally she'd see blood, sometimes a glimmering knife on the bedroom floor. In her later years, she'd even started seeing a figure stalking the landing whenever the incident manifested in her nightmares. Which parts were suppressed memories and which were complete fabrications was a mystery she could never solve. Even the most dedicated shrink couldn't exhume the real details from the depths of her subconscious because they'd continually distorted over time, like she'd played Broken Telephone with herself for twenty-five years.

The only hard evidence she had to go on was the autopsy report, which had concluded that her father had died from cardiopulmonary failure, which only meant that his heart had stopped unexpectedly. Even Ella had to admit that this wasn't evidence of murder, but her dad was thirty-five and as fit as an athlete at the time of his death. Healthy people in their thirties didn't just drop dead, especially when in the last few months of his life there'd been a lot of suspicious activity.

Ken had been taking out large sums of money from his bank account on a regular basis, and in the months before his death he'd run dry. He had no expensive habits that she knew of. She knew most of his were belongings untouched, and years of detective work had instilled the ability to spot a junkie when she saw one. Her dad wasn't one, so where the hell was this money going?

More bizarrely, Ken had taken out a loan of thirty-thousand dollars only a few months before he died, and the group he'd borrowed it from were notorious underground sharks. The Red Diamond Group. They ran underground gambling dens and liquor joints around Virginia, although whenever the Diamonds were mentioned, talk of murder was never far away. If someone in Virginia woke up dead under suspicious circumstances, the name *the Red Diamonds* hung loosely on the tongues of locals.

On Ken's receipt for his loan, she'd found the initials OWA. She'd uncovered a member of the Diamonds named Owen William Angels, a man who'd been on trial for murder back in 2002. Unfortunately, his whereabouts now were unknown, but her partner Ripley had found one very important detail about him; he was still alive. Somewhere in the country. He had no known address, probably so that investigating bodies couldn't find him.

Ella fidgeted with the matchbook, still full of unburnt sticks. Not a single one had been broken, nor had the other items in the lockbox been touched at all. The tobacco was sealed, the cigar still wrapped in cellophane, the cigarette lighter still full of fluid. They were more like mementos than objects that had a practical use. Tiny trophies, never to be touched or used or, considering where she'd found them, even admired.

What the hell did they mean?

The cigarette lighter was nondescript. A standard, green, plastic lighter that her dad could have picked up from any store in the country. The tobacco was the Winston brand, whatever that was. And the cigar was made by a company called Darjeen. Ella had never heard of either company, or seen any of their products on grocery store shelves in passing. Must have been some nineties brands that died out, she guessed.

But the matchbox was a different story. There was no brand name on the small and rectangular flap, only the name of a bar: Black Horse Tavern.

It wasn't a name she was familiar with, and she'd refrained from looking too closely into the place because, as much as she hated to admit it, she was beginning to think these trinkets meant nothing. As far as she knew, her dad didn't even smoke, so these were probably just the trappings of a filthy secret. Or maybe he did smoke before she was born and so he locked these items away as a symbolic gesture of his relinquishment.

Lots to ponder, but she feared she'd come up against yet another brick wall. The failures always hit harder after a glimmer of hope. She wasn't sure she could take another setback on this one because so far it had been obstacle

after obstacle. The more she dug, the further away she felt.

The Black Horse Tavern.

Ella grabbed her laptop. Better to disappoint herself now than further down the line. Stamp out misery before it turned to resentment.

She searched for the name along with a few other keywords. The results popped up, barely any accurate matches. Places in D.C. and Baltimore with the same name, but her dad would never have frequented where the city folk went. If he wasn't on a first-name basis with the bartender then he wouldn't be caught dead in there.

Ella got to page three of the results before giving up and going back to page one. She adjusted the search parameters and put quotation marks around *Black Horse Tavern*, then added in *Abingdon*, the name of her home town.

One result with an accurate match.

Black Horse Tavern. Located at 132 Barfield Avenue. No opening hours. No contact information. No known owner.

And current status: out of business.

Ella checked the time. Nine-thirty in the morning. She'd usually be at work now but the director had told her to stay at home until she was needed. Apparently she still had unhealed wounds. Also, Ripley was still finishing up some things in the office before her retirement and the two hadn't parted on good terms last time they were together.

Staring back at the circular void on the wall, Ella knew she couldn't just sit here all day contemplating what might be. She envisioned the next hour and couldn't imagine herself *not* going to check this place out. The second she learned the address, it was a foregone conclusion.

She tried checking the address online but it was in a place accessible only by a dirt road. Some backwoods tavern. Exactly the kind her dad would have frequented.

Out of business.

But what if there was something there? Something that could tell her where these items came from?

Ella grabbed the matchbox and her car keys then hesitated a second. Going there meant going *back*. She hadn't stepped foot in that town for God knew how long. Every time she saw a road sign for Abingdon, she went the long way around. Every inch of that place held a memory.

Could it be a good thing? Maybe she could see it as an exorcism. Go back to the scene of the crime and visualize it all again in the vain hope of jogging



a repressed memory.

Maybe. She'd see where the journey took her. All she knew was that she had to see this place with her own eyes, even if it led nowhere.

## CHAPTER TWO

Ella parked her car a quarter of a mile away from the Black Horse Tavern and made the rest of the journey on foot. She hadn't been able to face her old house, not yet. Besides, what was she supposed to say to the current owners? *Hey, my dad was killed in here. Mind if I take a look around?*

No, that would come at another time, if ever.

Through the backwaters of Abingdon, Ella learned that the Black Horse Tavern was indeed off the beaten path, and here at the end of her winding trail, she found that it wasn't a tavern at all, and it hadn't truly gone out of business. It was a small coffee shop, tucked out of the way along a forest pathway, dangling on the edge of the Clinch River.

How anyone found this place was beyond her, but she guessed it was one of those hidden gems that drew the locals. Might have been a place where fishermen and kayakers congregated and swapped stories, although the modern exterior suggested it was more a hipster den than a place for hardened adventurers to grab respite. The place seemed to have dropped the *Tavern* suffix, now simply known as the Black Horse. The little stick-horse stenciled on the window was reminiscent of a franchise place, so she very much doubted her dad would have ever stepped foot in here in its current incarnation.

A disappointing discovery, but she'd expected no less.

Ella peered through the window and saw the place was deserted save for a waitress mopping up a table. Instinct told her to head inside, if only to be in the airspace her old man must have occupied at least once in his life. The furnishings might have changed but maybe his spirit would still be lingering here, perhaps playing poker over a stout with some old-timers. She headed in, not sure what to do or say. She could have just ordered something and sat in silence but as she tapped her pocket she realized she'd left her wallet back in the car. Rookie move.

"Morning, honey," said the waitress as she scrubbed a table with the fury of a soldier on the battlefield. "Take a seat and I'll be with you in a minute." There was a southern twang to her voice and she couldn't have been any older than twenty-one.

"Sorry, I just wanted to ask something if that's alright."

The waitress dropped her cloth down and stood upright, perhaps excited

by the unexpected request. A break from routine, maybe.

“Sure. What is it?”

“Did this place used to be the Black Horse Tavern?”

“Before my time, sweetheart. I’ve only been here nine months. It’s always been the Black Horse as far I know.”

Ella reached for the matchbox to inquire if the woman had seen them before, but thought that such an action would be futile. As if anyone under the age of thirty had ever seen a box of matches.

“But the big man might be able to help you,” the woman said. “Dennis, are you back there?”

Ella glanced around but couldn’t see another soul in the confined little coffee shop. “The manager?” she asked.

“Owner,” the woman said. “He’s run this place since God was a boy.” She sauntered over to the counter, disappeared into a back room, then summoned Ella over. “Head out the back. Don’t mind the mess.”

Ella complied. She crossed over the threshold into the staff area, a little shocked that these workers were so willing to let strangers into their working quarters. Must have been that small -charm. The city had corrupted her that all strangers had ulterior motives.

“Go on through. He’s on the balcony.”

Ella walked through the kitchen, avoiding sacks of coffee piled on top of each other like dragon’s gold. At the rear, a door led out onto the bank of the river. A man was sitting in a green camping chair, a fishing line running from his wrinkly hands to the crystalline waters down below.

“Don’t be shy,” the man said. “This weather’s too good to waste.”

That small-town charm again. She’d never seen anyone fishing on the job before.

“You’re the owner? Dennis, is it?” Ella said. She searched for a seat but decided to remain standing. The fisherman rested his line on the holder and turned to face his new arrival. He had the haggard look of a man that didn’t shy away from Virginia winters and patches of gray hair that had long succumbed to the sands of time.

“Dennis. That’s me. We don’t get many visitors this time of day. Out for a walk?”

The owner seemed to be glad of the company. “Not quite,” Ella said as she surveyed the picturesque landscape ahead. “Sweet deal you’ve got here.”

“Not much else going on. We don’t pick up until the summer. You’re a

local?”

“Used to be. Lived on Saunders Road until ninety-five, then left for D.C.”

“Classic tale. How come?” asked Dennis as he unhooked the bait runner on his rod.

“Well, that’s something you might be able to help me with. Was this place once the Black Horse Tavern?”

“Once upon a time. We had a fire about ten years ago. Luckily, some might say. Gave me an opportunity to rebuild this place from scratch.”

“So you went the coffee route?”

“Sure did. People don’t want ale anymore. It’s all about the beans.”

Ella saw sense in the decision. She took the matchbook out of her pocket and flashed it to Dennis. “Does this ring any bells to you?”

Dennis retreated at the sight, as though Ella had harnessed the power of the sun and flung it in his face. Dennis took the box from her and held it at eye level. “Good grief. Haven’t seen any of these things in twenty, twenty-five years.”

“You recognize them?” Ella gasped, not quite sure how it would help but excited, nonetheless.

“Of course. We had these made in about ninety-three to get our name out there. Only ended up making about twenty boxes in the end,” Dennis laughed.

Twenty boxes, one of which belonged to her dad. Ella kept her father’s name off her lips for now, to see if Dennis got there for himself. Dennis could have been an old friend and that meant possible leads.

“Did you choose who you gave them to?”

“Yup. Smokers, jokers. My best patrons. The guys who came in regularly. How’d you get a hold of this?” Dennis passed the matches back to Ella.

“I guess from one of your best patrons. Do you remember any of them?”

Dennis’s line began to uncurl. He took the rod, switched on the bait runner, and began to wrestle with whatever sea creature was attached to the other end.

“God, I’d be lying if I said I did. I remember a Spencer. A Jessie. Some fellow we called Clock because he had one hand bigger than the other.” Dennis tightened his grip around his fishing rod as something tried to pull it down into the depths. “You got someone in mind?”

“Remember a Ken? Or a Kenny?” Ella was still quietly chuckling at the nickname joke. She suddenly thought of her ex-boyfriend, Ben, whose

friends had once nicknamed him Olympic Torch because he never went out.

Dennis yanked the line out of the water. Just a hook. No fish attached. “Goddammit, that could have been a beast. Kenny you say?”

“Yeah. Ken Dark. That was my dad.”

Dennis put his rod down then submerged his hands in a bucket of brown slop. He balled some up then attached it to his line. “Sorry, sweetheart. The only Kenny I know is Kenny Loggins. I had no friends named Kenny back then. This would have been what, mid-nineties?”

“Thereabouts. Maybe a bit before.”

Dennis sighed through his nose then launched his hook back into the water. “I’m coming up dry there. I definitely didn’t give no Kenny one of those matchbooks. Must have passed through a few hands before it reached your old man.”

Ella clutched the matchbook in her palm and then pocketed it. By now, disappointment had begun to feel like an old friend. Was she doing something wrong here? Had she left it so long that the case had become unsolvable? They said that human memory was fallible and unreliable, but no one, even in a small town where gossip spread like wildfire, seemed to have any recollections of her father. It was enough to make her doubt her own sanity. And of all the people she told about her dad, the only person who hadn’t immediately jumped to the *are you sure he was murdered?* retort was Ben. She still hadn’t given up on him, but she’d do what she could to make things right in time.

“Got it. Do you know anyone else who might remember him? Any of those old patrons of yours?”

“I wish. Those old timers are all brown bread, so unless you can speak to the dead then you’re out of luck.”

Ella could indeed speak to the dead, she thought. She did it every week. Every murder she investigated was an effort in practical clairvoyance. Digging into a victim’s life to uncover their secrets was a telepathic conversation with those who’d passed on to the other side. But she couldn’t say that to this man in front of her. More concerning was her sudden realization that she could act as a medium for dead strangers but not for her own flesh and blood.

A lull in the conversation signaled that they’d reached the end of it. Ella had no more questions and it seemed like Dennis had no more answers. She decided to let the man get back to his fishing.

“Thank you, Dennis.”

“Sorry I couldn’t be of more help. Stay if you want. Grab a java.”

“Wish I could but I left my wallet in the car.”

“It’s on the house.”

The man’s longing for companionship tugged at her heartstrings, and she couldn’t help but wonder if her dad would have been in the same position if he hadn’t been so cruelly taken away before he had time to reach this point in life. Would he be sitting on his porch, inviting strangers to sit beside him just to make the days a little less lonely?

“I’d like to, but I just need to be somewhere. I could come back another day. With money, this time.”

“Sure. I’ll hold you to that.”

Ella said her goodbyes and headed out the door. Another brick wall, no closer to understanding what these items in her dad’s possession signified. Heading towards the car, propelled by new adrenaline brought on by the lack of progress, she had an urge to address the next problem in her life.

This little foray into adventure had given her the courage she needed. She could face serial killers every day of the week, but tackling personal issues required a different kind of strength. Before she got home, she had someone she needed to apologize to.

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Ella went to knock on the door to Ben’s apartment but instead rested her knuckles against the wood. She prayed that he might be watching her through the peephole right now, begging her to knock and make herself known so they could rekindle what they used to have. The door, made of nothing more than flimsy wood and metal hinges, seemed impenetrable to her, as though it had been reinforced through the owner’s fury.

Ben had been her once boyfriend. He had the alluring combination of maturity, courtesy, and the lean body of a Roman statue, and she’d foolishly let him go. He’d been nothing but a gentleman to her throughout their short relationship, despite her constant expeditions onto the investigative battlefield that left Ben alone for indeterminate amounts of time. He understood the needs of her work because, unlike all her past lovers, Ben could process perspectives other than his own. He didn’t have a selfish bone in his body. He was an old soul in a 28-year-old’s skin. She’d even exposed Ben to the

hazards of her job, but Ben had fought Ella's old nemesis by her side, coming close to death on several occasions and doing it all with a smile.

The truth was that she didn't deserve him. He had every right to get the hell away from her, but he'd endured the battles and the near-death experiences and come out stronger on the other side. They'd been bonded by blood and a myriad of more intimate matters, but Ella had been blindsided by her own misplaced instincts.

In a moment of world-weariness, she'd stupidly searched Ben's name on the FBI database. She indeed found a file belonging to the same man who'd promised her that he had no secrets. After refusing to look out of respect for his privacy, curiosity had eventually won the battle and she'd discovered that Ben had been a murder suspect five years ago. Ben's then-girlfriend had been found strangled, and Ben had been the last one to see her alive. The evidence, or lack thereof, went in his favor, and Ben was cleared of any involvement.

The only other person who knew about this little incident was Ella's partner, Mia Ripley. Ripley had told Ella to drop it, stop overthinking, and believe the evidence. Law enforcement had found him not guilty and that should have been enough.

But Ella had persisted, thought about nothing else for a month, convinced herself that Ben must have been a cold-blooded killer. When she confronted Ben with the information a week ago, she found herself staring at the same sight as now. A closed door.

Her calls had gone ignored, text messages unanswered. Ben had shut himself off from her, and he'd done so believing that his ex-girlfriend thought him a murderer. If she knew Ben half as well as she thought she did, then that little fact would eat him from the inside out. Every story had two sides and now that she'd had time to dwell on it, she wanted to hear Ben's version. Did he owe her an explanation? Absolutely not. Did she owe him one? Yes she did.

Finding the courage, she knocked on the door and waited for what felt like an eternity. Someone shuffled on the other side, the footsteps getting louder as a body approached the door. Beyond the wooden barrier, she could feel his presence. That warm, comforting aura that he had about him. He was there, watching her through the spyhole, waiting to make a decision.

"Leave me alone," a voice said from the other side.

Another disappointment, but Ben's reaction was understandable.

"I'm sorry," she called. "Please talk to me."

Silence for a moment, then “Not interested in being called a murderer, thanks.”

“I don’t think that. I was wrong. Come on.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t do it.”

If she had to grovel, so be it. “Please, Ben, I didn’t mean it like that. I was just... overthinking.”

“I know,” Ben called back.

“I just want to hear your side of the story.”

The door shot open so fast that Ella felt the draft. Ben stood there half-dressed, bloodshot eyes like was on the final stretch of a three-day binge. She’d never seen him look so haggard.

“My side of the story? Are you kidding?”

“I gave you mine.”

“I trusted you. You stomped that trust to bits. If the shoe was on the other foot, I’d have communicated with you. Not bottled everything up and exploded on you.”

A whirlwind reaction swept through her head, storming down to her stomach. Not rage but frustration. Even if Ben did have a murderous secret, she just wanted to hear it out of his mouth. Unanswered questions were worse than horrid revelations.

“This isn’t fair, Ben.”

The haggard young man sunk into the wall, a portrait of despair. “Fair? Please don’t talk to me about fair. I did everything for you. I walked through war zones with you, and now you accuse me of not being fair?”

His words hooked right into her veins, like an injection of harsh reality. He made a good point.

“You’re right,” Ella said. She queued up the next words in her head because she knew it wouldn’t be long before she was staring at a door again, but before she could get them out, her phone began to ring in her pocket.

Ben said, “You should get that.”

Ella let the call ring out. Then it buzzed with either a text or a voicemail. “I don’t care. I came to make things right with you. Could we...”

“I’m really sorry Ella, but I can’t go down that road again. I can’t face it.” Ben let the comment breathe then said, “Answer your phone. Other people need you more than I do.”

And Ben disappeared, replaced with a door. It locked from the other side and Ella heard Ben retreat into his apartment.



She had her answer. One of the few lights in her life had been extinguished. She backed away from the door, as much as she wanted to keep trying to do whatever it took to have a meaningful conversation with this man. But he'd made his decision and any further interaction on her part would be tantamount to harassment.

Another buzz. Ella checked her phone and found one missed call from HQ and one text message from Ripley. A week ago, they'd parted on pretty bad terms, but Ella hoped the break might have mended things.

The message just said: *Director's office now.*

## CHAPTER THREE

How many times had Mia Ripley sat in this office, staring at an overworked man in a suit asking her to put her life on the line one more time? More times than she could count. More directors than she could count. Names and faces had come and gone in droves, most of whom had fallen prey to the stress of the job, some of whom had been unable to resist the temptation of a noose. Ripley, an FBI employee of thirty years, could scarcely believe she'd come out on the other side, although she too had her fair share of wounds.

But still, retirement was less than four months away. Once an FBI legend, soon to be a woman of leisure. She had to give six months' notice before she could officially hang up her Glock .22, and during this intermittent period, the director had given her two options. Either ride her remaining weeks out behind a desk or spend her final days passing her knowledge onto the next generation. The latter came with a lot more risk, but as a career field agent, the idea of sitting at a computer made her itch. She'd rather face serial murderers in the flesh than subject herself to torturous office work.

A furious knock at the door interrupted the unusual tranquility of the director's office. Behind the frosted glass, Ripley made out the familiar outline of her partner and friend. A great agent, and if she wasn't so headstrong, she could even be a good one. Ella Dark walked in and slammed the door with unnecessary force, shattering the peace and quiet that Ripley and the director had been relishing. You could always rely on Ella to ruin a perfectly good silence.

"Miss Dark, thank you for coming," said director William Edis. Ella sat on the opposite side of the room, not making eye contact with either soul as she spoke her greetings.

"How are you, Dark?" Ripley asked.

"Fine. You?" said Ella.

"Better." Ripley had been partnered with Ella for just over a year now, and together they'd closed eleven active cases, some within a couple of days of hard investigative work. They'd lived and nearly died by each other's sides and even brought down the number one on the FBI's Most Wanted list six weeks ago. It was a fantastic record for such a young rookie, and in around five years she'd be on her way to legendary status.

But Ripley had her doubts. If she carried on the way she had, the rookie wouldn't make it that far. This job had a way of blackening your heart and twisting your worldview. Every time you journeyed into the abyss, you unknowingly chipped away at your core. Every day was an axe blow to your very being, and eventually it would split your soul in two if you didn't find light amid the darkness.

But conveying that fact to absolutely anyone was an impossible task. Everyone thought they had the mettle. They all believed they were mentally strong enough to see the world's most disturbing sights and remain unaffected. The hero fantasy was all well and good until a masked psychopath locked you in a basement, until you found piles of children's shoes in a killer's hideout, until you saw the white eyeballs of a drowned girl in the Mississippi River. In this game, the test came before the lesson, and most people failed it. The rookie had always struggled to master the work-life balance, and in this job, you needed a good amount of life to offset the death. If you didn't, you ended up finding more detrimental ways to cope. Booze, pills, self-destruction. Ripley herself had taken to the bottle and vented her frustrations out on her ex-husbands, resulting in a lot of pointless fights and failed marriages. Ripley could see that same resentment festering in the rookie now.

"We've got something strange going on in West Virginia," Edis said. He passed brown folders to each agent. "Two victims in three days, found within three miles of each other."

Ripley scanned the details, starting with the most recent victim and working back. One crime scene photo showed a middle-aged man on his knees in some kind of building. Another showed a pool of blood coagulating around his knees.

Edis continued, "The most recent victim was a gentleman, discovered last night in a storage unit where he was apparently living."

"On his knees. Odd position to be left dead in," said Ripley.

"Indeed."

Ripley moved to the first victim to check the similarities. This time it was a woman, found dead in her apartment in a similar position. The glossy photograph showed her kneeling on the floor, legs slightly apart, with her face pressed into the sofa. Again, a river of blood had collected beneath her. Ripley had questions.

"Director, what connects these, exactly?" Ripley looked over at her

partner to gauge her response to the details but found nothing but a blank expression on her face. Ripley wanted to grab the file from Ella's hands and demand she get away from this job for six months. Go out and get hammered, take a trip to Europe, spend the night with some chiseled young stud. Anything to undo the constant frown on her face. Something that might put some color back into her cheeks. The rookie was ghostly pale and had more split ends than a horse's tail.

"Proximity more than anything," the director said.

Ripley jumped back and forth between the crime scene photos. Her first thought was that these two murders could easily have been the work of two separate people.

"That's all that connects them," Ripley said. "Vastly different victimology. The first was stabbed in the sternum while the second was attacked in the back. Do we have any confirmation they were committed by the same person? Any DNA or hair strands or anything?"

"Afraid not. But this..." Edis checked his notes. "A place called Alfa Creek. Small town. The odds of two murders occurring within a week is quite slim, no?"

"No. It happens all the time. You should know this," said Ripley.

"Perhaps, but we have a duty to investigate it."

"Not if it's not a serial case we don't. It looks to me like the first victim was killed in broad daylight while the second was carried out in the early hours. Everything about this screams two isolated incidents to me."

"They're connected," Ella said.

Ripley and the director turned to the new voice and willed Ella to continue. But she didn't. She just carried on leafing through the pages.

"Do go on," Edis said.

Ella coughed into her elbow then removed two photographs from the folder. "He wants us to think these bodies fell like this but he's posed them. Look at their legs."

Ripley peered closer. Both victims were kneeling, their legs spread about ninety degrees apart. Ripley didn't see anything special about them.

"I got nothing."

"Both died from being stabbed. The natural reaction to a knife in your gut is to tense up, contract your muscles, shrink yourself so the shock is dispersed around the body. No dying person is gonna land like these have. He positioned them like this."

Ripley roleplayed the scenario in her head. She'd been stabbed enough times to recall the feeling with unwanted accuracy. The rookie was right. When steel penetrated your flesh, tension gripped your body so hard you became a plank of wood.

"Decent observation," Ripley agreed.

"The question is why he's posed them like this when he could have just left them where he killed them."

Edis jumped in. "That's for you agents to figure out. No flights to West Virginia for hours but I need you there ASAP. You're on the jet. You should get there in an hour if the pilot puts his foot down."

"On it." Ripley shoved the folder under her arm and made for the door. The rookie stayed behind, probably not wanting to face the woman she'd had a blazing argument with a week ago. But as far as Ripley was concerned, they'd aired their grievances and so were ready to move on. Outside of the director's office, Ripley checked her phone and her bag and made sure she had everything she needed for the trip. She already knew she did, but it was an excuse to wait for Ella.

Two minutes later, the rookie emerged from within, a mask of defeat already plastered across her face. She looked surprised to find Ripley still out here.

"How are things, Dark?"

Ella readjusted her bag over her shoulder and said, "I'm fine. And you?"

"No complaints. Ready to head out?"

Ella scratched her head, looked at the floor and exhaled like she was puffing on an invisible cigarette. "Are you sure you want to go out there with me again?"

Ripley checked the hallways to make sure no one was within earshot. "We had an argument. So what? Learn to let things go."

Ella smiled dismissively. "We haven't even left and you're already lecturing me." She laughed but there was venom behind it.

"For God's sake, Ella. I meant what I said and I'm sure you did too. We disagree on things and that's just how it is. I'm ready to wipe the slate clean, are you?"

During their last case, Ella had gone rogue and took the investigation into her own hands. She'd taken a suspect out into the woods, put a gun barrel to his head and demanded he admit his wrongdoings. Ella had no intention of going through with the act, of course. It was just smoke and mirrors to elicit a

confession. However, it was a major violation of protocol, not to mention the suspect's human rights. Ripley was surprised the director hadn't torn the rookie a new backside for it because that suspect could sue the FBI for millions. But since the suspect had been a prolific burglar, he'd stayed quiet about the incident, not wanting to dip his toes too deeply into law enforcement waters. Ella had been right about his guilt, but wrong in her approach. Hopefully, she'd learned her lesson for this time.

"Sure. Let's start over."

"Great. Do you want to head to the airport together?"

"I just need to get my things."

"Not printing off sealed files, I hope," said Ripley. She meant it as a joke but the end result had a little more malice than intended.

Ella violently rubbed her face with both hands and said, "No. Just my overnight things."

"Alright, I'll see you outside."

The rookie strode off with her head bowed down. Their relationship was going to take some mending but Ripley brushed off the thought, assuming time would heal their wounds. She turned her attention to more pressing matters – two victims who'd been stabbed and left for dead inside their homes. Time to dig into this killer's mind, into these victims' lives and find out exactly what this killer was trying to say. She had a few ideas in mind, but she had to ask herself: how did this killer know there'd be victims waiting for him in this home, in this storage unit? These two incidents could both technically be considered home invasions, and home invasions pointed to one type of offender above all others.

Ripley had to acknowledge that this might be more than a span of serial killings.

They could be dealing with a stalker.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Ella thought that being thirty-thousand feet in the air might clear her mind, as though she could leave her problems back in D.C., on the ground. But she found she'd inadvertently brought them along with her. Staring at the crime scene photographs on the glossy table between her and Ripley, she struggled to focus on anything but the events of this morning. The dead end of her father's strange death, Ben's abrupt exit from her life.

Ripley got out of her chair once the plane settled into a steady motion and made for the coffee machine. She came back with two watery hits of caffeine and that was good enough for Ella. FBI private jets weren't the height of luxury that the name implied, but Ella always thought that luxury was overrated. Nothing irked her more than paying over the odds for something just because it had a gold ribbon around it. Must have been a byproduct of growing up in a farmer's town. A place where people would deep-fry roadkill if it meant saving a few bucks. Everything in the modern world just seemed like a re-packaged, worse version of something that came before, only with a higher price tag.

She put the nihilism to one side for the moment, making the most of the wonderful view of a fading city down below. It was the brief, transient moment between ground and clouds where you could glimpse an overview of everything you were leaving behind. Ripley tapped on one of the crime scene photos to get her attention.

"What do you make of this unsub?" she asked.

Ella scoured the papers, trying to place herself in the killer's mind, trying to see the world from his twisted perspective. All she saw were two dead people, posed in a particularly odd position. She didn't have much to go on right now, or maybe it was her clouded vision preventing her from seeing beyond the pictures to the real story.

"What do *you* make of it?" Ella asked.

"I see disparate victimology and barely any connections between the two. This first victim has all the makings of a crime of passion to me, and the second one could even be a suicide. If you hadn't pointed out the positioning, that would be my conclusion."

Ella saw something completely different. "I see a home invader."

"Purposely targeted?"

Home invasion cases always began with stabs in the dark. Ella excused the pun. “Has to be. I doubt he’d just invade random houses.”

“It does happen,” Ripley said.

It did happen, but the cases were few and far between. Richard Ramirez, Richard Chase, Dennis Rader. The number of targeted victims in home invasions far outweighed random break-ins that resulted in murder. Ella didn’t have the energy or interest to give Ripley a history lesson.

“Yeah, but not here.”

“Why?”

Ella found a photograph of an exterior shot of the first victim’s house. The neighbors on either side were in the periphery. Ella wondered how this wasn’t obvious to Ripley, but then a sudden realization came to her.

“Mia, you don’t have to hold my hand here. Don’t play dumb just to get me to talk.”

It was a common interrogation trick. Mention the opposite of what you genuinely believed so that the suspect couldn’t help but correct you, thus confirming your initial thoughts. Ripley never did that to her. It was tantamount to condescension.

“I’m not getting much else out of you,” Ripley said. “But I’m glad you saw through it.”

Looked like Ripley was playing the long con. Ella didn’t have the patience for it.

“Victim number one could have been a burglary gone wrong, but he’s not going to gut someone and pose them just for catching him in the act. Plus if he was going to rob a joint, he wouldn’t target a house smack-bang in the middle of a busy street. Same goes for the second one. He’s killed this guy in a storage building. There must have been cameras everywhere. Either this guy is really dumb or he’s on a mission. I’m going to bet the latter.”

Ripley sat back, seemingly satisfied with the answer. She got what she wanted.

“Good. I think the same.”

“So say it. You’re the consultant after all.”

“I want you to come to these conclusions yourself. In a few months, I won’t be around anymore.”

“Believe me, I know,” said Ella. “But you don’t have to walk me through things like I’m a kid.”

Ella knew she was being confrontational but the words came out like



vomit. Only a few months ago, she'd kept a secret from Ripley that nearly drove an impenetrable divide between them. Now she'd gone the opposite way. She'd developed some kind of truth Tourette's. It was like the words were poison and she had to spit them out at the first opportunity.

Ripley put her coffee down and said, "Dark, I think something's bothering you and I don't know what. Is it your boyfriend's case again? Or your dad's? I think you're looking for answers where there aren't any."

Ella felt like every time she opened her mouth, or took any action, it led to more problems. She decided to keep quiet about everything. Besides, all Ripley would do was berate her, as though trying to solve the mysteries that plagued her was some kind of flaw.

"Neither. I'm just... tired."

Ripley would tell her it was the darkness eating her soul, the side effects of dealing with the world's most heinous individuals. Ella couldn't lie. Part of it was indeed this job. For all the killers she'd put behind bars, it didn't bring any of the victims back to life. Imprisonment was the only the second-best option. Reanimating the innocent souls that were cruelly slain would be number one, but science hadn't yet caught up with her whimsical desires. She still saw those victims' faces in her dreams, sometimes alive and well. And when she woke up, she had to learn of the transient and fleeting nature of life one more time.

"Well, I know you think I'm a pain in the ass right now, but I'll always lend an ear. You know this."

"It's fine Mia, I'm just trying to get into this unsub's head."

Ripley nodded in acknowledgment then left the conversation to die. Clouds engulfed the windows as Ella did away with the jumbled thoughts and took to the matter at hand. Lives were on the line here. Her own problems would have to wait another day because if she wasn't focused, the next bloodstains could be on her hands. Her priority was to figure this unsub out, apprehend him, and ensure there were no new faces in her dreams.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The death site of this poor gentleman was crammed and confined. A small cube of tragedy that Ella could take in whole at a single glance. She stood back and surveyed the storage unit like a painting, flanked by two walls and a raised door. It was like looking into a freshly built mausoleum.

“Jesus, what a mess,” Ripley said.

“Isn’t it? Poor fellow.” The cramped unit, this poor victim surrounded by the only things he had left in his life. It amplified the tragedy.

From the group of forensic officers nestled inside the unit, a young man in a brown uniform emerged, shielding his nose as he passed the dead body. He made a beeline towards the new arrivals with the look of someone who’d just caught his first sight of death. Maybe he had, thought Ella.

“Agents?” he asked them. “You from D.C.?”

“That we are,” said Ella as she took his hand. “I’m Agent Dark and this is Agent Ripley.”

“Welcome to the mountains,” he said as he wiped his brow. “I’m Sheriff Hale. Or Cody. Whichever’s easier to remember.”

Ripley said, “Thanks for meeting us, Sheriff. Can you talk us through your findings?”

“I’ll be honest, this is new territory for me. This kind of stuff doesn’t happen around here too often. I’m in the deep end here,” the sheriff said, looking a little concerned that his confession might undo some of his authority. But Ella appreciated the honesty. She knew better than anyone that speaking up was the best thing to do when you were out of your depth.

“Totally get it,” she said. “First homicide case?”

“Second, after the one the other day.”

“Of course.”

“The closest we ever got was an acid attack,” the sheriff said. “Poor young woman. Left her with horrible sores. Left me scarred too. That’s the most extreme thing we’ve had. But this is... something else.”

“A steep learning curve,” Ripley said.

“Tell me about it. A couple of my guys are up with the manager in his office running through the security tapes. That’s our best hope right now.” Sheriff Hale wiped his bloodshot eyes then adjusted his gun in its holster. He seemed far too youthful for the role of sheriff; his soft, round face and

glowing complexion gave the impression of a man much too inexperienced for such responsibility. He had an air of innocence that seemed at odds with the hard, grizzled veterans of law enforcement who usually held the position.

“You don’t get much crime around here at all?” Ripley jumped in.

“Hardly. Our precinct has five full-timers. Back when my father ran the joint he was the only cop in town.”

Now it made sense. A product of nepotism. But still, it was nice to see a young person take on an old man’s role. Ella couldn’t quite put her finger on it, but something about the way he carried himself made her think back to her first case on the job.

“Small town. Gossip must spread like the plague around here,” Ripley said.

“Sure does. This town is full of curtain twitchers. Secrets don’t stay secrets for long around here. We’re doing what we can to keep these murders on the down-low.”

“Good, we should...”

“No.” Ella cut her partner off. “Our killer’s a local. Someone who snapped. Someone who’s been on the edge for a while. We need to get the details of these murders out there. Somebody knows this guy.”

Sheriff Hale nervously scanned the room, his gaze shifting uneasily between the agents. “Put it out there? That might not be wise.”

Ella checked Ripley’s expression. Mostly nondescript, maybe with a trickle of curiosity. It was the look that usually preceded a brief lecture. Ella ignored it. She was in charge now. Ripley was just the consultant and she’d have to get used to this little dynamic shift.

“The eyes and ears of the public are the best tools we have, especially in places like this.”

Ripley added, “It’s true.” Much to Ella’s surprise.

“It might put the fear of God in a few people, but fear prompts people into action.” The comment sounded more venomous than Ella intended, then she realized she was paraphrasing Charles Manson. She felt a sudden chill through her body.

“Fear of God is right,” the sheriff said. “Big religious community around here. They’re gonna think the Devil did this.”

Ella’s brain suddenly became a flurry of fast-moving thoughts, her mind working rapidly as the sheriff’s comment sunk in. “The Devil, huh,” she said.

“Something like that.” The sheriff went to continue but one of the masked

technicians appeared beside him. She removed her protective equipment and took a deep breath.

“We’re finished in there now,” the woman said. “No prints. No hair fibers. No boot markings. No signs of forced entry.”

“Nothing?”

“At least not inside the unit,” she said. “My guys still need to sweep the rest of this place but right now we’re coming up short.”

“Any idea what time the victim was killed?” Ella asked.

The woman crossed the room and grabbed a clipboard from one of her colleagues. When she came back, she said, “You’d need a coroner for an accurate answer but according to this initial report, about eleven hours ago. That’s based on discoloration of the wound and tightness of the skin.”

“About midnight last night,” Ella said.

“More or less,” the woman confirmed.

“Can we take a look?”

“Go ahead. We’re going to check for prints on the exterior.”

Ella and Ripley headed towards the unit as the technicians removed their apparatus. They had to follow the path that had been forged among the clutter, leaving very little wiggle room. But the centerpiece of this tragic scene was the lifeless body of a middle-aged man, still on his knees with his elbows dug into a wooden chair. His hands rested on his shoulders and his face had sunk into the heavy wood. She took a moment to pay her respects to this premature loss of life, and although she’d never met this man before, she’d surely get to know him very soon. Even from beyond the grave, the dead still had ways of telling their stories.

“Stabbed in the back,” Ella said.

“Quite literally,” Ripley replied. She knelt and inspected the laceration just to the left of the victim’s spinal column. “Missed the spine by a cat’s hair, but the force could have still severed one of the vertebral arteries.”

Ella considered the implications. “Would have paralyzed him.”

“Yeah. If this wound is the cause of death, then chances were he took a few minutes to pass out.”

The victim’s positioning was quite bizarre, even by serial killer standards. Looking at the strange contortion effort in front of her, she wasn’t sure of much, but she was positive this positioning was no accident.

“He’d have been more malleable in a paralyzed state,” she said. “Would have helped him get the body into this weird position.” Despite popular

belief, moving a dead body – no matter your level of strength – was always a difficult task. Even Edmund Kemper, a seven-foot, three-hundred-pounder, had trouble moving dead coeds from one place to another.

“I think I agree,” Ripley said. “But that’s real risky business, or…”

“Or part of the plan,” Ella said, catching Ripley’s train of thought. “There’s no chance he’d leave the victim alive, so he’d have to wait with them until they died.”

“Could mean he wanted to spend some time with them, but he had to subdue them first.”

“So he’s weak. He doesn’t have the physical prowess to subdue them with strength. Or the confidence to point a gun at them.” Ella turned and inspected the rest of the unit, trying to gain a semblance of character based on the man’s possessions. She saw old newspapers and magazines strewn about the floor, along with a few discarded clothing items and several empty beer bottles. There was a mattress and a couple of pillows, although they seemed to be an extension of the floor space.

“The question is – why here?” asked Ripley.

Ella was already forearm-deep in some of the boxes lining the far wall. The items within told a sad story. She held up a framed, high-definition photo of a couple standing on a balcony at some holiday resort. It would have been a beautiful photo if not for the cracked glass blurring the woman’s face.

“This guy was living here,” Ella said.

“The mattress says that but the thing is filthy.”

“Look at these items. Photos of what I assume is his wife. Gym clothes. He’s even got a cooler with rice in it. You don’t store these things. They’re the trappings of a person’s life.” She dug in deeper, finding a business card for a therapist with a name she couldn’t pronounce. Kowalczyk. It was crumpled down the middle, as though a quivering thumb had gripped it while they dialed the phone number. A sign of a troubled mind.

“Agents,” the sheriff called. He was standing beside a short gentleman in a black fleece zipped up to his chin. The new arrival stood sideways, unable to look at the product of murder laying inside the unit. “This is Mr. Bennett. The owner.”

Ella and Ripley left the unit and took the owner and sheriff aside, out of sight of the dead body and dried blood. The owner opened his mouth to speak but no words came out.

“Mr. Bennett, is it?” Ella asked.

The man found his voice after a few inhales. “Uh... Mike is fine,” he uttered. “It was me who found David. Last night.”

The man must have suffered a severe shock, and returning to the scene had clearly revived his trauma. “Can you talk us through it?” asked Ripley. “Take as long as you need.”

Mike glanced towards a distant stairwell and then back at the corridor, probably replaying the details in his head. Ella noticed his eye movements, relaxed shoulders, and feet pointed in her direction, three signs of a truth-teller.

“I saw something on the security monitor at about eleven o’ clock. I came down to inspect and found...that.”

Ella asked, “What did you see exactly?”

“Nothing. I just got alerted that there was movement down here. Could have been anything.”

Sheriff Hale jumped in, “My guys have checked the cameras. Our victim, David Harper, arrived here around ten p.m. But his murderer? A phantom.”

Ella applied some critical thought. “The cameras don’t catch every inch of this place?”

Mike shook his head. “No, just the main walkways. There are some unmonitored areas, and some of the bigger units have two entrances. Some from outside.”

“Meaning he could have snuck in via another unit, then kept himself in the shadows.”

“He knew this place,” Ripley said.

“We’ll need a list of names. Everyone who has a unit here.”

Mike seemed unsure. He clasped his hands tightly in front of him. “That’s a lot of names. We have four-hundred units here.”

Ella asked, “All in use?”

“Most of them.”

“So be it. Same goes for employees, old and new. And any contractors that have worked here in the past year.”

Mike shuffled, then said, “Understood. I’m not a suspect, am I?”

“Not according to these cameras,” said the sheriff.

“Thank God,” said Mike.

Ella made a mental note to check this footage out for herself once she’d commandeered an office space, to see what insights it might offer into their killer. Even a small shadow could reveal intimate details about a person.

Psychological profiles were jigsaws and little tidbits about the person made up the pieces.

“Mr. Bennett, you referred to this victim as David. You knew him?” she asked.

The owner shrugged. “Yes and no. We had a pretty detailed conversation the day he started renting the unit. The man was at the end of his rope.”

“How so?”

“Depressed, anxious. He used to be a high roller but he lost a ton of money apparently. A lot of what he said went over my head but I get the impression it was bad investments. Then his hot young wife kicked him to the curb, or so he said.”

Ripley asked, “Was he living here?”

“I’m sure he stayed some nights. I don’t usually allow it but I looked the other way in his case. I think he was drifting, to be honest.”

Ella looked back towards the unit and tried to imagine a day in the victim’s life, the day his lover cast him to the wind. It wasn’t a clear picture, but the beats were there. The sudden heartache, the gut punch, the painful separation of the cord that tied you to your life partner.

But even so, how did that relate to the man’s death? If she knew this information an hour ago, she might have considered David’s death a suicide as Ripley had suggested. But the cause of death and bizarre positioning of the body told a different story.

She asked, “Mr. Bennett, do you have David’s details on hand? Including his old address?”

“Yes, we need an address for bill payments. It’s all on file.”

“We’ll need it.”

“Give me five minutes.”

Ella nodded. Mike disappeared down the corridor. Ripley took over.

“Sheriff, we’ll see what we can discover about the victim. Please get copies of the CCTV tapes and scour them for anything suspicious, anything that might reveal our perp’s identity.”

“You got it.”

The next stop was David’s old house. They needed to talk to this ex-partner of his, this so-called hot young wife who so willingly left David Harper out to dry. It was no secret that around forty percent of murders in America involved the victim’s spouse in some capacity, and financial incentives were the number one motivator.

And the cracked glass in David's picture frame suggested that he and his ex-wife weren't exactly on great terms.



## CHAPTER SIX

The woman sitting across from Ella did not seem the slightest bit concerned that two members of the FBI were in her house. Ella took a moment to admire the opulent décor of Leslie Harper's living room: lavish furniture, framed artwork, the finely crafted rug caressing her soles. It all created a surreal environment that seemed at odds with the topic of discussion. As Ella adjusted herself on the white leather chair, she thought this too comfortable a position to be talking about death. It was a strange juxtaposition of grandeur and gravity, a reminder that even in the face of the most serious matters, life went on.

"You're aware of what happened to your ex-husband?" Ripley asked. Greetings had been minimal and forced, as though Leslie saw the ordeal as nothing more than a formality. Now the young woman, probably still in her twenties, platinum blonde hair cut off at the chin, blew her freshly painted nails dry.

"Not my ex. We're still married," the woman said. "But I haven't seen him for a few months."

Ella asked, "Why not?"

Leslie looked at her like she'd asked an unanswerable question. "Do you see your exes, honey?"

No, Ella thought. *He doesn't talk to me and the one before that died my living room.* "Fair comment."

"No communication? Nothing about the house, family, finances, anything like that?" asked Ripley.

"This is my house. David signed it over to me. He doesn't have any family up here. No kids. We had nothing to talk about."

Ella jumped right into the burning questions. Leslie might have been the trophy wife, but she seemed pretty blunt. With interviewees like this, you didn't have to beat around the bush. "How did David end up destitute?"

Leslie reached to her side, picked up a magazine, and dropped it again. Looked like she was the kind of person whose hands always had to be on the go. "He got conned by some sharks, basically. Invested in some stupid wine vineyard that turned out to not exist. I don't know how much he pumped into it, but it was well over a hundred grand. Then he threw more cash at it when nothing happened. God knows why."

“Sunk cost fallacy,” Ella said. “Reluctance to abandon because of heavy investments.”

Leslie looked at her blankly, fishing for the simplified version.

Ella said, “Like finishing a boring movie just because you bought a ticket.”

Leslie blinked, seemed to grasp it. “Yeah. Something like that.”

“Was that related to your breakup?”

Leslie delicately scratched her temple with a single fingernail. “Look, I know my role. I’m the trophy wife. Arm candy. When David’s string of bad luck started, that’s when things started going downhill for our relationship too.”

Ella was beginning to feel a little sick. “You left him because he wasn’t rich anymore?”

“Other way around, honey. He left me. He said he wouldn’t drag me down with him.”

Ripley asked, “And you didn’t try to hold on to him? You let him go and live in a storage unit?”

“Oh I tried. I begged him not to go. But he said he was leaving for somewhere new, to start again. I had no idea where he was holed up. For all I knew, he was living it up in Thailand.”

Suspicion was Ella’s first response, but Leslie’s demeanor didn’t suggest deceit. As if reading her mind, Leslie said, “Don’t believe me? I got text messages dating back months. I can show you just how stubborn David was.”

Ella lost herself in the abstract art piece hanging above Leslie’s fireplace while she reflected on her victim’s predicament. By the sound of it, David was a man of iron will and concrete morals. A rare breed to find in the wild. His failure to provide for Leslie had instilled a sense of deserved punishment, as though he needed to face the repercussions in order to honorably correct his mistakes. She suddenly thought about those Japanese CEOs who threw themselves off buildings whenever their companies folded.

“Did David make any enemies during this whole business venture gone wrong?” Ripley asked.

Leslie applied some moisturizing cream to her hands and checked her reflection in a handheld mirror. One half of Ella wanted her to at least act upset about her husband’s death, but the other half welcomed the honesty.

“No idea. He kept all that stuff close to his chest. Besides, he wasn’t gonna get much conversation out of me when it came to business. He

borrowed some money at one point, but that's as much as I know. Don't ask me who he borrowed it from or how much. He kept me at arm's length about those things."

If David had been dealing with loan sharks, they might have been forced to go nuclear when he couldn't pay them back. Ella thought of her father, then circled back to the situation at hand. But even if David's murder was payback, how did the first victim factor into this? She made mental notes to look into David's financial history and see if victim number one fit into the puzzle.

Ella asked, "So, you don't know of anyone who might have wanted to hurt David? Even people unrelated to his business ventures?"

"No one," Leslie said abruptly. "He wasn't a social animal by any means. He didn't have a ton of friends. If he wasn't living to work he wasn't living."

Ella stood up and passed Leslie her contact details. She doubted there was any more information to extract from the not-so-grieving woman, and it looked like she had more important things on her mind than a dead ex. "If you think of anything else, please give us a call."

Leslie placed Ella's business card to her side without even glancing at it. "I will."

Ella's gaze slowly swept across the walls of Leslie's home, captivated by the two pieces hanging in place. The artworks were encased in ornate golden frames, each one intricately crafted by hand. One showed a man reading a book outside the pearly gates, the other was an abstract interpretation of Jesus on the cross. "Nice artwork," she said.

Leslie began leading the agents to the door, then stopped and said, "Oh, those things. Yeah, David was big into that stuff. Gave off a vibe of luxury or something. He took most of the others with him."

Ella mulled over the remark. "You mean, he took giant pieces like this with him?"

Leslie nodded. "Yes. He was obsessed with them. Apparently these things are worth a hundred grand. God knows why. They're just strokes of paint."

Ella turned to her partner, whose expression evoked the same thoughts that were running through Ella's head. Their eyes met in silent agreement.

Until now, they'd only focused on what they *had* found in his storage unit. They didn't stop to consider what might be missing.

Ella had a sudden burst of insight, and she realized exactly where they had to go next.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Ella and Ripley arrived at the scene of the first murder, a house that had been stripped of its inhabitants but still lingered with ghosts of tragedy. It was a modest home on an unusually busy stretch of road in this backwater town, and the mountain view from the rear blocked out most of the sun. This home belonged to Joanne Gustafson, the first casualty of this active serial killer. According to the police report, Joanne was thirty-one years old, lived alone, and was recently divorced.

In the living room, Joanne's body had since been removed by the coroners, but the red-dyed carpet served as a reminder of what had happened here. Ella turned to her partner and said, "David Harper didn't have any art pieces in his unit."

"A burglary gone overboard," Ripley suggested.

"Right?" Ella asked. "What if our unsub knew that David had some valuable pieces, so he broke into his storage unit, killed him, and took his paintings?"

Ripley eyeballed the area where Joanne's body had once been with stern curiosity. "It's not impossible. A storage unit is easier to penetrate than a real house. But how does that relate to this murder?"

"If our guy is some kind of murderous repo man, maybe for some predatory underground company, he might have burgled some high-value things from here too."

Now that Ella spoke the words aloud, she suddenly doubted her own theory. But if there was one thing she'd learned during her time in the field, it was that you had to weed out the improbable to uncover the possible.

"It's worth adding to the list," Ripley said, "but this place doesn't look like it's been burgled. Look here, ornaments, laptop, TV. If he wanted money, he'd have taken these."

Ella felt a wave of embarrassment as she realized how ridiculous her suggestion was. "Sorry, I'm talking crap. I've just got murderous repo men on my mind."

Ripley began rifling through drawers in Joanne's living room. "Huh?"

Ella changed the topic. "Nothing. I mean, it was just a thought. I'm thinking out loud."

"A couple of jewelry pieces here," said Ripley as she pulled open a

drawer. “Not mega bucks, but worth stealing.”

Ella closed her eyes and let her mind drift back in time, conjuring up the events of this murder like a movie reel. She played it out in chronological order.

“So the back doors are locked. There’s no way in other than through the front door.”

Ripley closed the drawers and assumed the role of the killer. After looking around for any other exit points, she said, “More often than not, home invaders just walk in through the front door. I think our unsub did exactly that.”

“Then he creeps through the kitchen, blitz attacks this woman by stabbing her in the abdomen, then poses her here on this sofa.”

“Cut and dry.” Ripley checked something on her phone then said, “Autopsy report says the blade ruptured her liver. That’s usually a death sentence if the blade is removed.”

With a little more contemplation, Ella’s burglary theory seemed even more ludicrous. “Our unsub came here with the intent to kill. Abdomen wounds are only fatal if you hit the right spot.”

“And this guy hit the ultimate spot. It allowed him a few seconds with the victim before she passed out from blood loss.”

“Just like the second victim.”

“Almost a carbon copy,” Ripley said. “I’m just going to check upstairs, see if anything stands out.”

Ella stayed put and used the moment to pay her respects to the deceased. She stood in silence, offering condolences that would never be heard but needed to be paid regardless. No one should endure a premature death, and the fact was made all the more tragic when it took place where Joanne was meant to feel most safe.

Peering up and out of the living room window, Ella’s heart skipped a beat as she spotted a figure at the end of the driveway. As she squinted for a better look, she could make out the silhouette of someone standing motionless, front and center, ogling the house with something akin to morbid curiosity. Maybe she was a local who’d heard the news of the tragedy. Usually, there were officers positioned outside to keep onlookers at bay, but in a town with so few cops, yellow crime scene tape had to suffice.

Ella went through the kitchen and out the front door. She called out, “Can I help you?”

The figure loomed closer, which Ella now saw was indeed a woman. Her raven locks were cropped close to her scalp, and her slim frame seemed almost fragile in the dim light.

“The police asked me to meet someone here,” she said nervously. “I’m the one who... found her.”

Ella excused her own judgment. “Oh, I’m sorry. Please come in.”

The woman firmly shot down Ella’s request, flapping her hands wildly as if to swat away the suggestion. “No thank you. I can’t go in there.”

“Understood,” Ella said and so met the woman in the middle of the driveway. “What’s your name?”

“Sondra.”

“Thank you for facing this again, Sondra. I’m Agent Dark with the FBI. Can you talk me through what happened?”

Sondra shifted her weight uneasily, her shoulders lifting in a noncommittal shrug. “Me and Joanne work at the textile factory down the road. We’d head there together whenever we were on the same shift. I called for her in the afternoon – no answer. I guessed she was sick or something, but when no one heard from her all day, I decided to check on her.” Sondra tried to remain composed, but the tears threatened to fall.

“Her front door was unlocked?”

Sondra nodded as she smeared her cheek with tears.

“I’m sorry you had to find your friend like that. Did you see anyone else in the area around the same time? Anyone suspicious?”

“No. I’d remember if I had. Everyone knows everyone around here.”

Their unsub had to be a familiar face, a member of the community. This wasn’t some outsider who’d chosen this town because of its lack of cops or isolation. He was one of them. A drinking buddy. A good neighbor.

“I know it doesn’t make anything better, but Joanne seems like a wonderful girl.”

Sondra regarded Ella with an expression of incredulity, her eyebrows arched in disbelief. “Joanne? A wonderful girl?”

Ella hadn’t expected such a turn. “You mean she wasn’t?”

Sondra hastily zipped up her jacket as the wind howled, its icy fingers gripping Ella’s neck. “Joanne had problems. Demons. She was nice enough, but sometimes...” Sondra trailed off.

Ella’s inquisitive nature took over. “How do you mean?”

“I’ve only known Sondra a couple of years, and when I met her she was

the life and soul. Then she changed, like someone flipped a switch.”

“Changed how?”

Ella realized it was a broad question, but a sudden change in personality or lifestyle would mean she had something in common with David Harper. Connections between victims was always preferable to the alternative.

“Miserable. Angry. She stopped caring at work. Showed up drunk a few times.”

“What triggered it?”

“No idea. I know her husband left her recently, but she started acting weird way before that. Joanne kept her personal life close to her chest.”

“Got it. Do you know her husband’s name?”

“Chris Murphy, but I don’t know where he lives or what he’s doing now. He used to work with us too, but then he just disappeared.”

Ella noted the name. They needed to talk to him pronto. “Thanks so much for the information Sondra. Please call the precinct if you think of anything that could help us.”

Sondra gave a slight nod in agreement, then cautiously asked, “Is it true? There’s been... another one?”

David Harper’s body was still warm, but it seemed that the sheriff had been right. Secrets didn’t stay secrets for long around here. “Yes, we had a second homicide last night.”

Sondra gripped the bridge of her nose, squeezing her eyes shut, as though she was attempting to ward off an oncoming headache. “Who was it? Man? Woman? We have a right to know.”

“Yes you do. It was a male. Found dead in a unit at Securicall Storage.”

Sondra’s face paled at the news. “Oh God, that’s barely two miles from here. Are we in danger? What should we do?”

The query hung unanswered in the air. To compare a heinous crime like serial murder to something as trivial as car theft was almost sacrilegious, yet the two offenses shared one key similarity. You couldn’t stop a thief from stealing a car, but you could stop them from stealing *your* car. The same rang true for serial killing. This unsub wouldn’t stop until he’d completed his mission, whatever that might be, so the only thing that potential targets could do was to keep themselves safe.

“Lock your doors. Don’t trust anyone. Keep your eyes peeled. Whoever did this is a member of the community. You might have seen him before. You might even know him. If you suspect anyone, contact us immediately.”

“I will. Please catch him.”

“We will.”

Sondra clutched herself as she headed back up the street and into her own house at the end of the row. With her interviewee gone, Ella was suddenly engulfed in a heavy blanket of stillness, the kind that could only be found in the dead of night. No distant traffic, not even the gentle hum of wildlife. The street was as silent as a graveyard, as though Joanne’s passing had drained the place of its life and energy. Ella’s heart sank to the depths of her being, a bleak emptiness rising within. The sudden, overwhelming urge to text Ben itched at her fingertips, longing for his comforting words. At times like these, he always knew the perfect thing to say.

Ella began to type a message to him but then thought better of it. It was over and no amount of text messages would change that. Instead, she navigated to the FBI database and searched for Chris Murphy’s details. She had sudden flashbacks to the day she searched Ben’s name on here, because Chris Murphy’s name was listed in the criminal archives.

But before the thought could turn into action, Ripley emerged from the doorway, shoulders slumped in dejection. “No sign of anything being stolen,” she said. “Upstairs hasn’t even been touched.”

“We need to go and speak to the victim’s ex-husband,” Ella said, nose-deep in her phone. She navigated to his criminal record, then jolted the phone away from her face when she spotted Chris’s charges.

“I agree, but the report doesn’t list his name.”

“Don’t worry about that. I already got it.”

Ripley closed the door behind her and unlocked their cruiser. “How?”

Ella flashed the screen to her partner. “Not only have I got his address, but look at this.”

Ripley peered closer, squinting. “Well, what are the odds? I guess we need to have a few words with him.”

Yes they did because Chris Murphy was a wife beater.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

In less progressive times, the other agents at HQ would immediately joke “it was the husband” whenever a dead woman landed in their laps.

Ripley rapped her knuckles against the old door of Chris Murphy’s home. The place was a far cry from the suburban palace his ex-wife had lived in, and looked like it had seen better days. It was situated on the ground floor of a small building, nestled in a quiet neighborhood about three miles from Joanne’s house. Ripley waited patiently for a response, her knuckles still pressed against the wood.

On the way here, Ella had told her about Joanne’s situation, her sudden personality change, her apparent inner demons. Whether or not it was relevant to her death remained to be seen, but if anyone knew the finer details, it would be her ex-husband. Not to mention the fact that over twenty women were killed by their husbands every single day in the United States, one of the few murder statistics that actually increased each year. The door creaked open and a face peered through the gap, its pale complexion illuminated by the dim light of the hallway. Ripley’s distorted reflection stared back at her from the lenses of the man’s glasses.

“Hello?” he asked.

“Chris Murphy?” Ripley asked.

“That’s me.”

“I’m Agent Ripley and this is Agent Dark with the FBI. We’re investigating...”

Chris pulled the door wide open, stepped back, and beckoned them inside. “Come in. This is about Joanne, I presume.”

The gesture took Ripley by surprise, but she always welcomed a willing interviewee because they were easy to read. Either their innocence was plastered across their face or their angelic facade was a clear front for their guilt. As with everything in this game, the devil was in the details.

The agents stepped into the apartment, taking in the small space. It was far from lavish, but more than livable with its beige walls and sparse furniture. Chris led them into a front room and leaned against the wall, offering the two-seater sofa to the agents.

“Please take a seat. I’ll stand.”

Ripley sat but Ella remained upright. She always did that. The rookie

thought it was a psychological trick to maintain dominance during interviews, but it was only true in certain situations, and it especially wasn't true if you were half the size of the interviewee. Ella's five-foot-nothing paled in comparison to Chris's lanky stature. The man wore a pair of rectangular glasses that were slightly too big for his face, and his hair was a bit of a mess, short and unkempt. Despite his tall, long-limbed frame, he was alarmingly thin, and his clothes hung off him like a flag in the wind.

"We're sorry to meet you under such circumstances," Ella said. "We'd like to talk about your ex-wife."

"I understand. I already told the police everything I know, though."

"You've been separated a while, is that right?"

The sudden dive into the deep end caught Ripley off guard. She prepared to interject but Chris's expression told her that he didn't mind getting right into the details of his relationship. Both of these victims had been divorced or separated, so Ripley guessed Ella was zoning in on that connection.

"Yes. I left Joanne a year ago."

"Do you mind if we ask why?"

Chris stared in astonishment, taken aback by the remark. "Uh, why do you want to know? I'm not a suspect here, am I?"

"Everyone's a suspect," said Ella. Good line, thought Ripley.

"Okay. Well, I left Joanne because she went off the rails. Used to be the sweetest girl in the world, the kind of girl who'd scold herself if she was a minute late for church. Then she did a total one-eighty."

Ripley always hated the my-wife-suddenly-changed excuse because there were always two sides to every story, but at least this one had been corroborated by Joanne's workmate. "How so?" she asked.

Chris looked away as though the answer lay in the beige walls, then said, "Uh, the reason is... look, this is going to get quite dark, okay?"

"Dark is my middle name," Ella said. "Well, last name, but please go ahead."

"Okay, so Joanne got hardcore into drugs. Methamphetamines. They completely destroyed her. She stopped taking care of herself; she stopped eating. She managed to drag herself to work, but on her days off, she'd just lay around and get high. All her cash went to drugs. She said it put the devil in her. I couldn't live like that, so I had to get out."

Ripley nodded along to the story. "Understandable."

"But that's not all. The reason she started doing drugs was because we

had... an accident.”

Ella asked, “What kind of accident?”

“Me and Jo had been together since we were nineteen. We envisioned our life from the start, and we actually had it all, except for one thing.”

Ripley saw the ending to this tale immediately, propelled by the momentum of despair. “Children,” she said.

Chris’s expression told her that she’d guessed correctly. “Yes, children. It took us a long time, and I mean a *long* time to conceive. Ten years. But then, two months into the pregnancy...” Chris’s eyes drooped and his face fell into a frown. Again, his demeanor did the talking, no need for words.

“I’m very sorry to hear that,” Ella said.

“Tough situation,” Ripley followed up. “Our deepest sympathies.”

Chris swiped at his face, trying to compose himself after a sudden burst of emotion. “Thanks, but it wasn’t just the fact it happened, it was the way it happened.”

Over her thirty year career, Ripley had heard the grisly details of every tragedy in the book. Mass shootings, drownings, cult suicides, incinerations, even people who’d been flayed alive. But something about the loss of a child – even an unborn one – always tugged at her heartstrings. She was surprised she still had any after a lifetime of law enforcement, but it was nice to know that slab of cold steel she called a heart could still beat when it needed to.

“We’re listening,” Ella said. Ripley wasn’t sure how much of this was relevant, but she couldn’t rightly interrupt someone talking about such a topic.

“Jo was poisoned. We’re not sure how. But she collapsed one afternoon. I took her to the hospital and they found traces of something in her system. I can’t remember the name. Perflu-something. The docs called it PFAS if I remember rightly.”

“Perfluoroalkyl. Chemical solvent,” Ella said.

“That’s it,” Chris said. “God, just hearing that word brings it all back. But yeah, that’s why we separated. I begged Jo to keep going, try again. I said if it happened once it could happen again, but she went full self-destructive. She said she lost the only thing she ever wanted.”

Ripley’s gaze swept across the room, taking in all the brief details. It was pretty minimal in here, a glorified crash pad and a stark contrast to Joanne’s fairly lavish residence. Even though Chris had been forthcoming with information, she still couldn’t abandon suspicion just yet.

“You have something of a past, is that right?” Ripley asked.

Chris nodded without hesitation. “Yes I do. But that was a long time ago, before I met Joanne.”

“Care to talk us through it?”

“My ex-girlfriend accused me of beating her. I did no such thing, but I couldn’t prove I didn’t. Her word against mine. I lost.”

Ripley detected sincerity from the man’s nonverbal language. Steady breathing, no sudden twitches, steady tonality. Her instincts told her Chris was telling the truth, but the best psychopaths had the most convincing masks.

“And this Joanne business, how do you feel about it all?” Ripley asked.

“Gutted, obviously. What Joanne didn’t realize was that I lost two people through all of that. She only lost one, because she stopped caring about me soon after.”

“She seems to have gotten the better deal in the divorce,” Ella added.

Chris’s face lit up with a wry smile. “You’re right there. But trust me, she needs all the help she can get. I couldn’t leave an addict to fend for themselves. For all her problems, I still love her.”

Ripley felt the sincerity radiating like a warm glow, Chris’s body language in sync with his tone and inflections. That kind of earnestness couldn’t be faked, at least not by anyone but an experienced performer. But still, the psychological profile was just a small cog in the justice machine. Chris’s involvement needed to be ruled out with hard facts.

“And you haven’t been anywhere near Joanne recently?”

“Absolutely not. And I was at a convention in Chicago from Friday until yesterday. I got plane tickets, pictures, everything. I sent them to the police already.”

Chris seemed committed to his innocence, and combined with his open body language, Ripley was all but certain she wasn’t sharing air space with a murderer.

Ella said, “Thank you. We’ll review them. Before we go, I just have one more question.”

“Go ahead.”

“You said Joanne got hooked on methamphetamines. Did she have a history of drug use? Even alcohol or nicotine?”

Chris shook his head. “Rarely. Occasionally alcohol. She always said she was raised to believe drinking was fine but drunkenness wasn’t. Some

Christian mantra.”

“Got it. Do you know where she was sourcing these drugs? Meth must be pretty difficult to come by around here, right?”

Chris’s face was a blank slate, his answer evident. “I don’t know. Someone would drop it in our trash outside. Joanne wouldn’t tell me where she got it. I guessed online.”

Ripley searched for focus, trying to keep her mind straight and her thoughts linear. This unsub targeted a female drug addict and a male homeless person, both of whom had been well-to-do but weren’t anymore, both of whom had been separated from their spouses. Ripley looked past the trees and envisioned the forest, not letting herself get lost in connections that might not be there. For all she knew, Joanne and David could have been victims of opportunity and nothing more.

“And you don’t know anyone who might have wanted to hurt Joanne?” Ella asked.

Chris pondered the question, his fingers idly tracing circles on his chin. He sighed and said, “No. I mean, I don’t know who she was hanging around with these days. Could have been anyone, you know?” He trailed off, but Ripley caught a flicker of doubt in Chris’s expression. A moment of indecision, characterized by a sudden rush of submissive body language. Two slumped shoulders, a narrowing of the legs, eyes sweeping up and down along their left-hand side.

“Mr. Murphy? Is there something else you want to add?” Ella asked. The rookie had caught it too. For all her problems, the wild theories and the impulsive rushes, Ella’s body language analyses were second to none.

Chris removed his glasses and placed them on the side table. He rubbed his eyes with his fingertips and said, “I don’t want to jump to any conclusions here, but I know Joanne was seeing someone. I still talk to some guys from our old workplace and apparently she was seeing one of the execs there.”

“Name?” asked Ripley.

“I don’t know exactly. It’s foreign. I want to say Hiko-something, maybe Hiro? He’s a board member or something. I never met him.”

Ella took the information on board. “Thank you for all this, Mr. Murphy. You’ve been a great help.”

“You’ll catch this guy, won’t you?”

“Yes we will,” Ella said, with more certainty than anyone should have in situations like this. Premature death was always the biggest tragedy of all, but

false hope was a close second. Ripley had a mind to lecture her for promising things she couldn't guarantee, but now wasn't the time. Ripley rose to her feet, signaling that the interview had come to a close. Ella passed on her contact details to Chris and joined Ripley at the door.

Next stop was the precinct to try and piece things together and see what – if anything – connected these unfortunate victims. The only thing Ripley was certain of was that this killer had a deadly mission and she and Ella were the only chances of stopping it. Unsubs like this never deviated from their plans, and nine times out of ten, they never went down without a fight.

## CHAPTER NINE

Ella's office at the precinct was a drab, cramped space, barely bigger than a shoebox. Its yellow walls and sparse decor offered little to stimulate, but all the inspiration she needed was already locked up in her head. She lay out her notes and paperwork on the desk and began scrutinizing the evidence she had available, carefully connecting the dots to form what she hoped would be a cohesive narrative.

But she fell at the first hurdle, because very little here made sense.

Victim number one, Joanne Gustafson, had been a reasonably well-to-do thirty-something woman. According to her ex-husband, the loss of an unborn child sent her spiraling into self-destruction, leading to a crippling drug addiction that destroyed her marriage and her will to live. By all accounts, she made a perfect victim for a fledgling serial killer because she'd descended into one of society's downtrodden. The killer might have known this, and perhaps targeted Joanne because he knew her death could be blamed on other factors: overdose, suicide, perhaps a hit due to debt.

But judging by the lack of stolen valuables around Joanne's home, the motivation here wasn't financial. If she owed the wrong people money, the crime scene didn't show it. This killer targeted Joanne for a completely different reason.

Victim number two, David Harper, had been a wealthy gentleman who'd recently fallen on hard times. After a bad investment in a wine vineyard that apparently didn't even exist, David had handed over his home to his young wife and moved into a storage unit. The decision was apparently David's own, feeling he had a moral obligation to get his life back on track without dragging his wife down with him.

Both were killed inside their own living spaces, both with one thrust of a steel blade. Both had been positioned on their knees post-death, with their heads buried into a chair.

Aside from the manner of death, the two victims appeared to live in two separate worlds. The victimology did not match up at all, although it seemed that both Joanne and David had lost something recently. Joanne had lost a person; David had lost money. Both had been separated, but who out there could say they hadn't lost either of these things at some point in their lives? Ella wondered if she died from a heart attack herself tomorrow, would

investigators consider her own broken relationship as a possible factor in her death? Very few people could say they didn't have at least one running problem at any given time, so it was only natural that these victims followed suit. Hell, Joanne and David had both split up between six months to a year ago, so was that really recent enough to be a connection?

Ella stopped for a moment, pleasantly surprised by her own level-headedness. By this point in an investigation, she was usually making wild leaps, clutching at straws, weaving imaginary threads to create loose and barely connected sequences. But not today. Maybe her frustrations were keeping her grounded, or maybe she'd just learned that after all this time, making tangential connections rarely got results. What was it Ripley always said to her? Homicide investigations are like a spinning top on a table. One should admire it first and study it carefully before proceeding. Touch it too soon and it'll fly out of your hands. Right now, the spinning top was a fast-moving blur, so she had to step back and wait for the edges and the corners to become visible. Only then could she begin to dissect and grasp this case with full clarity.

And besides, the dead often went to their final resting places with their secrets still intact, sometimes having never revealed them to anyone but the person that ended their life. If something did connect Joanne and David, it could have been something undocumented, something that even their closest allies might not have known. Troubles were seldom a topic of pride for most people. Perhaps she and Ripley could have asked these interviewees every question under the sun and still come out cold on the other side.

Forensic reports were still yet to come back for David's crime scene, so Ella sat and prayed that they'd find something useful. This killer had stalked a maze of corridors, forced his way into a storage unit and stabbed a man to death; doing so without leaving a trace behind suggested nothing short of supernatural ability. Even with all the forensic countermeasures in the world, you were at the mercy of the elements. All they needed was a hair strand, a boot print, a flake of dried skin. Anything that might point her in the right direction. Once that avenue was fully explored, Ella could begin piecing together the minor details of these victims' lives to form a bigger picture.

Surrounded by the unfamiliarity of her new office, Ella was suddenly overcome with a wave of loneliness. This precinct, a usually bustling and hyperactive setting, seemed to be in a state of suspended animation. She began to feel like a lone specter in a cemetery, the only lost soul still holding



on for a second chance at life, her only company the wandering thoughts in her head.

Throughout these ten minutes of quiet contemplation, Ella realized she'd been turning her phone screen on and off every minute. Each time she was met with a blank notifications tab, not even a spam email or a reminder to input her carbohydrate intake into her fitness app. She desperately wished for a sign that Ben was thinking of her - a message, an email, anything. Something that suggested their relationship – or even a potential friendship – wasn't yet six feet under.

Then her thoughts crashed like a meteor as the door swung open and brought Ella hurtling back to reality. Ripley stood there, hand on the doorknob, leaning over the threshold. She regarded Ella with a searching gaze, her mouth slightly open as if ready to spill some secret.

“Dark, we got the security tapes from the storage unit.”

Ella's pulse raced with anticipation, her excitement growing with every beat. A surge of optimism took over. “And?”

“You need to come and see this.”

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The officers huddled together in the sheriff's office, their eyes glued to the computer screen, faces illuminated by the crystal glare. It showed a still, grainy image of the corridor that Ella had been in that same morning. The timestamp in the corner of the screen read 11:12 p.m.

Sheriff Hale said, “This isn't the main camera near the victim's unit, but it's an overhead shot of the entire area. We've had a tech guy from Charleston enhance it for us. It's not perfect, but we've got something.”

“The owner didn't think of mentioning this to us?” Ella asked.

“He didn't think it would pick anything up, but the camera works on motion-detection apparently. If it picks up any signs of life, it'll zone in on the area. Mike didn't know that, or so he claims.”

“Alright. What do we have?”

The sheriff hit the PLAY button and the still image began flicking. The camera jerked left and right before settling into position, then zoomed in slightly on one particular storage unit. Ella recognized it as the one that housed a corpse only a few hours ago. The camera jerked again, then steadied as a shadowy blur manifested in the right-hand corner of the screen. Small,

rounded, hardly the shape of a human being. It skulked along the ground, almost floating, and for a moment Ella felt like she was watching one of those hoax paranormal shows that tried to pass off silhouettes as ghosts.

“This is the part our guy enhanced. Check this.”

The grainy footage became a little clearer. Less pixelated, higher contrast, better saturation. Then it zoomed in closer to the scene, the blackened smudge now taking on the contours of a real person. Ella saw black clothing, a hood, a hat, a strange gait, almost hunched over. She couldn't discern the figure's height or weight or profile due to the lack of clarity, and his shapeless attire made a hard task even harder. But this rough outline of a human had to be their man. This was their killer. Ella felt a chill rush through her as she sized him up, darkness radiating from him like a black cloud. Even through the screen, without the advantage of in-person analysis, she could sense his murderous intentions.

“Look, he knocks on the door,” the sheriff said. Ella could do without the running commentary, but the sheriff was correct. The figure gently tapped on the door to David's storage unit, then a small beam of light manifested at the man's feet. David had opened the door just slightly, but that was all this man needed. After a moment of hesitation from the visible figure, the beam of light expanded as the figure pulled the door open, then disappeared inside the unit, alone with the victim.

“God damn,” Ella said.

A second later, someone shut the door from the other side, and the image remained still. Ella, Ripley, and Sheriff Hale watched as nothing happened for twenty, thirty, forty seconds. Beyond this door, some ghoulish fiend was lost in the act of murder, leaving an innocent man lying in his own blood. Ella's stomach churned at the thought, her chest tightening with dread. She wanted to leap into the monitor, catch this son of a bitch in the act and save a poor man's life, but there was no escaping the past, and she felt her heart sink as she resigned herself to the inevitable.

Then a new beam of light emerged and the figure snuck out, back into the corridor, leaving from whence he came.

The silence was palpable; a heavy, oppressive weight seemed to hang in the air, suffocating the three officers surrounding the computer. They all seemed to be holding their breaths, as if they were afraid that even the slightest movement or whisper would somehow make what they witnessed even worse.

“We got him,” said the sheriff.

“We got a smudge,” said Ripley, “but it’s something to work with. We know which way he left, so if we follow the camera trails in that direction we might get something more useful.”

“Already did. Nothing. There’s an exit just round that corner.” The sheriff tapped the screen. “Chances are he left there. No other cameras nearby.”

“Dammit,” Ripley said. “Send this footage over to me and Dark. We’ll inspect closer, see if we can pull up anything remarkable about him. Even something as nondescript as those clothes and hat might give us a starting point.”

Ella’s head was a movie theater, her thoughts spinning like a carousel as she replayed the footage in her mind’s eye. Every little moment, every brief but potentially meaningful action. Her vision blurred and the colors seemed to swirl together until it felt almost like she was seeing the events from the perspective of the killer, experiencing his emotions, his desires, his mission.

There was something there. Her senses had registered it but on a subconscious level. Now that she was replaying the whirl of images, there was one moment that seemed a little strange, a little at odds with the killer’s abrupt arrival and departure.

“Those clothes could be from anywhere. I doubt he got them around here,” the sheriff said.

“You’re right, but we have to...”

“Stop,” Ella interrupted. She needed to see it again. Or more accurately, hear it again. “Sheriff, play the tape again. Go to the point where he knocks on the door.”

Sheriff Hale idly swung around in his chair and placed his hands back on his keyboard. He rolled the footage back to the timestamp in question. “This part? Why?”

“Just press play, and turn the volume up to the max.”

The sheriff obliged Ella’s request. A shrill hiss echoed throughout the room, followed by the sound of fast-running water. The camera had picked up the sounds of the building, and so Ella prayed her hunch was correct. She could feel the reverberation coming off the computer speakers, but placed her good ear closer to them regardless.

On screen, the shadow knocked on the door of the storage unit, and Ella froze still, holding her breath.

Then it came.

*Nameless.... Unright.*

She tried to exhale but no breath would come. All she could say was, “Play that again.”

Ripley and Hale moved in for a closer listen too. Hale played it again. The same words.

“You hear that?” Ella asked. “Our killer spoke to the victim.”

Sheriff Hale decreased the volume then rolled his chair around to face Ella. “How does that help?”

“We have his voice,” Ripley said, “and that’s preferable to a black smudge and some nondescript clothes. Good catch, Dark.”

But Ella wasn’t finished yet. “Play it again. What’s he saying? They don’t sound like real words.”

The sheriff repeated the process. Ella moved closer again and listened for any noticeable aspects of the speaker’s tonality, inflection, accent, nuance. Anything that might single this person out from a list of two-thousand townfolk.

“What the hell is he saying?” asked Ripley. “Nameless, aimless, tameless?”

The words were muffled by the sounds of running water and clinking parts, but Ella was sure she could hear it right.

“Nameless and unright,” Ella said. “That’s what I’m hearing.”

“Unright? Is that even a word?”

Ella stepped back and cleared the fuzz from her ears. “I’ve never heard it. Seems unique, and that’s good for us. Could be something specific to him, or could relate to his mission.”

“Then we better get going,” Ripley said. “Dark and I will look into this footage. Sheriff, your guys are keeping an eye on the streets?”

“Yeah, my guys are patrolling. Charleston loaned us ten cops too. If we get a hit, you’ll be first to know.”

“Perfect.”

Ella readied herself for an evening of obsessive inspection, but there was something new clawing at her brain. An itch she couldn’t scratch, a lyric she couldn’t place, a persistent voice that seemed to be speaking in tongues.

Nameless and unright.

She wasn’t sure of much about this killer, but she was fairly certain she’d heard these words before.

## CHAPTER TEN

As it turned out, unright was indeed a word, but Ella's search of the bizarre string of words yielded nothing substantial. Ripley sat across from her at the desk, looking equally irritated at the lack of leads that the video had produced. She slammed her laptop shut and said, "For God's sake, this is a kick in the nuts."

It was the start of a balmy evening, the sun slowly sinking in the sky and casting a dusky hue over everything it touched. A slight breeze rustled at the office window, carrying with it a whisper of promise for what was to come.

Ella stayed composed, not matching Ripley's frustration. She always found that when one partner kicked off, it made the other one weirdly calmer, as though they needed to bear the responsibility that the other was quickly shunning.

"It sucks, but it's better than nothing."

"We've got this guy on tape *and* we have his voice. We should be able to pinpoint this asshole in seconds, especially in a town this small."

"That's what the sheriff is doing. We've only been here a day. I think we need to get this voice sample out to the public. I reckon this town is full of lifers so someone might recognize it."

"I'd agree if the voice wasn't so plain. It's bog-standard middle America, maybe with a little southern thrown in. Not to mention it's about as clear as a pint of Guinness. I don't think we're gonna get a whole lot from this to be honest."

Ella sat back in her chair and breathed a heavy sigh. If not for the circumstances, she'd have to laugh. Ripley had become the person she always vowed not to be, the I'm-not-paid-by-the-hour cavalier that just wanted to get in and get out as soon as possible. Ella would have loved to have made some serious headway too, but something as serious as homicide required diligent effort out of respect for the victims. As frustrating as the fact was, serial killers just didn't walk into precincts and hand themselves in. Ella was happy to put the work in and beat this monster at his own game, and besides, all she had to go back to in D.C. were her own unsolvable mysteries.

The door swung open and Sheriff Hale stepped into the room, his boots heavy and loud on the wooden floor. In one hand he held a sheaf of papers, rustling in the silence like a flock of birds taking flight. "Got something for

you,” he said. “A list of people who own units at Securicall Storage. The owner just sent it over.”

“Excellent,” Ella said. She welcomed any new information, even just a list of names. The sheriff placed the papers down on the desk and went on his way. Ella took the list, speedily reading the names then glanced over at her partner doing the same. Each name had a name and a number next to it: the date each unit was first rented and the unit number.

None stood out.

“Any of these mean anything to you, Dark?”

“Nope. None except David Harper, number three-hundred.”

“Yeah,” said Ripley. “Maybe we need to start looking into the scam business David fell for. There could be something in that.”

“I took a quick look already. Two guys, known scammers, both in jail. Nothing to do with David’s scam, but still, it puts them out of the picture.”

“For Christ’s sake,” said Ripley. “What about David’s creditors? His ex said someone loaned him money, didn’t she?”

“Couldn’t find anything,” Ella said. “No records of anything other than David’s income going *into* his account. Lots coming out, but nothing sketchy being deposited.”

Ripley angrily crumpled the paper in front of her, her frustration palpable. She looked through the list of names as she retreated on her chair, forgetting it wasn’t a recliner and jamming the base into her back with a sudden thud. She didn’t sell the embarrassment. “So one of these four-hundred names could be our unsub,” she said.

“Four-hundred and ten,” Ella confirmed, “but it’s better than two-thousand.”

“Our killer knew that David was living here, so he had to know the basic details about his life, but that could be a huge circle. Could be a friend of a friend. Anyone could have let that information slip.”

“His ex said he didn’t have many friends, and even *she* didn’t know he was living in that unit. It had to be someone close to him.”

“Or someone that just happened to see a potential target in an isolated area,” Ripley said.

Ella wasn’t buying that for a second. “Ripley, this town is nothing but grass and mountains. If this was a random lust kill, our killer couldn’t have chosen a worse spot. He picked one of the few places in the town that actually *does* have cameras. David was always an intended target.”

Ripley's eyebrows knit together as Ella's words sunk in, accepting the explanation in silence.

"That could have been part of the thrill," Ella continued. "He technically invaded both victims' homes. The violation of sanctuary. The interaction with the victims. The intimate killing method. If the victimology was consistent, I'd say there was a sexual element at play."

"He was in and out too quickly for there to be a sexual component," Ripley argued. "Think about it. You're alone with these victims. You can do whatever you want without interruption. Why would you stab and run without savoring the moment?"

Ella pondered the idea, drawing on past serial killers for reference. It was true that lust killers preferred to spend intimate time with their victims when possible, usually dispensing mutilation or dismemberment postmortem. It wasn't an exact psychological science, more so a general rule, and there were always exceptions. Ripley had a point in this case. Usually, knife wounds were a symbolic substitute for penetration, but if sexual release was this unsub's goal then he certainly didn't show it.

"Fair enough. Sexual gratification is off the table. If he's not the hedonistic type, then he's either a thrill seeker, revenge seeker, or a mission-oriented killer."

"Let's hope it's the latter," said Ripley.

Even in the context of homicide investigations, Ella had to pray for the best case scenario, and the best possible outcome was that this killer was on some kind of mission. Usually driven by delusions or the desire to right some perceived wrong, mission-oriented offenders were so dedicated to their goals that they'd go to extreme measures to carry them out. It was a double-edged sword, because it meant they wouldn't stop hunting their targets until death or imprisonment intervened, but it also meant that they were more prone to mistakes. They also had a much smaller pool of victims, and while most mission-oriented killers targeted select groups like ethnic minorities or sex workers, there was a sub-category of this offender that targeted specific individuals. From what Ella had discerned so far, this unsub fell into this rare category.

The deeper she thought about it, the more she went back to her original belief: these two victims had to be connected, no matter how ambiguously. Her eyes still swept across the names on the new lists; if their killer was on here, it meant that person would also have a link to Joanne Gustafson.

But replaying the conversation she'd had with Joanne's ex-husband, she realized she knew barely anything about the woman. She was a troubled drug addict who'd lost a child and that was pretty much the extent of it. She recalled the previous conversation in full detail, but there didn't seem to be anything she could grasp onto despite the intimate details her ex had shared.

Ella's gaze drifted across the list, her shoulders slumping in resignation. No matter how hard she clawed for a connection, none of the names were familiar. Night began to set in outside and it seemed defeat had won the day.

But motivated by prospect of having to face this brick wall again tomorrow morning, Ella zoned out and willed her subconscious into the driver's seat. The old artist's trick. The age-old method that historical authors apparently used to combat writer's block. She didn't know if it worked, and debates about the subconscious even existing at all were numerous, but it was a last-ditch attempt to make progress with the current information at her disposal.

She felt a whirling kaleidoscope of memories spinning through her head. Images and words crashing against her mind's eye like waves on the shore. She first thought of Ben, then her interview with David Harper's ex-wife. She remembered how David had consigned to homelessness and how it was reminiscent of Japanese CEOs killing themselves out of some misplaced honor. Then this little spark led her down a winding trail of similar thoughts, landing on her interview with Joanne's ex-husband.

What had he said?

*I know Joanne was seeing someone. She was seeing one of the execs at her workplace. Foreign name. I want to say Hiko-something, maybe Hiro?*

A spark of understanding ignited, forming a chain of thought that linked together the disparate pieces in her mind.

As consciousness came back, she felt her gaze glued to a particular name on the list of storage unit owners. It pulled her in, like a sparkling jewel in a field of weeds.

The name was Hiromu Takahashi.

"Ripley," Ella said in lieu of an exclamation. "Unit number three-oh-four. Look at it."

Ella's partner clutched the paper and found the line in question. "Hiromu... something. What about it?"

"Didn't Chris say Joanne was seeing someone new? A foreign guy from her work with a name like that?"



“You tell me. You’re Miss Memory Bank.”

“Yes he did.”

Ripley scrutinized the name a little further. “I mean, it’s not a solid link, but according to this he started renting the unit a week after David.”

“And it’s only four units away.”

Ripley already had her laptop back open and was furiously typing. “Nice catch. Looks like that memory of yours is good for something.”

“I have my moments,” Ella said, keeping her nerves at bay. It was just a name on a piece of paper and didn’t mean anything at all. Right now, the last thing they needed was a wild leap that would result in nothing but crushing disappointment.

“Christ on a bike,” Ripley said. “Dark, get your ass over here.”

Ella leaped out of her seat, around to Ripley’s side of the table. She was on the local police database, staring at the file of the person of interest.

“Oh crap, he’s got a criminal record,” Ella said, fighting against the mounting exhilaration. The first check in the potential suspect column.

“Insider trading,” Ripley said, “but now he works at...”

“Avon Textiles. Where Joanne worked.”

“This is him,” Ripley said with a slam on the table. Ella welcomed the rush of excitement that raced through her veins, greeting it like an old friend. This man, Hiromu Takahashi, was a good fit for Joanne’s boyfriend, and he had a storage unit only four doors down from David’s.

It was getting into early evening, but Ella knew they had to pay this man a visit.

“What are we waiting for?” she said. “Let’s go.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ella checked the time before knocking on Hiromu's door. Nearly nine p.m. Still plenty of time to catch a murderer before the day was out.

The suspect's home was a vast, sprawling estate around three miles outside of Alfa Creek. Its tall walls and columns of marble belied a life of luxury and excess - affluence earned not through honest labor, but judging by Hiromu Takahashi's criminal record, his corporate wrongdoings. The lavish home was tangible proof that karma didn't exist, not in this world.

Ripley went first, pounding on the door with a clenched fist. Ella looked up and saw a light flickering on the first floor followed by the twitch of a curtain. Someone was home, and that person had spotted them.

A minute passed, and so Ella knocked with slightly less force than would shatter the door down the middle. "Mr. Takahashi, please open up," she shouted.

A moment later, the door clicked open and a hesitant face appeared in the crack. A tiny figure, camouflaged amongst the shadows. "Hello?" the man asked.

Ella flashed her badge and said, "Mr. Takahashi, we're with the FBI. We need to talk to you."

The gap between the door and the frame grew a little wider as the suspect came into view. He was short and dainty, dressed in a brown shirt and suit trousers. His eyes looked red raw and his forehead glimmered with a line of sweat. The man had wrinkles for days, but according to his record, he was only forty years old. Ella thought maybe they'd caught him in the act, but when she spotted the crust around his nose, she had a sudden spark of insight.

"FBI?" he asked, no hint of a Japanese accent but his ancestry was evident in his features. "What are you doing in my house?"

"We're not in your house, we're at your door," Ripley snapped. "But we'd like to come in if that's alright with you."

"Absolutely not. You can't just come in here. What do you want?" He began to retreat but then thought better of it.

Ella said, "Mr. Takahashi, we're investigating a series of homicides and we believe you were close with at least one of the victims." Ella left it at that. Always keep the details minimal and let the interviewee potentially incriminate themselves later. That was the number one rule.

“Homicides? You mean Joanne?”

There it was. “So you know,” said Ella.

“Of course. She was one of our employees. The police told us yesterday.”

“You knew her well?” Ripley asked.

Hiromu shifted his weight forward. “Not as well as you’re implying. What are you trying to say?”

“Nothing. We’re just asking questions.”

Ella studied the suspect carefully, examining his body language, his tone of voice, his potential capacity for murder. It wasn’t rare for persons of interest to lash out upon questioning, but discerning the reasons why was a different story. Some suspects faked outrage in a desperate attempt to appear slighted, others did it out genuine anger at the privacy violation. Others did it because they were trying to hide something. She didn’t have enough intel on Hiromu Takahashi to make an educated guess yet.

“We’re just wondering about your connection to her,” Ella said, hoping Hiromu might take the bait.

“My connection? We didn’t have one.”

The first lie. Perhaps the first of many.

“Really? Well, someone told us you and her were dating.”

Hiromu scratched his hands and smirked away the accusation. “Well, your source is wrong. Now please leave me alone.” The suspect gripped the door, but Ella’s firm hand kept it from shutting. She caught a close-up of his knuckles, scratched and blotchy with a few deep red sores. Instantly, the pieces of the puzzle slotted into place like a key unlocking a hidden door. Rage began to build, because nothing frustrated her more than cowardly murderers who tried to deny all accusations. All serial killers were bottom-of-the-barrel scum, but there was a special circle of hell for the ones who maintained their innocence in spite of hard evidence.

“Mr. Takahashi, please don’t make this difficult. We already know.”

Fury burned his face. His jaw clenched as he reined in his heavy breathing. “You don’t know anything. I’m not going to tell you again. Leave me alone or I’ll report you for harassment. I could sue you.”

Ella’s anger overflowed into her fists. Hiromu had pulled out the magic combination that always sent her into a rage-fueled frenzy: denial and threats of legal action. If she didn’t go verbally nuclear, she’d run the risk of punching him square in the jaw. “Joanne was a drug addict, and judging by those sores and your incessant scratching, you are too. I’m guessing we’ve

caught you in the middle of a session, which is why you're so desperate to get rid of us, but I'll tell you now that we're not going anywhere, and I'll happily drag you out here by your skull if I have to."

Hiromu halted, coming to an abrupt standstill. His expression melted from fury to unease as Ripley stepped closer and put her hand on Ella's shoulder. "Dark, take a moment," she said. "Mr. Takahashi, we know about your relationship with Joanne, and we understand you rent a unit at Securicall Storage, is that correct?"

The suspect nodded, then opened the door and stepped out into the cold. He sidestepped away from Ella to face his questioner head on. "Relationship isn't the right word. And yes I do own a unit there. Why?"

Ella stepped back, realized she'd overstepped a boundary. She'd gone in all guns blazing and shot herself in the foot.

Ripley said, "Securicall Storage was the site of a second homicide. Four units away from yours."

Hiromu glanced between the agents and said, "And why are you asking me about it?"

"Because we thought you might be familiar with both of our victims. You knew Joanne, you rented a unit by David's. It's not a stretch to think you might have seen him around. Care to add anything?"

"I knew Joanne. That was all." Hiromu turned to Ella, "And we were recovering together actually. Not doing drugs. I don't expect the person mentioned that little tidbit, did they?"

"Recovering?" Ella asked. The man's sores and blemished skin said otherwise, and he had a good reason to lie being in front of FBI agents and all.

"Yes. A hundred days for me. Joanne... different story. She couldn't escape. Relapse after relapse. There was no helping that woman."

"You saw her recently?" asked Ripley.

"No. Not for a long time. She stopped answering my calls a while ago. You can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped."

"You said you worked with her. You didn't see her around?"

Hiromu shook his head. "I'm the Associate Director. Joanne worked on the floor. I don't see day-to-day stuff."

"So how did you meet?" Ripley asked.

"Recovery meetings. She recognized me. We got to talking."

Ripley nodded in understanding, accepting the explanation. She said,

“Right. And your storage unit? Any details on that?”

Hiromu looked dumbfounded. “What do you want me to say? I needed a storage unit. Besides, it’s not even for me. It’s my daughter’s. She has the key to it. I’ve only been there once and that was to sign up. She did everything else. You can ask her.”

Ella stayed quiet, letting Ripley do the talking. Maybe her comment had been a step too far, but idle threats always worked in the past. Ripley must have still been pissed about her threatening to shoot a guy on the last case. Understandable, Ella thought, because she still felt bad about it herself.

“Mr. Takahashi, where were you on Friday between one and three p.m.?”

Hiromu’s jaw dropped an inch. “Why? You don’t think I could have hurt Joanne?”

“You can prove whether you did or not by telling me your whereabouts.”

Hiromu smiled. A winner’s smirk. Ella recognized it a mile off. “Recovery meeting. Smart Recovery at Saint Paul’s Church on Lichfield Street. Ask anyone there. There are cameras in the lobby too. They’ll have caught me going in.”

Ripley cracked her neck with a sudden jolt and said, “Thank you. We’ll check it. What about last night between eleven and midnight?”

The winner’s smirk returned. Ella’s heart plummeted to her stomach, a heavy stone sinking in an ocean of dread. She felt like she’d come first in a race of fools. Barely an hour ago, she’d idly praised herself for not giving into temptation and connecting dots that were barely visible. Now, out here in icy darkness, she found herself having done just that. Jumped headfirst into something she had no real evidence for, only to be proven wrong and sent back to the starting line with absolutely no new information.

“I was driving back from Ohio. My dash cam recorded the whole journey. I got home about half past one.”

“We’ll need that footage. Right now if you have it,” Ripley said.

“Agents, please, I have to be up early in the morning.”

Ripley leveled Hiromu with a piercing gaze, like two icicles boring through his retinas into his soul. The stare that, if legend around FBI HQ was to be believed, once made a suspect confess to multi-homicide without any need for words. Two seconds later, Hiromu was at her mercy.

“Fine,” he said.

“We’ll have a police officer out here within the hour. Please have it ready for them.”

Looked like Ripley had resigned to the belief that Hiromu Takahashi wasn't their man. If the footage checked out, Ella would too. The revelation hit her like a stack of bricks to the heart. Back to square one. Ella prepared herself for a restless, sleepless night.

"If could ask your daughter if she knows anything, that would be a great help," she said.

Hiromu continued, "I will, but she hasn't been back there in a while as far as I know. Who was the person who got killed, anyway?"

"A local gentleman named David Harper. Recognize the name?"

"No, sorry," Hiromu said. "What storage unit was it?"

"Number three-hundred, directly opposite yours."

Hiromu's expression shifted from irritation to deep thought. "Opposite mine you say?"

"Yes."

Hiromu tapped the stubble on his chin and said, "You know, I think *have* seen that fellow. About five-eleven, brown hair, looked like crap?"

Ella and Ripley shared a knowing look. "Could be him," Ella said. "What did you see?"

"When I helped my daughter first move her things there, I saw him cleaning some stuff out. I remember being a little concerned because he was... acting strangely."

Ella's curiosity piqued. "Strangely?"

"I might be misremembering, but he was smashing some things up. Quite violently."

Ripley asked, "He was smashing his own possessions?"

"Yeah, paintings. Tearing them up, breaking the frames. Very odd."

Ella's heart beat a little faster as she thought back to her interview with David's ex-wife. She'd said that David had taken a load of artwork with him when he left.

"Thank you, Mr. Takahashi," Ella said.

"Good luck in your search. I'll have the footage ready for your colleague."

Ripley tugged Ella back towards the car. "Come on, Dark. Motel time."

Ella trudged back, preoccupied with the thoughts spinning around in her head. There was too much on her mind to even consider sleeping.

And she had a feeling deep down that these ruined works of art held some kind of significance. She just had to dig a little deeper to find the answers.

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He stared at the silent building, anticipation prickling his skin. He'd been here for hours already and not a soul had passed by, but time was the brush of God. To make a masterpiece, you had to put the effort in, hone your creativity, refine the brushstrokes. He'd wait here all night if he had to, but he had faith in the plan. The others had gone off without a hitch, as though an invisible entity had perfectly engineered the necessary conditions. He was beginning to think that's exactly what had happened.

Besides, time was all he had anymore. The world, with its chaotic and unpredictable nature, had a way of separating the strong from the weak, the resilient from the frail. Those who were unable to withstand the pressure of its ever-changing nature were weeded out, leaving only those who had the fortitude to endure its relentless tests. The survivors, those who displayed the courage to persist in the face of adversity, were the ones who ultimately prevailed.

The man and the woman, they too had been forsaken. They had been tested by the divine and had fallen short of expectations, so they needed to pay the price for their failures. They'd gone down easy, too easy, frustratingly easy. Neither had shown anything that resembled resilience, instead succumbing to their fates like animals bred for slaughter. The woman in particular had been simple prey, almost welcoming the knife in her abdomen. She'd greeted death like it was an old friend, accepting her transition from life to eternity. All it had done was reinforce the belief that he'd been right to carry out this mission, right to assume the role of the bringer of the end.

But of course, he was simply the messenger. God had selected him from the herd for this sacred mission. His task? To be the harbinger of death, to carry out the divine decree, unloading God's will through a steel blade. He was no mere man, he was an angel of destruction, sent to test the weak and cleanse them of their woes.

Why the man and the woman? To the uninitiated, they were from two different worlds, bonded only by proximity. But if one took the time to look scratch below the surface, they'd see that the man and the woman shared a common suffering. Neither had been spared the trials and tribulations of life, and both had been tested beyond what most people could endure. Both had been tempered by the flames of adversity and left battered and bruised. Both

had been defeated by life's relentless obstacles, and were left broken, homeless, craving the devil's substances to numb the pain of everyday life.

After dispatching the man last night, he'd returned to his makeshift home, malnourished and tired. He'd asked God why he was taking him through troubled waters, and God replied *because your enemies can't swim*. God's words were like a balm to the weary, a light in the darkness, and a reminder of his infinite love. Hardships would come and go, but they were a tunnel to brighter days.

He glanced at his watch, the hands ticking slowly around the face. Just after eleven p.m.

A gentleman emerged from the building up ahead, scanning the area for any signs of life. He seemed to linger than a moment more than was necessary, as though he'd spotted the patient stranger sitting among the bushes on the other side of the road. To be safe, he sidestepped out of view, keeping himself invisible. From now on, he could only show his face to those who wouldn't live long enough to tell the world what they saw.

A minute later, the coast was clear. Now he just had to get inside, remain invisible, and carry out his plan.

Time for the next test.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

Ella felt as if her eyes were made of sandpaper, so exhausted that her vision had been reduced to a fuzzy haze. At the motel reception desk, she rang the buzzer but there seemed to be no staff in sight. She glanced around the foyer and saw a lone gentleman nose-deep in a newspaper, the pages concealing his face, the clichéd image of a detective on a stake out.

Ripley trudged in with her bag over her shoulder and joined Ella at the desk. She glanced at the minimal furnishings in the lobby and said, “Nice place.”

“We’ve been in worse,” Ella said. Ripley rang the bell then tapped her fingers on the reception desk, busying her fingers as though she was trying to distract herself from what was really on her mind. Ripley had remained uncharacteristically quiet regarding Ella’s outburst back at Hiromu’s house, and Ella guessed her partner was saving that lecture for another time.

“Sorry I went nuclear on that guy,” Ella said, getting it out of the way. “I didn’t mean to make things uncomfortable.”

“It happens,” Ripley said. “I’d be a hypocrite if I said otherwise.”

True, Ella thought. She’d seen Ripley lose her cool on too many occasions to count, including times she’d done the talking with her fists. “I just really thought we had something there.”

Ripley checked her phone while they waited for service. “The sheriff emailed us the footage and the voice sample. I’ll get them back to HQ tonight to see if they can work any magic on it. Tomorrow, we should try and get this to the locals. Someone will recognize his voice.”

Going public with a murder investigation was always a double-edged sword. The eyes and ears of the local community was a massive advantage, but if news reached the mainstream media, then the press might infiltrate the town and scare the offender off. Only the most hardened killers, the ones who craved the thrill of the hunt, would stick around with so much commotion. This unsub was more focused on his mission rather than any sexual gratification or thrill-seeking, so there was every chance he’d bail if news of his crimes became widespread.

That meant they had to tread carefully, but if they could keep the information contained in a smaller area, they might just get a few good leads.

“Where the hell is the receptionist?” Ripley asked. “I’m gonna go find

someone.”

“Alright,” Ella said. Ripley disappeared beyond the lobby and Ella stayed back. She took a seat on a cream chair, opposite the newspaper man. She set her bags down beside her and checked her phone.

Nothing from Ben. Nothing from anyone. Only an email from Sheriff Hale with the footage and voice sample attached as separate files.

“Out of towners?” a voice asked. Ella glanced up and saw the stranger lower his newspaper. He was a middle-aged bald guy, dressed in a brown suit that had seen better days.

Ella said, “We are indeed. And you?”

“Sadly not. Born and bred here. What brings you to this little town?”

Ella took a moment to assess the man, mentally measuring him up to discern his true intentions. Just a genuine guy making small talk, or a potential murderer scoping out his pursuers? She thought back to the footage and transposed it before the man in front of her, comparing heights, weights, frames. This man was too tall, too wiry to be the same man from the video.

“Homicide,” Ella said, going for broke. If they were going to reveal the details to the locals tomorrow, she might as well get a head start. “Not sure if you’ve heard the news.”

The stranger dropped the newspaper in his lap. “Homicide? You’re police officers?”

“Close enough,” Ella said.

“Good lord. No I haven’t heard anything about them. Murder, around here? You know what? I can believe it. It makes a lot of sense.”

“I’m afraid so,” Ella said. “Two homicides, so please be cautious.”

The man folded his newspaper and put it to one side, curiosity emblazoned on his face. “Is there anything a local can do to help? Everyone knows everyone around here.”

Ella considered the question, prioritizing hesitation. “Perhaps. Who are you?” she asked.

“My name’s Gary. I live on Primrose Street, a few miles away. Born and bred in this town.”

Ella pondered the obvious question. “Why are you in a motel if your house is so close by?”

Gary’s expression fell at the question, as though struck by a terrible memory. “Cast out. Ravaged by fire. Lost everything.” The man held his palms out, flashing blistered skin, layers of flesh stripped away.

Ella winced, contorting in discomfort. “Good lord, that looks awful. I’m really sorry to hear that.”

“If he was a good lord, this would never have happened. The big man left me out to dry that day. I survived, but lost all my belongings. Been forced to stay here for the past three weeks.”

Ella’s heart ached as she looked upon the man, and she knew that no amount of sympathy would be of any use. “The police can hook you up with shelter,” she said. “Or the housing association.”

The man laughed but looked unamused. “Neither cover acts of God. A lifetime of prayer and this is how he repays me. The irony.”

“Head out to Charleston, find a Sikh temple. They take in anyone who’s struggling. We can help you find one if you want.”

Gary waved his hands dismissively. “I’ll take my chances here. Is there any way I can help you officers out?”

Ella glanced down at her phone screen. “Yes, actually. You say you were born and bred in this town?”

“Yes. Lived here for fifty-six years.”

“How’s your hearing?”

“My hearing?”

Ella shuffled across the room and sat beside the gentleman. She navigated to the voice sample, turned up the volume and hit the play button. The killer’s three words echoed around the hotel lobby.

“Recognize that voice?” she asked. “Or those words?”

The man’s body language shifted fiercely. He leaned away from his new friend, the sudden change punctuated by a furrowed brow.

“Is this some kind of joke?” he asked.

Ella glanced around, wondering if he wasn’t referencing something different. There was no one else around, nothing else to seize his attention. “Huh? A joke?”

“Yes. Who sent you this? Who put you up to this?” he scowled.

“Nobody, sir. This is a voice sample from a recent crime scene.”

The man steadily rose from his chair, now shaking with a sudden course of rage. He hobbled away towards the nearby stairwell, turned around and said, “I’ll get you for this. I’ll get all of you.”

Ella looked down at her hands, making sure she wasn’t stuck in some violent state of hallucination, or if she hadn’t accidentally shown the man a picture of a middle finger.

No. This stranger had become enraged at the sound of a rough, barely audible voice.

Ella leaped from her seat and made for the fleeing stranger as he vanished into a corridor, but then her partner's voice drove a wrench into her pursuit.

"The hell is wrong with that guy?" Ripley asked.

Ella's mind raced with questions, but no answers seemed forthcoming. The man's sudden reaction was a complete mystery. "I have no idea," she confessed. "Did you see where he went? Upstairs?"

"I didn't see him. I just heard shouting. Some lunatic?"

Ella joined Ripley at the stairwell, glancing for any sign of the incensed stranger. She should go and apologize to him, she thought, although for what she had no clue. "He said he was a local so I played that voice sample for him. Then he just... went crazy."

"You're the angel of death, Dark," Ripley said. "Can't leave you alone with anyone."

Footsteps from behind announced a new arrival. A motel worker came from the back room and eyed the agents up. "Can I help you both?" she asked.

Ripley said, "Yes, we've got two rooms booked, but..."

"But there's another guest here," Ella jumped in. She'd created this problem and she needed to fix it. "Older man, was sat here reading a newspaper. Would it be possible to speak to him? Or get his room number?"

The motel worker, a middle-aged woman with curly brown hair, checked a notebook on the desk. "Miss Dark and Miss Ripley, that's you?"

"Yes," Ella said.

"Well, um, we can't give out room numbers of other guests, but as far as I can tell, you're the only people staying here."

Ella dug her fingernails into her palm to make sure she wasn't locked in some weird dream. What the hell was going on here?

"No, there was a man. He said he'd been staying here for weeks."

The clerk flipped through the notebook again then shook her head. "I'm sorry," she said, "But there's no record of anyone else checked in."

Ella didn't have time to think. She bounded up the stairwell, heart pounding, hot on the heels of this apparent ghost. Did this man know something she didn't?

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Ella dropped onto the bed, letting the mattress consume her and soothe the aches from the fifteen-hour workday. Her ghost hunt had ended as abruptly as it started, with no sign of the mysterious stranger anywhere on either floor of the motel.

It was possible she'd misremembered and that he'd left the motel entirely, or perhaps found another way out of the building via the stairwell. However, more concerning was his reaction to the *nameless and unright* voice recording. Had it set off some troubled memory? Did he recognize the voice as someone close to him? She had a cacophony of questions, angry wasps stinging her temples, buzzing from one uncomfortable query to the next. She tried to focus on one question at a time, but as soon as she thought she had an answer, more questions would take their place. Combined with everything else going on, the cycle of bewilderment felt like a never-ending maze she was doomed to wander forever.

Ripley had seen him too, and that offered a little comfort. He wasn't just a manifestation of her daydreams, he was a real human being made of flesh and blood and clothes. He said his name had been Gary, so if she needed to, she could perhaps find him through the police database. How many Garys could there be in one town? If this stranger recognized the speaker in the audio file, or if he recognized the bizarre words, she needed to track him down immediately.

The time on the digital clock beside her said it was just after one in the morning. That meant around seven hours of sleep at most. She battled with the idea of staying up all night and putting in a few more hours of work, but that just meant collapse would be inevitable around midday. Lack of sleep always came with a sacrifice, and in the end it just wasn't worth it.

Ella readied herself for sleep and tried to black out her thoughts, attempting to replace the burning questions with mundane musings, like plotting out fiction stories or designing her perfect garden. For years she'd be telling herself that she'd write a fiction book if she ever found the time, and the storyline would revolve around a failed heavy metal musician trying to recapture his youthful creativity, which he'd achieve by attempting to contact the Devil. It was just a seed of an idea prompted by an old case she'd worked on back in her Intelligence days, but she thought it had wheels. As she flicked through imaginary book covers and titles in her mind's eye, she suddenly recalled something Ripley had said to her around an hour before.

*You're the angel of death, Dark.*

The comment had stuck with her, a thorn lodged in her brain. Ripley definitely meant it as a joke, but Ella felt it encapsulated everything that had happened the last few months. She'd gotten close to another agent named Mark and even though he'd turned out to be a demon in disguise, he'd wound up dead on Ella's sofa at the hands of a serial killer.

Then her two-time partner Paige Ellis had suffered a similar fate. She and Ella had infiltrated a killer's lair together, both feet first, and Paige had been fatally stabbed in the abdomen. If not for Ella's headstrong style, Paige might still be alive now. She'd been an incredible agent and had one of the most gifted minds Ella had seen from anyone in her field, and now she was six feet underground – all because she'd been paired with the wrong partner.

Now there was Ben, a man who had no connection to this life of law enforcement, yet death had been thrust in his face more times than she could remember. Ella's old nemesis had put him through unimaginable torment as a way to get back at her, and Ben had miraculously lived to tell the tale.

Now that he was away from her clutches, he'd be a lot safer. He'd shared a bed with the angel of death but hadn't succumbed to her poison, so perhaps pursuing him wouldn't be fair. She wanted nothing more than to see him again, hear his calm and tranquil tones, but she couldn't put her selfishness before another person's safety. She was the common factor in all this chaos and that surely wasn't a coincidence. What was it Ripley always said? If you ran into assholes all day, then you were the asshole.

And Ella guessed that if you ran into dead people all day, then maybe you had something to do with that too.

In the darkness, she opened her text chat with Ben and hovered her fingers over the keyboard. She saw he'd been online less than twenty minutes ago, and the mere thought of him talking to another woman twisted a knot in her gut. He might not have been, of course, but it wouldn't take long for other women to work out that Ben had the magical combination of beauty, patience, and altruism, and this hypothetical woman wouldn't drag him into the abyss or wrongfully suspect him of murder. She guessed men like him didn't stay single long, and that was something she'd have to live with.

Ella typed out a few words to combat the sudden writer's block, then deleted them. She typed *Sorry for everything, I hope things work out* then deleted that too. She knew what she wanted to say but couldn't quite place the words. Perhaps her vocabulary wasn't quite broad enough to capture her

intent, at least not within the parameters of a text message. She wanted to portray sorrow, understanding, guilt, and regret but didn't quite know where to begin.

So Ella left it blank. There was no point raking up old graves just to re-bury the corpses. Better to kill the relationship than to kill one of the people involved. Time to accept the reality that Ben had moved onto more fruitful, safer pastures. She'd miss him, but maybe she could find solace in the memories they'd made – if only those memories weren't sullied by her accusations of murder that plagued their final month together. She wished she'd never opened that damn FBI file. Ella never suspected that her own curiosity would be the silent assassin of her personal life. That insatiable hunger for more, a need to know the unknown, the relentless urge to discover, explore, and unlock sealed mysteries whose answers were hidden for good reason. It either led to great heights or abyssal depths.

Ella cast everything aside, embraced the darkness and tried to sleep. A moment later, she heard footsteps outside her door.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The only light in Gary's motel room came from the television, but he had to keep the volume down low. He'd been living here for weeks now, but only a choice few people knew he was holed up in this dingy place. The owner, an old friend of his, had let him stay here at no cost for a month, but then Gary would be forced to leave. The owner couldn't risk people finding out that he was giving his old pals free rooms, something Gary struggled to grasp. Most nights of the week, this place was empty. What difference did it make?

As far as he knew, only the owner, the housekeeper and one of the clerks knew he was living here. The others, as few as they were, were unaware they had a secret lodger. Gary guessed that the woman he'd seen in the lobby knew too, but he couldn't for the life of him figure out her agenda. She'd said she was a police officer but of course, that was just a cover. The girl had been a follower, a messenger. They'd sent her here to pour salt in his wounds, to remind him that no matter where he went, escape wasn't an option. They had eyes on him every hour of the day, so holing himself up in this semi-public place was his only recourse until he could figure out a better plan.

He had to eye everyone with suspicion, because if they could burn his house down, what else were they capable of? They could come for him in the night, or assassinate him while he was walking the streets. He had no family left to speak of, so they couldn't take away things he held dear because he had none. His home had been his most prized possession, his collection coming in a close second. They'd taken that from him and left him to rot, but it was only a matter of time before they came to tie up loose ends. The woman said there'd been two murders in this town recently, but how much of that was true? Was it an intimidation tactic to run him out of town? He hadn't seen or heard anything about these so-called homicides in the news and he read the newspaper every evening. Not to mention, he wouldn't put it past his tormenters to doctor video and audio footage just to mess with him.

Gary was sitting upright in bed, but his whole body stiffened when he heard something outside in the corridor. The thin door of his room was unable to contain the sounds of life beyond, the cheap materials doing nothing to muffle the noise. Fear churned in Gary's stomach as he looked around him, all his senses on high alert. He swallowed, feeling dread crawl up his spine like a cold hand.



Was it the girl? Or had she alerted people to his whereabouts?

He knew he'd been right about that jezebel. He could taste her deceit a mile off, with her false smile and her cheap perfume. She was just another follower, and now he was forced to share a motel with his persecutors.

Gary threw one foot off the bed as he considered his next move. He crept over to the window, peered through the curtains, and checked the window. He unlocked it, looked out at the street below and considered his odds of injury if he jumped out. He was on the first floor, around twenty feet in the air, so it was unlikely a man of his condition would survive such a fall.

He slammed the curtains shut then muted the television. Over at the door, he peered through the peephole. An empty corridor stared back, but Gary knew better. His tormenters wouldn't just wait for him. They'd be hiding in the shadows, waiting for the opportune moment to strike.

Gary sprinted back to the center of his motel room, adrenaline numbing the oncoming panic attack. He felt like a cornered animal, searching for an escape route that didn't exist. With nowhere to turn, he pulled himself into a tight ball and tried to take deep breaths until the feeling passed. He felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead as he stumbled forward, his feet seemingly glued to the floor. He landed on the bed, rocking the frame against the wall.

His anxiety gripping him tighter, he cursed himself for making such a foolish mistake. His pursuers would have heard the noise. He'd basically announced his presence to them, so now there was no escape. All he could do was gather what he could, head out the door and make a run for it. If he made it out alive, he could get the CCTV footage from this place and use it as evidence – not that the police ever listened to his pleas, but it could fuel a new investigation. He could add it to his collection of proof that he was being targeted by a nameless group. The cops had laughed him out of their precinct on more than one occasion, but they were probably in on it too. Everyone was.

Gary threw everything he had into his rucksack and made for the door. Where would he go? He couldn't go to a church, not anymore. That devious woman had mentioned something about Sikh temples in Charleston, but he couldn't go there either. If a follower was advising him of something, it meant everyone there would part of the sect. He wasn't dumb enough to fall for their tricks, not again.

He squinted his eyes, pressing his face close to the door as he peered through the tiny round window into the corridor.

No one there. The shuffling sound was nowhere to be heard. Just a vast, empty space with no moving parts. That meant whoever had been there was either hiding or they'd gone elsewhere.

But Gary knew he couldn't stay here. He'd already been here too long. If he wanted to stay alive, he had to keep moving, live on the road, in a new home every three weeks. He had enough money to sustain himself for a year or so, but after that, he was on his own. Maybe he could sell that charred cube he called a house for a hundred grand or so. That might support him for a little longer.

Gary's fingers trembled as he slowly creaked open the door. He took a deep breath, steeling himself for whatever might be lurking outside. An icy chill swept through the corridor, allowing him to breathe easier, think clearer, plan a direct escape out of here.

He calmed down as he saw streetlights through a distant window. He saw other doors on his row, a maid's trolley, felt a sense of comforting familiarity. He stepped over the threshold into the corridor, ready to find a new life beyond this place he'd called home for over fifty years.

But then Gary felt an alien sensation, a physical energy that told him without a doubt that he'd been right above everything. Tonight was the culmination of their plan because Gary was face-to-face with a hooded figure who'd manifested from the shadows like a vengeful specter. Gary went to scream, went to attack, but found himself shocked into paralysis.

The attacker spoke one sentence.

Words he'd already heard tonight. The same words the woman had played for him.

It was too late because the blade was already in his stomach.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ella was abruptly jolted from her slumber by the shrill ring of her alarm clock at seven-thirty. Between the few minutes that seemed to pass between two a.m. and now, Ella had been wandering a desolate wasteland in some abstract dreamworld. She'd been transported to some war zone filled with crumbling buildings and dead bodies, and only when she found a headless statue of Abraham Lincoln did she realize it was the remains of Washington, D.C. Her brief time in this hellhole had taken her to all of her once favorite locations, including her own home where she found the bodies of her loved ones piled up on her apartment floor. To her surprise, she was thankful to be back in the real world.

She hurried out of bed and got ready in record time, because if she knew Ripley, ten minutes early was right on time. In the bathroom mirror, Ella tied back her hair and face-creamed the hell out of her wrinkles because she seemed to be fighting an uphill battle with these things. Even with this overpriced cream and serum that promised anti-aging in a matter of weeks, the creases were fast winning the war. It smelled like lavender, and that was always nice, but one year into this FBI game had rendered her youthful complexion a thing of the past. The grays were sprouting like mushrooms after a summer rain and the bags below her eyes gave them depth she didn't want. Was this what age looked like, or was it a product of stress?

Once she was ready to face the day, Ella sat on her bed and checked her phone. Her only notification was an alarm clock saying she was twenty-four minutes past wake up time, and the lack of any others was a good thing. No urgent texts from Ripley, no missed calls from the precinct, no emails from the boss. It meant nothing had happened since last night, and right now that was the best thing she could hope for.

Despite the lack of rest, Ella had a new optimism in her. Maybe it was the heavy sun peeping through the curtains or her acceptance of her dead relationship, but she felt that today would bring some kind of good news. Sleep had a way of organizing the chaos running through your brain, like an invisible librarian carefully slotting each book back into its rightful place on the shelf. With everything neatly arranging in your subconscious, you could see connections you couldn't before. Ella was already beginning to see things in a new light and concoct new ideas, like how they might be able to track down

David Harper's creditors, or how they could target Joanne Gustafson's rehabilitation groups. She was also considering rummaging through the trash at Securicall Storage to try and locate some of David's destroyed paintings. She hadn't forgotten about those yet, either. The same went for the strange man who'd lashed out when he'd heard the voice sample. She had plenty of questions backed up for that guy.

Ella checked the time. One minute past eight. It marked the first time in history that Ripley had ever been late to anything, but then as if summoned by Ella's surprise, there was a knock at the door. Ella peeped through and saw her partner waiting for her.

"One minute late. That's rare for you," Ella said as she swung open the door with a flourish.

"Retirement mindset," Ripley said. "I'm going to get one minute later every morning until one day I just never show up."

"Lucky you. Are we ready to go?"

"No. Can I use your bathroom? Sudden urge. It's an age thing."

"Sure." Ella widened the door and let Ripley through. Mia rushed past.

"It'll happen to you when you hit fifty," she said.

Ella shut the door and began rummaging through her bag. It was minimal on necessities, but one necessity that was missing was her laptop charger. Ella found it on her nightstand, threw it in. Before she'd gone to sleep, she'd made some notes about her potential novel in the works, and that little thought prompted a topic of conversation she'd planned on bringing up at an opportune time. Now seemed better than any other.

"Ripley," she called, "I've got a question."

"The answer is no," her partner shouted from the bathroom, "this stuff won't make you look any younger."

"What, moisturizer?"

"Yup." Ripley emerged from the bathroom to the sound of gushing water. "Tried it all. Cream, oil, gasoline. You can't fight nature."

"You're not so bad for what, fifty-six? Maybe it worked and you didn't know it."

Ripley pointed to her forehead and said, "I once got my face burned in a bomber case in Ohio, must have been around fifty years ago. To fix it, the docs used Botox. When I recovered I looked about ten years younger. I'm putting it down to that little miracle."

Ella nodded. "Never had you down for plastic surgery."

“Once and once only,” Ripley said, “or you end up looking like Joan Rivers. We ready to go?”

“Yeah, but I just wanted to know why you think I’m the angel of death. Do I give that impression?”

“Huh?”

“Last night. You mentioned it.”

“Oh, jeez. It was a joke, Dark. You heard of jokes?”

“Fair enough,” Ella said. “Ready when you are.”

They headed out of the door into the hallway, and checked up and down for any sign of the stranger from the previous night.

“You’re looking for that guy, aren’t you?” Ripley asked.

“Yeah, I just can’t...”

The sound of a piercing scream shattered the peace, driving a wedge in their conversation. Adrenaline rushed through Ella’s veins like an electric current. Ripley’s face contorted in surprise.

“What the...?” asked Ripley. “You hear that?”

Another shrill scream echoed through the corridor. A woman’s voice, the sound of pure terror. It lingered for seconds after it had passed.

“Down here,” Ella said, hurrying down the hallway, round the corner. Nervous energy rippled through her like a million pin pricks, blowing up her heart rate, rousing a hundred thoughts at once. *Please be our killer*, she said to herself as the source of the scream came into view. Ripley caught up behind, crashing into her partner as they halted to a stop.

It was the housemaid, backed up against the wall, shaking like a weak branch in a force ten gale. The distressed woman eyed the new arrivals, then pointed across the hallway into one of the motel rooms. The one with an open door.

And bloodstains on the carpet.

In a flurry, Ella burst into the motel room and saw an image straight from her nightmare. Only this wasn’t a dream; it was very much real.

The mysterious stranger from the night before, knees on the carpet, elbows on the bed. The same position as the other victims.

“Holy shit,” Ripley said.

Ella’s blood rushed cold. “This is the man from last night.”

Ripley’s hands flew to her face in disbelief, her eyes wide with astonishment. Ella rarely saw the emotion from the woman, but this scene seemed to shake her to her core.

“The angel of death strikes again,” Ripley said.

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Now, Ella was alone with the dead body. She kept a distance, only treading where she needed to. This was a fresh crime scene, untouched by no one but the killer and the victim, so contaminating it was a very real possibility. Ripley had taken the housemaid downstairs and seen to her well-being, and she told Ella she'd make the arrangements to cordon off the scene. Ella stayed put to keep prying eyes away but so far, not a single soul had passed by.

The ideas raced through her mind like a fierce tornado, whipping up a flurry of emotions and possibilities. First, their killer had been so close to them, literally a few rooms away. But why had he come here? Was it a pure coincidence or was it her and Ripley's presence that drew him here? Could she or Ripley have been his intended target, but instead settled on easier prey? Or maybe this was an insult, a kind of *you-can't-catch-me* message?

If not, why this victim? She had a hundred questions for this man, all now unanswerable. His secrets had accompanied him to the afterlife, so extracting those answers were now a much more difficult task.

She calmed herself, taking a moment to pay her respects to this fallen gentleman. Despite his attitude, he didn't deserve this, didn't deserve to be gouged in the stomach and left to bleed out. This punishment did not fit the crime.

Ella removed her emotional hat and put on her rational one. She had an advantage here. She was the first person to lay eyes on this very fresh crime scene. Everything would be exactly as the killer intended, no contamination, nothing nudged out of the place by the law enforcement machine. She consumed the scene with a logical eye, reenacting the killer's steps from entry to murder to escape.

The bloodstains indicated the killer struck at the door, possibly as he stepped outside. For a more accurate answer, she'd need to gauge the severity of the laceration in the victim's stomach, but until then she'd have to stick to the most probable answer. Either way, the killer either knocked at the door or waited for the victim to leave. There was a rucksack lying beside the dresser, a few clothes spilling out of the top. As much as Ella wanted to inspect it, she couldn't yet, but it suggested that this victim was preparing to leave. She

looked around and saw zero other possessions, and hadn't this man told her he'd been staying here for weeks? If this was his semi-permanent home, surely he would have unpacked by now?

Judging by the trail, the killer dragged the victim back inside towards the bed. The majority of the blood had congealed beneath the victim's torso, that meant he died in the position he was now locked in.

Ella rubbed her face and took a deep breath. She had a problem with this theory, even though all the evidence pointed to it. It went against everything she knew about serial killers and people in the throes of death. Usually, a victim would thrash around until their dying breath, not simply stay locked in a position until they finally passed away.

Unless the killer commanded them to do it, but why bother? More bizarrely, why place – or force – them into this strange position? Because it implied submission? Because the visual of someone on their knees begging for mercy appealed to his sense of power? Perhaps, but if he was truly looking to prove his dominance, he'd spend as much time with the victims as possible and he'd carry out more severe attacks. So far, he'd only lacerated each victim once, and that was at odds with everything Ella knew about power-control serial killers.

Next, Ella went to the window. The curtains were still drawn but the window was slightly open. It only opened a few inches, so the chances of the killer escaping out here were nonexistent. That meant he left the same way he arrived – brazenly. There had to be CCTV cameras in this place or in the surrounding areas, so that would be her first port of call after leaving here.

Was there anything here different to the other crime scenes, or was it another carbon copy? Nothing had been vandalized, and she doubted the killer would bother robbing a man who apparently had nothing left to his name. She stepped back out in the hallway, avoiding the blood, and took in the scene at a single glance. On the surface, it was all very simplistic, but this killer had a twisted vision that he was hellbent on achieving. Everything meant something, she was sure of it.

The whoosh of the breeze coming in through the window made for calming background noise, but Ella jumped in surprise when the victim – this poor man who'd been dead for at least several hours – suddenly moved of his own accord.

“Jesus,” Ella shouted.

The victim, whose head had been propped up on his hands in a begging-

for-mercy position, collapsed face-first onto the bed. In death, the body went through several sudden changes, including the rapid withering of skin and the mass release of bodily fluids. He now lay in the same position as Joanne and David, head buried into the mattress.

The corridor reverberated with the sound of shuffling feet, the echoing rhythm like a heartbeat in the otherwise silent passageway. Ripley turned the corner, joining Ella as they both surveyed the scene.

“Can’t believe he struck next door to us,” Ripley said. “That’s some bold shit.”

“You don’t think it was a coincidence?” asked Ella.

“He could have killed any of the other two-thousand people around here and he chooses one in the same building as us? My gut says no. This wasn’t an accident.”

Ella assumed these victims were purposely targeted, but Ripley had a good point. This town had a thousand miles of land to choose from. Hitting the location that happened to house two FBI agents was akin to winning the lottery.

“I talked to him a couple of hours before he died. I upset him.”

“And we still don’t know why.”

“Is this because of me?” Ella asked. Again, she’d invited someone in and they’d wound up dead. “Maybe this angel of death thing is a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Ripley shook her head. “It would only be self-fulfilling if *you* killed him, but this is the work of some vengeful son of a bitch craving power and control. These are his domination fantasies coming to life, and he’s targeted someone close to show he can operate right under our noses. He wants us to think he’s invisible, but we’ve got him scouted.”

“Do we?”

“Yes. The owner is on his way in. He’s going to check the cameras for us. Plus, if what the maid told me is true, this victim is kind of... odd. I hate to say it, but he’s a perfect victim.”

“You’re not kidding,” Ella said. “Judging by his rucksack over there, he was getting ready to leave. Didn’t the clerk say no one else was staying at this hotel, though? How would our killer know this guy was even here?”

“Yeah, I got questions and lots of ‘em,” Ripley said. “Come on, let’s go and wait for the owner to get in. The sheriff and the forensics team are on their way too.”



Three perfect victims, Ella thought. What was this killer trying to say?

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“I’m... at a loss,” Dennis said. “Why would somebody do this to Gary?”

The manager’s office was an immaculate rectangle of minimal furnishings and a crooked calendar hanging over an old computer. Ella wanted nothing more than to straighten it up, but now wasn’t the time. The motel’s owner, a man named Dennis Cromwell, sat frozen at his desk, shook by the horrors that had taken place on the floor above. He buried his face in his palms and grabbed a chunk of his thin blonde hair as he ran them over his skull.

The owner had confirmed in his native southern twang that the victim’s name was Gary Weathers. From what Ella had gathered from Dennis’s brief spiel, Gary was something of an eccentric.

“We’re hoping you might be able to help us with that,” said Ripley. “First of all, we have one burning question. One of your staff told us no one else was staying in this motel. Why’d she lie?”

Dennis frowned off the comment, as though he’d taken it as an accusation. “That’s not on her. That’s my fault. She wasn’t lying, she just didn’t know.”

Ella said, “The clerk didn’t know someone was staying here? Seems like something a staff member ought to be aware of.”

“Gary’s a pal of mine, alright?” Dennis snarled in a confessional tone. “I was throwing him a bone. I didn’t want anyone to know.”

“No one knew he was staying here other than you?” asked Ella.

“Me and Sandra, the maid. I told the other staff he was my buddy who just needed to hang out here for a while. They didn’t know he was sleeping upstairs.”

Ella ruminated on the situation. This Gary Weathers fellow was a secret guest with only two people aware of his whereabouts. Either this killer got very lucky or he knew of Gary’s circumstances.

Ripley asked, “Why would you keep it a secret, Mr. Cromwell?”

“Didn’t want to get in trouble. We’re a chain motel. If the top brass got word I was giving my pals handouts.” Dennis mock-slashed his own neck. “I was worried one of the staff might blab.”

Ella got it. “So, no one other than you and the maid knew Gary was living here?”

Dennis threw his hands in the air, a sign of his surrender. “Hey, don’t look at me. I was in bed all night. My wife can vouch, so can my kids.”

Ella didn't genuinely consider Dennis a suspect. Dennis might have been the only person who knew the victim's location, but that little fact contradicted what Ella knew about this unsub. Not only was their killer too smart to advertise such an obvious connection between killer and victim, but Dennis's voice was too much to shrill be the same one from the audio footage.

"That all?" asked Ripley.

Dennis shrugged. "I don't know. Doorbell cam will have caught me getting home and not leaving 'til this morning. Does that work?"

"It'll do," said Ripley.

Ella said, "Gary. Tell us about him. Why was he here? What was he like as a person?" The victim had already told her his side of the story, that he was staying there because his house burned down. But she wanted to know if Dennis's version matched up.

"Me and Gary go way back. Thirty, forty years now. He ran into a string of bad luck recently. His house burned to the ground, then he lost his job."

Ripley asked, "Which was?"

"Maintenance man for some local churches. The fire is what set him off. He went off the rails after that, and I hate to say it, but Gary's home was... prone to being burned to the ground. As weird as that sounds."

"Come again?"

Dennis breathed a heavy sigh and said, "Gary was a collector. A hoarder. His house was stacked from floor to ceiling with crap. Mostly newspapers and boxes. Throw in a guy who smokes like a chimney and you've got a recipe for an inferno. I hate to blame him for that, but... come on."

Ella was reminded of an old saying of her aunt's. If you don't want to get trampled by elephants, don't hang around with elephants. "A hoarder? So when his house burned down, he lost everything he loved too."

Dennis nodded. "Yup. To most people it was just trash, but Gary was a special breed. I mean, he was always kinda kooky. When we were teenagers he used to try and contact aliens through his radio. But recently he completely lost the plot."

"Oh jeez," Ella said as she pinched the bridge of her nose, already sensing the turn this was about to take. "Conspiracy theorist."

"Something like that," Dennis said. "He thought people were after him. I believe *targeted* was the term he used, as though anyone would care what a small-town maintenance guy was up to."

Ella knew the conspiracy mind very well. She found it fascinatingly pathetic. “Some nameless, faceless group, right?” she asked.

“Yup. It was always *they* and *them*. Never any solid names. He claimed *they* burned his house down, but it doesn’t take a genius to put two and two together.”

Dennis had a good point. Smoking plus piles of flammable paper only ended one way. “That could have been why he lashed out at me.” Ella directed the comment to her partner. “He thought I was one of them.”

“Never underestimate the fragility of a gullible mind,” Ripley said. “Dennis, did Gary have any evidence that someone was after him? I mean, I think conspiracy theorists are dummies like anyone else but the fact remains that someone *did* kill him. I just want to work out if this was a targeted attack or whether something else drew this murderer here.”

Dennis paused to ponder the question. “Nothing that I ever saw. It was all vague comments like he saw someone watching him from across the street. But in the past two weeks, me and Gary barely spoke. He became stir crazy, bitter, resentful, lots of crap about God abandoning him.”

Ella’s imagination suddenly alighted, an indistinct spark that seemed to pair up with some of the other musings whirring around that overworked machine she called a brain. A new avenue suddenly formed, opening a flurry of options that had otherwise taken a backseat to more probable answers. But in light of Dennis’s comments, she went with the flow, molding together small fragments that may have been a part of the same puzzle.

“Gary was a religious man?” she asked.

“Once upon a time. Didn’t seem to mention it much anymore, though. He was more concerned with his so-called followers.”

It made sense Gary might adopt a conspiracy outlook, Ella thought. After losing his house, possessions and job, Gary might have struggled to accept the reality that, in the grand scheme of life, he wasn’t as important as he thought he was. He was as disposable as anyone else, so he would have made great mental leaps to somehow rationalize this cold reality. In his head, he wasn’t simply an insignificant guy who happened to be down on his luck, he was so prominent that an underground group were attempted to sabotage his life.

And as Ripley had said earlier, Gary Weathers made a perfect victim. Or at least, he would have if the killer hadn’t used his death to send a middle finger to her and Ripley.

Ella scratched her head. Things didn't match up. The killer must have known Gary was hiding out here, but who else did Gary have in his life? He seemed like a lone ranger, but if he was willing to tell Ella – a total stranger – about his living situation, who else might he have told?

“Cameras,” Ripley said. “You have them in here?”

“Yes. Five in total. One outside, two on each floor.”

“We'll need to see if they caught anything.”

Dennis slowly turned around and hovered his palm over his mouse. “I... uh... can. But I really don't want to see this.”

“Then look away,” said Ripley. “He came between what, midnight and eight a.m.?”

Ella cast her mind back to the previous night. Just before she'd fallen asleep, she remembered hearing footsteps outside her door. That must have been their unsub, stalking from the shadows. “Between two and three a.m.,” Ella said. “I heard someone in the corridor about then.”

Ripley nodded. “Check it,” she instructed Dennis.

The motel owner did, rewinding footage from the outdoor camera to two a.m.. It showed an empty street and a single car. Then he zipped through the footage at triple speed until a lone figure manifested from the darkness. The low quality of the camera only caught him in pixelated fragments, moving robotically with each frame like a character from an ancient video game. This time, he was dressed in a blue jacket zipped tightly up to his neck, a mask over his mouth, a loose hood hanging from his skull. He looked to be about five-nine, stocky, long arms like a gorilla. The sight of the man stirred a maelstrom of intense feelings - a boiling sea of anger, revulsion, and nausea. This son of a bitch had been within grabbing distance. Ella put the thought to one aside, promising herself she'd catch this monster and throw him in jail for the rest of his life.

In the footage, the man gently pushed open the front door to the motel and slipped inside.

“He just walked right past the clerk?” Ripley asked.

“We're a motel. People come and go. Besides, the desk isn't always manned.”

“Skip to the next camera,” Ella said.

Dennis did. The time in the corner said two-seventeen a.m.. The unsub stepped lightly, moving from door to door, eyeing the door handles to find out which ones were occupied. For a moment, he froze like a mannequin

outside room one-twenty-five – Ella’s room – then placed his ear against the door. Ella felt her stomach tighten but didn’t look away. Rage coursed through her veins like molten lava, threatening to erupt, but she kept it in check, promising herself to channel that energy into something more beneficial.

Then the killer moved on, door to door, out of sight. Dennis switched the camera again, and this time, the killer made a beeline directly to Gary’s door.

“He knew Gary was here,” Ella said. “Look. No hesitation.”

Ripley, leaning over the desk, said, “Agreed. This wasn’t luck. He came here for Gary.”

The figure stood outside Gary’s door, head down, inhumanly still. He reached out with a single hand and seemed to caress the wood, then retreated slightly to the right of the door. Even through the peephole, Gary wouldn’t have been able to see him.

“He’s baiting Gary out,” Ripley said. “Playing to his paranoia.”

“He knows him,” Ella said.

“Mind if I don’t look?” Dennis asked. “I... can’t watch this.”

“Of course,” Ella said. Dennis turned his chair around just as the action began on screen, but Ella spotted something. A small fragment that seemed out of the ordinary. “Wait a second. Dennis, rewind that.”

The owner asked, “Do I have to?”

“Yes, please. Rewind to the part where he’s hiding away from the door.”

Dennis did so, reluctantly. “What, here?”

“Yes.” Ella clocked the time in the corner of the footage. Two-twenty-two a.m. Then she watched the killer closely. More specifically, his mouth.

“Ripley, look.”

“What?”

“He’s talking to someone.”

Ella’s partner leaned in for closer inspection. “God, he is. But is he talking to himself? The victim? Who?”

The footage played out, showing Gary answering the door and the unsub responding with a sudden knife attack before pushing Gary back in the room, out of sight. Ella’s stomach churned as she watched the senseless murder, rage simmering in her chest. Right there and then, she vowed to find this man, even if it took her until her dying day. This killer would not go free. He would not evade justice.

But Ella turned her attention to Ripley’s question, because Ella was sure

she already had the answer. Ripley had the answer too, spoke it, she just hadn't realized.

"Mia, you already said exactly who he's talking to. When you put this altogether, it's obvious."

The footage finished, showing a brazen killer walking out of the hotel room, past a maid's trolley and out through the door.

"What?" Ripley asked.

"Our unsub, he's talking to God."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ella waited in the motel parking lot while the forensics team did their dirty work inside. Ripley came out too, boots clattering on the pavement like a beaten snare drum. She had a cigarette in her mouth.

“You don’t smoke,” Ella said.

“Need something to get the taste of death out of my mouth.” Ripley exhaled a plume of smoke then coughed. “But this somehow tastes even worse.”

Out of earshot of the motel owner, Ella could be more open about her theory. “What do you think?”

“I think... I’m glad I quit years ago.”

“Not that. My theory.”

“I think you’re onto something,” Ripley said. “There are some seeds to work with.”

“Right? Aside from our killer talking to God, there’s some religious aspect to this whole thing. Joanne went to rehab at a church. David had tons of religious paintings in his house. Gary was a maintenance worker for local churches, and Dennis said that was deeply religious. And then there’s the obvious thing. I can’t believe we didn’t see it a mile off.”

“What’s that?” Ripley asked, flicking her half-smoked cigarette into the wind.

“I didn’t notice it until I saw Gary. There was a moment he slipped out of his position, landing face first on the bed.”

“What do you mean?”

“These victims were posed. To look like they were praying to God.”

Ripley’s gaze wandered from Ella, out towards the empty street. She seemed to like the idea. “Could be. I guess they couldn’t hold the prayer position for long. Their bodies would slip out of the pose in death.”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I saw. By the time anyone had gotten to the other victims, they’d fallen out of position. Our killer’s making these guys pray.”

That was where Ella’s theory hit a wall. “Beats me, but there’s something else we need to consider too. Now that we know Gary’s life story, all our victims have a connection. A pretty strong one.”

“They were all struggling, down on their luck, pretty much on death’s



door anyway?”

“That’s another one, but each one of these victims lost something. Well, not just something, but the thing that defined them. They’d all had their identities stripped away.”

Ripley reached into her pocket then shoved two pieces of gum into her mouth. “Like?” she asked.

“Look at the first victim, Joanne. She had her heart set on being a parent, but then that got taken away from her. Then it was a downward spiral until her death.”

“Right. And David?”

“Same thing. He had his wealth and his business. Lost it all, ended up homeless, ended up dead.”

“I see where you’re going. Gary loved his possessions. That got taken away, then he woke up dead.”

“Exactly,” Ella said. “It’s not about the drugs or the homelessness or the conspiracy theories. At its core, it’s about identities. Motherhood, wealth, possessions. Defining characteristics that were stripped away, leaving nothing but empty shells behind. Our killer is targeting people who lost themselves.”

Time seemed to stop while Mia reflected on Ella’s interpretations. She untied and retied her glowing red ponytail, affording Ella a rare glimpse of her partner’s locks in full flow past her shoulders. Catwalk models the world over would kill for those natural curls, she thought.

“Right, but... why? What’s the point of killing people who wouldn’t last much longer anyway?”

Ella regarded Ripley for a moment, willing the answer into her head. “You don’t think it’s obvious? You of all people must be able to see it.”

Ripley smiled. “Of course. I just want to see if you do too.”

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Matthew twenty-eight.”

“Right,” said Ripley, “mercy killings.”

“Mercy killings. God’s will. Our unsub is a walking euthanasia clinic. He’s putting these people out of their misery to give them better lives beyond the grave.”

The gravity of the conversation topic hung thick in the air, a palpable pressure that squeezed the breath from them. While serial killing was par for the course, religion was unfamiliar territory for both Ella and Ripley. Ella

even felt a little foolish reciting a Bible passage that she'd only learned about thirty minutes before. The strange syllables felt unfamiliar as they tumbled from her tongue, a foreign language that she could repeat but not quite grasp.

After a moment of heavy stillness, Ripley said, "Matthew sixty-nine, huh? What's all that about?"

Ella sensed a joke was on the horizon. "Ten-twenty-eight. I dunno. I just searched some religious passages online while I was waiting for you."

"It's all Hebrew to me," Ripley said.

Ella fought hard to maintain a stoic expression, despite the urge to grin itching at her cheeks. "How long?" Ella asked. She had to know.

Ripley smirked. "Had that one backed up for years."

The motel door creaked open and Sheriff Hale emerged, evidence bags in his hands, his face pale white. A chill seemed to radiate off him, like a fog rolling in from the nearby lake. The poor guy had seen three dead bodies in as many days, and that was as many as he'd seen in his whole career. This case had definitely thrown him in at the deep end, Ella thought.

"How's it looking in there?" asked Ripley.

The sheriff drew in a long, cleansing breath, probably to rid himself of the cloying taste of death that had seeped into his lungs. "Brutal. One stab wound in the chest, nothing stolen, no prints or hair samples but they're still going over."

Ella motioned towards the long evidence bags clutched between his fingers. They looked like they held notebooks. "What we got in there?" she asked.

The Sheriff proudly presented the evidence bags as if they were two prized trophies. "Thought you might find these useful. We found them in the victim's rucksack. Notebooks. Two of them. Pages and pages of stuff about this guy's life."

"Anything useful?" Ripley asked as she took them off the sheriff's hands.

"I didn't read much of them, but literature isn't my forte. What I did read, I couldn't understand."

Ella took one and held it up to the light. Black cover, white pages, around three-hundred pages thick. The thought of rifling through a conspiracy theorist's inane ramblings sapped her energy like she was being gnawed at by a ravenous vampire. "Oh, Christ," she said. "Please God, let's throw these in a woodchipper and be done with them."

"Huh?" asked the sheriff.

“Don’t ask,” Ripley said. She turned to her partner, “There could be something in here. Whoever did this to Gary knew him. If these can point us in the direction of friends, colleagues, enemies, whatever – then it’s worth a shot.”

The woman had a point, but Ella would be damned if this wasn’t the worst thing she’d ever had to do in her life.

“One read through then I’m done,” she said.

“Agreed.”

“Come on,” Ella said, unlocking the car. “Let’s get this over with.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Back at the precinct, Ella laced herself with caffeine and got to work. Ripley sat opposite doing exactly the same, equally as perplexed by the absurd paragraphs forcing their way into her eyeballs as Ella was. The notes began five weeks ago, when Gary's house had first burned down, and somehow he'd filled six-hundred pages in less than forty days. He'd documented absolutely everything that happened in his life during this short period, and the result was the most perplexing, badly written autobiography ever self-published.

"I hate to speak ill of the dead," Ripley said, "but this guy was batshit insane."

Ella said, "It's weird. He seemed mostly fine when I spoke to him. At least until he started screaming."

Ten minutes into reading, Ripley said, "I can't take much more of this. This should be the plot of the next Saw film. Read five minutes of this garbage. People would tear their eyeballs out."

Ella struggled to disagree. As it turned out, Gary Weathers was perhaps the most paranoid man to ever live, and he seemed to think that a cult were following his every move and leaving behind cryptic clues of their activities.

"You got to the cult part?" Ella asked.

"Yes. I'm ready to kill myself."

"You know there's never been any Satanic cults proven to exist? There've been groups of teenagers who've sacrificed animals and things, but no actual, mass-scale cults ever discovered?"

Ripley downed what remained of her coffee and said, "I was a police officer in the eighties, Dark. Believe me, I know. The quack psychologists that peddled that crap set behavioral science back about a hundred years."

Ella was desperate for a distraction from the task, anything. "That long, you think?"

Ripley picked up the notebook and slammed it back down. "Thirty-five years later and we're still fighting this crap. In fact, it's worse than ever because these days everyone wants to think they're important, so they call themselves..." Ripley flipped back a page. "Targeted individuals. These people need to learn that sometimes you've gotta eat shit and like the taste."

Ella fought back a grin. "Nothing useful so far, then?"

“No, and I’m giving it five more pages before I bow out. There’s a killer out there and we’re nose deep in some lunatic’s ramblings.”

“It was your idea,” Ella laughed.

“And I regret it. Please forgive me.”

“Five more pages, then we’re out.” Ella carried on reading, trying to concentrate in spite of the incomprehensible prose and general lack of direction. The man seemed to jump from one topic to the next without any segues or fluidity.

*What is the war between good and evil? Evil is fake, that’s why, but you do not need to tell me your logic. If you’re using God to hurt people you’re really evil. Why are people like me targeted? This is the basis of this attack. It’s not only the government, although they use those channels (police, FBI, courts, electric bill, or any other workers). They need to get ready for all of us in hell and so they are saved by the coming of God. I had an interesting experience. A large, framed picture of Jesus fell the wall and hit me on the head, almost knocked me out. Boy, did that get my attention. And someone told me that his passenger seatbelt sometimes goes off for no reason.*

Ella had to take a moment and peer out of the window at the balmy midday scene outside. She needed to see something that made sense, something that cleansed the crazy, familiar shapes and contours that matched her understanding of the world. The sun rose in the east, flowers grew in the spring; underground sects did not exist, let alone stalk unimportant members of the public.

Yet it was funny, because as misguided as Gary might be, he saw the world through his own unique lens. He’d created his own narrative and lived his life trapped inside his own head. Instead of a curious bystander, he saw someone with malicious intent. Graffiti-tagged walls were not the product of bored youth but a sinister message left by all-powerful cults with social and political sway. In a way, didn’t everyone see the world wrongly? We all made up narratives and beliefs that justified our feelings and actions, so was Gary really any different from she or Ripley?

It was easy to disregard this man, but it took a mature mind to analyze how someone might have reached this point. It didn’t happen overnight. It was the result of reinforced beliefs and a long decline of mental stability. To understand it, you had to see everything from their perspective, as difficult as it might be.

“Shoot me,” Ripley said.

Mia hadn't got there yet.

"Had enough?"

"No," Ripley said. "I got something. This might actually be useful."

"Really?"

"Yeah, look at this." Ripley turned her page around to show her partner. She pointed to a paragraph at the bottom of the page.

*Saw my therapist today and did not hold back. I told him about what happened at the store and he said I "acted out." He got angry at me and said I was losing myself. I said I was going to leave and he demanded I stay. I threatened to tell people he didn't have a license and then he calmed down. But I left and walked to the Old Brick Store. He is not one of the good ones, he is wearing a mask. I will not go back.*

"Therapist, huh?"

"An unlicensed one at that."

"Could be useful. Any word on who he is in there?"

Ripley went back to the books while Ella speed-read through hers. On page ninety-six, she found another mention of him.

"Here, Ripley, got something here. This entry from three weeks ago says: *First appointment with therapist, then walked to Greenbury's to pick up newspapers. Visited my old church. Bad memories.*" Ella skimmed through the rest of the book at lightning speed, half thankful the task over, half disappointed there were no other references to this therapist.

"Grab your laptop, Dark. Check for any therapists or psychologists or counselors in the area. There can't be many around here."

Ella first pulled up the police database and searched by occupation. Nothing in there. Next, she tried an Internet search.

"We got a bunch of practices in Fairview. One in Masontown, one in Brandonville."

"Too far away," said Ripley. "They're what, twenty, thirty miles from here? This guy didn't even have a car."

"Yeah, those are the closest. But the note says he was unlicensed. He wouldn't be listed if he was working off the books."

Ripley shot out of her seat, peered around the door into the precinct. "Dammit, nobody around to ask. I could call the sheriff."

"No, wait. Read those entries again. After one therapy session, he walked to a place called Greenbury's. Another time, he went to the Old Brick Store, whatever that is."

Ripley clicked her fingers. “Gotcha. If he’s walking there after his sessions it means they can’t be far away.”

Ella was already typing away. She found Alfa Creek’s Old Brick Store on the virtual map and pulled up an overhead view of all the establishments on the same street. Ripley, leaning over the screen, said, “Look, Greenbury’s. They’re at opposite ends of the street. What’s nearby?”

“No sign of any therapists or counselors along the same road. A library, garden store, gift shop. Nowhere a therapist could hide.”

“Dammit,” said Ripley. “Zoom out a little. Let’s see what else is in the area. This is all what, a few miles away from here?”

“Yeah, about three miles by the looks of it.” Ella fiddled with the map and scrolled through the side streets. “We got a card shop, a builders, some place called New Wellness.”

“The hell is that? Sounds cultish,” said Ripley.

Ella stopped her search, intrigued. “You’re right, it does.” Ella dug into the establishment and found nothing but a name and address. No details about the business itself. She tried the name in a search engine and found the same information again.

Ella’s gaze fell upon the name of the business owner. A faint glimmer of recognition, bringing forth a recent memory. She’d seen this name before. Somewhere else, now illuminated in a digital world.

“Hold on,” Ella said. “Look at the owner’s name. Does that ring a bell to you?”

Ripley leaned closer and put forth her best Eastern European tongue. “Ted Kowalczyk. Kuh-voll-check. If I’d heard that name, I’d remember it.”

“Oh crap,” Ella said. “David’s storage unit!”

“Huh?”

Ella darted out of her seat, over to the boxes of evidence in the corner of the room. She dived in with eager hands, sifting through evidence bags like a scavenger over a carcass. At the bottom, she found it. Something from David Harper’s personal collection.

She displayed it to her partner. “Business card for one Ted Kowalczyk. Found among David’s possessions.”

Ripley slammed her hand on the table. “Yes! Two victims, one unlicensed therapist. This could be our link.”

Ella pocketed the business card then grabbed her things. An inexplicable surge of energy raced through her body, tingling her nerve endings, filling

her with new life. This could be the game-changer they needed.  
“What are we waiting for? Let’s get this guy.”



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Nestled between two larger buildings, the little structure went practically unnoticed. It was like a secret chamber, only welcome to those in the inner circle. But as Ella looked more closely, a few hints of its presence could be found - an old door handle, a faded sign – like cryptic clues that only the initiated could decipher. If not for her online search, Ella wouldn't have known that this dingy, almost invisible building was the New Wellness Center.

“Not exactly a marketing expert, this guy,” Ripley said.

“You're not kidding. Nothing about this place screams wellness.”

“We sure it's the right place?”

Ella double-checked the address on the business card. “This is it. Building eleven, Heald Street.” On the way here, Ella had taken a quick look at Ted Kowalczyk's history. Very little information seemed to be on record, other than that he was once arrested for threatening someone with a knife three years ago. Ella reasoned that this little altercation could have been the reason he lost his therapy license and was therefore forced to go about his business under the radar. Could these underhanded tactics have been compromised by some new clients, and so Mr. Kowalczyk had taken matters into his own hands?

Ripley gripped the door handle and said, “We've got a sneaky therapist with a criminal history who has ties to two of our victims. I don't usually get hunches but I've got a good one here.”

Ella felt it too. After a year in this game, she'd developed a sense for identifying homicidal maniacs in the flesh. When you shared the same airspace with someone who'd taken another's life, you felt an indescribable aura in your bones and ears and nostrils, as though the souls of those they'd claimed were calling out to you from beyond and propelling you to push forward. She felt it now, that heavy blanket of instinct. Ted Kowalczyk had a sinister story and Ella was prepared to beat it out of him.

“Crap, door's locked,” Ripley said. “Something tells me that knocking isn't the wisest idea here. This building connects to the two either side. He's got a million escape routes at his disposal.”

Ella sized up the lock with a critical eye, examining the grooves, assessing the legal ramifications of breaking it down. It was a standard lever handle

with cam lock. Nothing that a few everyday tools wouldn't penetrate.

"Nothing's ever locked." Ella reached into her pocket and pulled out a hairpin, then scoured the ground until she found a thin nail. She twisted the hairpin, destroying it, but transforming it into a makeshift tension wrench in the process. She hovered down, inserted her new tools of the trade, and twisted until she felt tension. Ripley's gaze pierced down from above, stern and unwavering.

"You walk a fine line, Dark."

"What? You didn't learn anything from the last case?" Ella asked. A week ago, they'd done battle with a killer now known as the Key Master, and aside from putting a serial murderer in jail, she'd re-familiarized herself with the worlds of locks and lockpicking. She eyed her partner and said, "No permanent damage. We'll just say the door was open."

"Let's just say I saw exactly what you wanted me to see," Ripley said. One of Ripley's qualities that didn't get enough credit was her willingness to look the other way in the name of justice. Unless, of course, you threatened to shoot a suspect to elicit a confession, then you never heard the end of it.

"Like magic," Ella said. The door clicked open, revealing a thin and claustrophobic stairwell. "What's our approach?"

"Same as always. Keep it simple. Don't antagonize anyone. If he's our man, the evidence will speak for itself. We don't need to shoot confessions out of him, alright?"

There it was again. "Fine."

Ella floated up the stairwell, Ripley trailing close behind. Her feet barely made a whisper on each step as she ascended, favoring the surprise approach if indeed anyone was present up above. If not, they could scour the place for evidence that this Ted Kowalczyk person was their perpetrator, and while it might be inadmissible in court since they were technically trespassing, they could come back later and officially claim it.

At the top of the stairs, they reached another door. Ella gripped the lever with one hand and her Glock with the other for that sturdy reassurance. She cast a sidelong glance towards her partner, who responded with a subtle raising of her index finger.

"You hear that?" Ripley whispered.

Ella pressed her ear against the door. From within, she heard a low rumble of a man's voice, punctuated by occasional grunts.

"The hell?" she asked.

Suddenly, a desperate plea for help seeped through the wood. It was a tone Ella recognized; someone in dire need, someone in the throes of pain.

“Go,” Ripley said.

Ella heaved the door open, gun drawn. Her grip was firm, her stance determined. Ted Kowalczyk was in here and she had more than a few questions for the man. She rushed inside with no hesitation, the claustrophobic stairway giving way to a vast rectangular office, the centerpiece of which was two people locked in an unfamiliar intimate embrace.

One man lying on a couch, violently shaking and twitching.

Another man over him, his hands pressed against his shoulders.

This wasn't any kind of therapy session Ella had seen before.

“Ted Kowalczyk?” she shouted, drawing her pistol. “Are you Ted?”

The man stood there, immobile, as if rooted to the hardwood floor beneath his feet. Jaw clenched tight, brow furrowed in rage. Ella hadn't seen what this suspect looked like until now, but he was around five-ten, reasonably stocky, short black hair that followed the contours of his head. Despite his robust frame, he had a gaunt and pale face, as though everything above the neck had been painted on.

“Who the hell?” the man screamed, glancing between the agents and then back to his patient. “What are you doing here? How did you get in?”

Before either agent could answer, the sofa-bound patient tumbled onto the floor with a heavy thud. The man, whose face was hidden beneath a mass of silver locks and a wild white beard like a second-rate wizard, flung himself into a corner of the room. He frenziedly scanned the faces of the other three occupants, his gaze darting from one to the next like cornered prey searching for an escape from his deathly predicament.

“This session is over,” Ripley said. “We need to talk with you, Ted.”

Ted said nothing, because all eyes moved to the cornered patient, who'd pulled out a handgun from his rucksack. With trembling hands, he trained it on Ella, then to Ripley and back again.

“Don't make me shoot,” he said in a gruff voice. “I'll take you all down.”

“Jessie,” shouted Ted as he edged closer to his presumably now-former patient. “It's fine. There's been some misunderstanding. Put the gun down.”

“No! They're Charlie. They want to kill me.”

Ella glanced at Ella in a moment of desperation. She'd heard it too. This bearded man wasn't a regular therapy patient. He was a PTSD sufferer,

maybe a veteran. She lowered her gun and said, "Sir, we assure you we're not soldiers. We're FBI agents. Ted is our target, not you. Please put the gun..."

"Target?" asked the veteran. His violent convulsing worsened at the term, perhaps triggering some troubling memory. "I'll kill you if you come closer."

"Dark, be very, very careful," Ripley shouted. "Ted, please come with us. We don't want any trouble."

"I'm not going anywhere. Why are you in my office? I've done nothing wrong."

"We'll see about that," Ripley said.

Ella edged around the room, closer to Ted but keeping her distance from the triggered soldier. Ripley gradually walked the opposite direction, catching onto Ella's train of thought. If someone was pointing a gun at you, you either wanted to be as far away as possible or close enough to seize their wrist at the first available opportunity. Ella would take care of Ted, Ripley the distressed soldier.

"Ted, we're not asking," Ella said as she raised her pistol again. Ted shifted his weight to his left leg, a sign Ella recognized as pre-flight, but a sudden gun blast shook the walls of the building, deadened her ear drums, and injected her with a shot of adrenaline.

Two blurs ran in opposite directions. Ted, hurrying for the door. Ripley, storming the cornered soldier. Ella's brain raced, the seconds slipping away as she frantically weighed up the options. She had to act fast - any delay could have disastrous consequences.

Suspect, she decided. Ripley could comfort the soldier, reassure him there was no threat. Ella sprang into motion, racing towards the fleeing suspect who now was inches away from the exit. He reached the door handle, pulled it open and got one foot into the stairwell before Ella shoulder-tackled him against the door frame. The bodies bounced off the wood like two rubber balls, momentum carrying them back into the room and onto the floor. Ted gained the upper hand by rolling on top of Ella, deflecting her blows with his elbow, and pummeling her mid-section with his fist.

But the therapist's blows were weak and out of practice. These were the attacks of a man in unfamiliar territory, and so Ella pressed her knees against his ribs and shoved him off of her in one thrust. She jumped to her feet and trained her pistol on the wheezing gentleman, locked onto his lower section.

"Shoot me," Ted screamed. "I dare you."

"I really don't want to do that," Ella said. She turned side-on and glimpsed

her partner, who was now clutching the innocent man in the corner. He looked terrified, shook up, as though he'd been transported back into the jungles of Vietnam.

Ella sheathed her weapon, not wanting to put the man through any more distress.

But as she did, Ted seized the moment and fled again towards the exit. Ella rushed into action again, cutting him off at the pass, colliding with him at the peak of the stairwell. She grabbed him by his blue shirt, threw him against the wall, lodged her knee in his abdomen. Ted curled over, clutching his stomach, coughing violently. Ella spun him around and gripped his wrists behind his back.

“Why are you running, Ted?” she shouted in his ear.

Ted laughed, maniacally. “Because you know.”

“What do I know?”

“You know... that you want to throw me down those stairs.”

Ella tightened her grip. “You want to go to court with two broken legs?”

“No,” Ted spat. “I’d rather die than go to prison.”

“Why’d you do it?” she asked, calmer this time.

Ted said nothing as the arrest became inevitable. Ted wasn’t getting out of here. His game was up. The murders were over. Ella breathed a sigh of relief, remembering those victims, the poor souls that were already down and their luck and then euthanized by this man’s hand. Rage burrowed inside her at the thought, realizing that this was her opportunity to exact a measure of vengeance for the friends and families of those who’d been cruelly slain. Certain people would give anything to be in this position with a triple-murderer. She was here, living it, breathing it.

Exploding back to life, Ted made one last ditch effort. He flung his foot backwards into Ella’s groin, but Ella scouted it and deflected the blow with her ankle. The pathetic attempt to immobilize her enraged her. Her fury boiled over, all willpower to keep this man safe suddenly deserting her, as though she’d begun channeling God’s will herself.

She didn’t even believe in God, really.

But she did believe in gravity.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“I can’t believe you threw him down the stairs,” Ripley said.

Ella watched the man from outside of the interrogation room. This precinct wasn’t lavish enough for a designated interview room with one-way glass, so a regular office with a locked door would have to do. Ted Kowalczyk was forced to watch his captor, Ripley, and Sheriff Hale confer on the other side like images from a silent movie.

“Me neither,” Ella said.

“You could have killed him, Dark. You better hope he hasn’t broken anything or there’ll be hell to pay. Killer or not, he’ll be suing your ass.”

“He was a runner. Had to stop him running.”

“You definitely did that.”

“It was just some good old fashioned gravity, and he doesn’t look too hurt to me. Was the soldier okay?” Ella asked.

“Yeah. PTSD from Vietnam. Apparently he was working with Ted over here to overcome it, but the results had been minimal.”

The sheriff interrupted, “What are our chances of this guy being our man? Is it likely? Should I put the bubbly on ice?”

Ella bit her tongue, refusing to even whisper the dreaded words out of fear that saying them aloud might contaminate the truth. However, she was ninety-nine percent positive that Ted Kowalczyk was their killer. When backed into a corner, people had a way of showing the face beneath the mask, and what Kowalczyk had said in that stairwell spoke to her core. He was a man with dark secrets. He’d done something illegal, something treacherous, and Ella had a good feeling that it involved the murder of three innocent people.

“If I was a gambling woman, I’d put a bag of sand on it,” Ripley said. “Kowalczyk has links to at least two of the victims. He’s violent and aggressive. He’s a coward. He fits the psychological and the physical profile. He has a motive. He has a criminal past. He’s the missing piece of a very large puzzle and he fits perfectly.”

The sheriff’s grin was interrupted by an incoming phone call. “Excuse me,” he said.

“We ready to do this?” Ella asked.

“Always. Want me in there?”

“Please. This was a team effort. Gameplan?”

“Open-ended questions. We’ll present him with the facts and let him incriminate himself. I’ll bring in a folder of crime scene photos. Keep a close eye on his non-verbals. And for God’s sake don’t mention the stairs thing.”

“Got it.”

Sheriff Hale rushed back after his brief phone call. “Ladies, that was one of my guys. They found a stash of newspaper articles in Ted’s office, all relating to the murders. He’s been collecting them.”

Ella and Ripley beheld one another in disbelief, their eyes wide with awe. This fortune was a gift from the heavens.

“Wow,” Ripley said. “Names have not been made public, right?”

“No. Just general details. Still haven’t got the names or footage out there.”

“Thank you, Sheriff,” Ella said. “Great find.”

Ella led the way into what passed as an interrogation room, eager to get this case over with, ready and willing to leave it in the past where it belonged. She sat down opposite a damaged Ted Kowalczyk, still reeling from his violent descent fifteen feet to the cold ground below. She couldn’t lie, it felt good to throw a cowardly serial murderer down a flight of stairs. Ripley sat beside her and began the proceedings.

“I can’t pronounce your last name, so I’m just going to call you Ted.”

“It’s Polish,” spat Ted. “Some culture might do you Americans good.”

Ella said, “I love Poland. Fantastic buildings. Tragic history. Highest number of Christians of any country in Europe, apparently.”

Ted held her gaze. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Sure you wouldn’t. Want to tell us what happened back there in your office?”

Ted shrugged off the question, his face betraying no emotion.

Ripley asked, “Oh come on, Ted. Does that kind of thing happen often?”

“More often than you’d imagine.”

“And why’s that? Get yourself into a lot of fights?”

Ted smirked. “I know what you’re trying to do. You want me to talk about my past. Well, I won’t. That was all settled back then.”

“No, no,” said Ella. “We’re here to talk about your future, and I see a lot of iron bars and handcuffs. Back there, you said *“because you know.”* Want to tell me what that meant?”

Ted’s gaze flitted around the office, legs jittering, his torso buzzing with nervous energy. “Don’t pretend that you don’t. Why else would you drag me

here?”

“David Harper, Gary Weathers, Joanne Gustafson,” said Ella. “Those names are why we dragged you here. Mean anything to you?”

Ted’s lips pursed at the mention of David’s name, then went back to their baseline. He slowly nodded, rubbed his forehead, and said, “Yes, I knew David Harper.”

“Knew?” Ripley asked. “Interesting you’d speak of him in past tense.”

The suspect smirked. “Oh come on. Everyone knows what happened to him. He’s dead.”

“Funny you say that, because that information has never been made public.”

“David used to come and see me for sessions every Monday. When he didn’t show up, I tried to call him, find him. Went to the church, paid a visit to that little unit where he was hiding out, and saw police tape. I just put two and two together.”

Ella was a little taken aback by the man’s honesty. She at least thought he’d try and skirt the topic, but this little reason gave Ted an excuse to be at the crime scene when they eventually found evidence of his presence there. “And you just assumed it was David? Could have been any number of reasons for police tape there.”

“David was on the edge,” Ted said. “I assumed he’d killed himself.”

“Weren’t you his therapist?” Ripley asked.

“Yes I was. For six months.”

Ella added, “Right, and what about Gary Weathers?”

“Idiot,” Ted said. “Former patient. Never again.”

“You’ll certainly never be seeing him again, because he’s dead.”

Ted’s irritating smirk fell like a rock. All his smarminess plummeted, leaving a pale, soulless expression in its place. Ella kept a close eye on his pupils and eye-direction, both of which were frozen solid. “Gary’s... dead?”

“You didn’t know?” Ripley asked. “Seems like something you’d know.”

“No.... I.... I mean, Gary had problems. Major ones. But I genuinely didn’t know he’d died. I swear on my life.”

Unfortunately, admissions of ignorance didn’t mean much in this game. John Wayne Gacy swore innocence until the end despite having thirty-three corpses under his floorboards.

Ripley pulled a piece of paper from her folder and said, “Ted, I’m just going to read you something from Gary’s diary, if you don’t mind.”



“Oh Jesus. Please no. Sorry that he died but... the man had a few screws loose.”

Ella felt a strange, alien feeling swirling in her stomach, a whirlpool of mysterious emotion. She felt a sudden kinship with this suspect, bonded over their animosity for Gary’s ramblings. But it was a brief flame that quickly extinguished.

Ripley began, “Saw my therapist today and did not hold back. He said I ‘acted out.’ He got angry at me and said I was losing myself. I said I was going to leave and he demanded I stay. I threatened to tell people he didn’t have a license and then he calmed down. He is not one of the good ones, he is wearing a mask. I will not go back.”

“All of that is true. What do you want me to say?”

“Gary threatened to expose your fraudulent activities. Doesn’t that rub you the wrong way?”

Ted laughed the accusation off as he ran his shackled hands across his scalp. “No. Gary’s right. I lost my license years ago, that’s why I keep things discreet. But Jesus wept, I’m not going to kill a man for reporting me to the cops. I’d just leave town and set up shop elsewhere. We don’t all work to live.”

The comment stung Ella a little, as though Ted somehow knew the intricate details of her life.

“Wait a minute,” Ted continued, “you’re not accusing *me* of these murders, are you?”

Ella and Ripley remained mute, letting the silence do the talking. Ted flung up his arms in disbelief. “You’re out of your minds. I didn’t kill David or Gary.”

Ted could definitely talk the talk. He was as convincing as any innocent suspect she’d encountered in the past, but she couldn’t look past the evidence. It all pointed to this man, almost to a tee.

Maybe a little too perfect, she wondered.

“Do you still think David’s death was a suicide?” she asked.

Ted shook his head. “No. I read about it in the newspaper. It said it was a homicide. I’ve got the clippings in my office.”

*Dammit*, Ella thought. She’d tried to catch him out. “Collecting clippings of the news? Seems obsessive.”

“I knew David. Knew him well. I thought maybe, with a bit of luck, I could help the police out. I have recordings of everything he said. I thought

there might be, I don't know, a clue or something. Shoot me for trying to be helpful."

Ella and Ripley regarded each other, a string of doubt manifesting between them. Ella felt her heart begin to sink because Ted seemed to have an answer for everything. Were these rehearsed lines? Was he a master improviser?

Or was he being honest?

"Joanne Gustafson," Ripley said. "Know her?"

"No idea," Ted said firmly. "Never heard that name in my life."

Ripley laid out a crime scene photo of Joanne's body on the table and pushed it over to Ted. "How about now?"

Ted leaned closer, squinted his eyes, then turned away in disgust. "Ugh, I don't want to see that. And no, I don't know this woman."

Ella's heart accelerated and her palms grew clammy. She didn't like the way Ted was speaking. A common sign of a truth-teller was speaking in absolutes. A simple *no* would have roused her suspicions, but a hearty *no, I didn't know this person* gave her cause for concern.

Her case against this man was slipping, so she had to pray that the evidence held up. Time to get right to the core, she thought. No more pussyfooting around.

"Ted, where were you Friday afternoon between eleven a.m. and one p.m.?"

"This past Friday? Working. I've got recordings and timestamps to prove it."

An iron fist punched Ella in the gut. "Monday night? Between eleven p.m. and midnight?"

"At home. Alone. No I can't prove it."

No alibi for David's murder. "And last night, between two and three a.m.?"

Ted's smirk blossomed into a full-blown grin, baring his gapped, stained teeth. It was a grin Ella knew all too well, so she braced herself for the bad news. It was the smile of a man who had an airtight alibi.

"I was in the hospital last night. All night. I didn't get back until this morning."

Ella felt as if she'd been struck by lightning. The air left her lungs in a violent gust, throbbing pain pricked away at her skull. All hope and enthusiasm was sapped away with a single comment. They had footage of the killer's whereabouts during Gary's murder, and Ted could prove he was

elsewhere, then any further investigation was pointless. Could he have been involved in the other two murders? Possibly, but doubtful. These murders were the work of a lone perpetrator.

Ripley tapped her knuckles on the table, equally as lost for words as her partner.

“Are we done? Am I free to go?” Ted asked.

“Not by a long shot,” Ella said. “We need to see this evidence first.”

“Then I’m cleared?” Ted asked. Worry plagued the man’s expression. He was obviously trying to avoid the issue of his unlicensed operations.

“You’re treating patients without a therapy license,” Ripley said. “That could be a fine or jail time.”

“It’s not illegal. Just unethical.”

“No,” said Ella. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the man’s business card, still locked in an evidence bag. “It says here you’re a psychotherapist and counselor. Those terms are regulated in West Virginia, believe it or not.”

With a loud groan, Ted folded his arms and dropped back into his chair.

“But you already knew that,” Ella finished. In truth, she didn’t really care that some quack was practicing unlicensed therapy. It happened every minute of the day all over the world. She just needed a reason to keep him here because something told her she wasn’t done with this man.

“We’ll be back shortly,” Ripley said as she stood up and made for the door. “Come on, Dark, we need to talk.”

Yes they did because something about all this didn’t make sense.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

By day, he took shelter wherever God directed him. For the past few weeks, it had been beneath a culvert beside the Life Gate Church on Bellmonte Avenue. A rough, isolated area of town, but sanctuary, nonetheless. He had all the necessities beside him: bottled water and scraps of food he'd taken from the church dumpster. Other than the air in his lungs, these were the fundamentals of existence. It also didn't hurt that whenever he emerged from his underground den, God's house was only a stone's throw away. Something about being a literal neighbor to his savior reinforced everything he believed, reassured him that he was on the right path.

Because God had plucked him from the herd and sent him on this divine quest himself. It was a sacred mission that channeled God's primal desires. Tests of courage, to assess the will of man and determine whether or not they held up to God's image. The ultimate test was not how loudly you praised his name, but how deeply you trusted him in dark times. Ask him for strength and he'll give you difficulties to make you strong. He is never deaf to prayers or blind to tears or silent to pain. He sees, hears, and delivers when the time is right.

It hadn't always been this way. Once upon a time, the man lived an unexceptional faceless, Godless, existence. He'd been a cog in the machine of life, seeking hedonism and material comforts over spirituality. The seasons rolled by, like time-lapsed clouds in a sky of memories, fading into one another with no distinguishing markers. Days melted into one another like colors in an ever-expanding oil painting, carrying away the years with it until they were but a distant memory. Life was a continuous loop of monotony until an act of divine intervention finally broke the cycle, unlocking his chains and drawing out his true potential.

There was no explanation for what had happened. Police and investigators had been none the wiser. It was a mystery that could not be explained by science or any other earthly knowledge. For months, he'd agonized over the facts and possibilities, arriving at conclusions that were improbable if not completely impossible. After driving himself to near madness, he finally arrived at the only logical answer: it was an act of God. The Divine Hand was responsible for these dealings. No other explanation would suffice. The lord had stripped away his earthly wares so he could evolve into something more,

a divine follower, true messenger of heaven.

He'd fought the idea of letting God in at first. Religion had always been alien territory to him, especially in the wake of his father's obsessive devotion. The old man had a Bible verse for everything, and over time they began to wear on the young boy. He remembered thinking it was all nonsense for the weak-minded, and when the old man disappeared in eighty-five, the young, fatherless child vowed he'd ever let religion invade his life.

But now he was older, he'd realized that his father hadn't disappeared like his mother had claimed. His father been sent on a holy quest of his own, and now years later, he'd been afforded the same privilege. For that reason, he couldn't stay mad at his old man, and was happy to finally let go of all that smoldering resentment.

Only after letting God into his life had he saw the true magnificence of the world. Behind its graffiti and pollution and crime, there was a soft underbelly of beauty that connected its inhabitants in loving and natural harmony, but we had to pay for this beauty with sacrifice. To be real, a sacrifice must cost, hurt, and empty. You will accomplish great things on the condition you believe in his love more than your own weakness.

Tragically, not everyone believed this mantra, even those who claimed to be virtuous. People were quick to protest when God abandoned them, but didn't stop to consider their own neglect that came before. It was easy to turn to intoxicants and short-term highs and outlandish beliefs that had no basis in reality, and these things were mere substitutes for true holiness. They were a temporary refuge from fear. The allure of intoxication and fleeting euphoria was a temptation too hard to resist, and so there was only one solution for these immoral defectors.

They needed to be tested.

Joanne, David, Gary. The time had come for them to prove their mettle. They had to demonstrate their faith and their worth in light of the pure tragedies, and none of them had come out stronger on the other side. Their hearts had been ripped out by fortune's cruel hand, leaving them with nothing but emptiness inside – and it was times like this they should have been on their knees, praying to the heavens, showing resilience in the face of adversity.

They hadn't done that. They'd simply bowed their heads in surrender, accepting their fate like weak heathens.

Motherhood, wealth, possession. If these things weren't worth fighting

for, then God had no place for them in this world anymore. Did he feel bad taking the lives of these people? Before putting his plan into action, he'd been concerned that the physical act would take its toll on him, but he was simply the conduit of the lord. His blade was a mere surrogate for a higher power. He had no emotional connection to any of these lost souls.

Nor would have any connection to the next one. He'd already selected her, primed her, thrown her world into chaos.

Had she thrived? Flourished? Kept her faith and came out stronger in the face of hardship?

No, she'd floundered like the rest of them. Deserted God and filled the empty void in her soul with alcohol and pills.

So when nightfall came, she too would face the repercussions of her failures, and when that was done, he'd leave this town and start up again elsewhere. Tonight was the final night of testing.

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Ella paced from wall to wall in the office, trying to sweat off her frustration.

It wasn't working.

Ripley, sitting stoically at the desk, said, "I can't believe that. I really felt like we had our killer."

"Alibis still need to check out. He could still be our guy," Ella said.

Ripley's phone pinged on the table in front of her. She idly glanced over and read the new message. "Nope," she said with a sigh. "Ted was in hospital all night. Confirmed."

Ella curled her fist into a ball and pressed it into the wall. An unrelenting tidal wave of disappointment emerged thick and fast, raging her through muddy waters, burying her on the ocean floor that was her mind. "What are we missing, Ripley? How can we come so close only to get knocked back ten steps?"

"We're not missing anything. We just got the wrong guy. In a town like this, we're always going to find connections between people."

"True. We need to figure this out. Our killer knows intimate details about these victims' lives. Take Joanne for example. How many people would be aware she'd lost a child? It's not something you advertise."

"Word could spread around, I guess," Ripley said. "But where exactly would you talk about such a thing anyway? The same goes for David and Gary. People aren't going to shout from the heavens about their failures."

"Agreed," Ella said as she began brainstorming on the whiteboard. "So he needs to get close to them. A therapy session would be the perfect place, but it looks like that's out of the window. Where else?"

"Could be online therapy? That's all the rage."

Ella considered it. "Could you really see Gary using a computer? Or a phone? He didn't even have one."

"Good point. What about somewhere like Alcoholics Anonymous? Maybe there are groups for specific traumas."

Ella furiously scribbled, stream-of-consciousness writing. "I like it. I'll note it down."

Ripley rose from her chair and leaned over the desk, eyeballing Ella's ramblings on the board. "Hold on a second, Dark. We might have missed

something here. Look, read your drivel back and tell me something doesn't suddenly jump to mind."

Ella complied with the request. She read her hastily written notes. *Religious motivation. Mercy killer. Has intimate access to each victim prior to murder. Simplistic M.O. Mission-oriented. No significant ritual. Inconsistent victimology. No surrogates.*

"What?" she asked.

"Our killer is a complete Jesus freak. To me, that conjures up a very specific image. A very specific job."

Ella took a moment to catch up with Ripley's train of thought. She slammed her hand against the wall in triumph. "Dammit, of course. A priest."

"Who else do you speak privately with about your problems? Who else do you confide in? Priests are basically free therapists as it is."

"God, how did we miss that? So, I don't know a whole lot about that world, but priests only work for a particular church, right? They're not like locums?"

"They're usually assigned to one parish."

Ella flew to her laptop, fingers quickly tapping the keyboard. She searched the area for religious houses of all kinds. "Dammit, there's about fifty churches around here. Two synagogues as well." When she looked up, Ripley was nose-deep in Gary's textbooks again. "Couldn't resist?"

"Shush," Ripley said as she pushed the notebook across the table. She tapped her finger on a particular entry in Gary's diary. "Read this."

Ella read aloud, "First appointment with therapist, then walked to Greenbury's to pick up newspapers. Visited my old church. Bad memories."

"Gary was a church goer too," Ripley said.

The fog of forgetfulness quickly dispersed, like a window had been opened, allowing the recollections to flood in. "When I talked to Gary at the motel, he told me he was an avid church goer. He said a *lifetime of prayer and this is how he repays me.*"

Ripley slammed her fist on the table. "Bingo. Our guys were religious. Of course they went to church. If they were long-standing members, they might have developed a rapport with the priests."

Ella pondered, her mind spinning with possibilities. "Right. We just need to figure out which one they went to. If we can confidently put them all at one place, that gives us a lot to work with."

Ripley said, "Maybe we need to dig further into their lives, look through



their belongings, talk to their friends. If these victims were regular churchgoers, one of them must have *something* that tells us.”

“We already did,” Ella said. “David and Gary had no friends by the looks of it. We looked through all of their stuff too. Nothing in there that suggested a local parish. We could look through Joanne’s house a little more ourselves but the sheriff said he cleared that place.”

An eerie stillness suddenly cloaked the room, the kind that came with a heavy weight of expectation. Ripley tapped her fingers on the desk fast and loud like a pneumatic drill. Ella glanced out through the cheap glass partitions that made up the walls of their office, losing herself, idly ogling a bobbing head across the way.

Then an epiphany struck, and the answer to the puzzle became clear.

Ripley said, “I don’t see any other way. The sheriff might not have known to look for religious...”

“Mia,” Ella interrupted. “We don’t need to dig into their lives at all. We have an advantage. A tool. We’d be foolish not to use it.”

Ripley ceased tapping, stood up and joined Ella at the window. After a moment of mutual reflection, Ripley let out a prolonged *oh*.

Ella said, “There’s no point digging into their lives, not when the man who knew them best is locked in the office next door.”

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Ella requested that she go in alone. Ripley had obliged.

She and Ted Kowalczyk resumed their positions from an hour before. She looked the now-innocent man dead in the eye and said, “Ted, I need your help.”

Ted let out a hollow chuckle, his lips curved in a humorless line. “You throw me down the stairs. You accuse me of murder. And now you want my help? Don’t make me laugh.”

Ella wasn’t above swallowing her pride. Or at least, what little she had left of it. “I’m sorry. We got it wrong. Your alibi for the hospital checks out.”

“So, I’m an innocent man?”

“Yes. You’re an innocent man.”

“Then someone needs to come untie me because I’m out of here.”

“If that’s what you want, I can make it happen. But you could help us catch a serial murderer.”

Ted shrugged, no sign of distress on his face. “That’s your problem.”  
“Yes it is.”

“Sorry, but I don’t trust you. How do I know you’re not trying to frame me? How do I know you won’t just arrest me again later?”

Ella reached into her pocket, grabbed a key and unchained Ted’s handcuffs. A token gesture. “Because you have my word. I’ve called a lawyer to come in right now. He’ll record everything, make sure everything is airtight. No judge in the world is going to argue against two FBI agents singing your innocence.”

Ted’s face shifted, his expression taking on new life. He itched the marks left by the handcuffs and said, “Keep talking.”

“Plus, if you help me out, we won’t say a word about your license or a lack thereof. We can even help you get your license back.”

Ted examined the back of his hands, keeping his lips pursed. Ella could see the idea taking hold. “And what would I have to do?” he asked.

“David and Gary. You knew them both, possibly better than anyone else. We need to know about their lives.”

“Their whole lives? That could take a while.”

“Their religious lives. Do you know what churches they both went to?”

Ted squeezed his temples and said, “Saint Paul’s Church. Lichfield Street.”

The simple phrase stirred a forgotten memory, bringing a past conversation to the forefront of her mind. She heard the voice of Hiromu Takahashi, Joanne’s rehab partner. *She went to Smart Recovery at Saint Paul’s Church on Lichfield Street.*

It was the same place.

Ella worked to contain her composure, but this was a big revelation. “Both victims visited there. You’re sure?” she asked.

“Positive. It’s actually where I first met David.”

“You went there too? For mass?”

Ted gave a sly, suggestive wink. “Lots of lost souls at churches who need therapy,” he said. “Call it a marketing opportunity.”

Ella didn’t have time to dwell on his comments. She shot out of her chair and made for the door.

“Woah, wait a minute,” Ted said. “What about my lawyer?”

“He’s on his way.”

“Well, how long are you gonna be? Can’t you wait here for him?”

Ella rushed back to the desk and leaned across, close enough to smell the former suspect's nervous sweat. "Ted, do you want to be known as the unlicensed therapist forever, or the therapist that helped catch a serial killer?"

Ted's beady eyes suddenly animated. He nodded. "Okay. Go."

Ella was already out the door.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

“So, all the victims came here at some point,” Ella said. “We need to speak to the priest in charge.”

Ella and Ripley were parked outside Saint Paul’s church, its majestic spire reaching into the sky in silent prayer. The midday sun beat down on the golden cross atop of the building and bathed the old stone walls an off-color gold. A horde of worshippers were passing through their gates on their way out, presumably the afternoon mass crowd.

“Have you checked him out?” Ripley asked.

“Yeah. Nothing. Clean as a whistle. But that doesn’t mean a thing.”

“You’re right about that.” Both agents went quite while they waited for the crowd to disperse. Ripley asked, “Have you ever been to a mass?”

“Never,” Ella said. “I don’t even know what it is.”

“It’s not just me then.”

“Definitely not. I hear it all the time but I couldn’t tell you what it involves for the life of me.” She watched the last of the midday crowd disappear down the way. “Come on, I think we’re clear.”

The agents stepped out of the car, treading carefully across the solemn grounds of the mini-cemetery, and soon found themselves before a colossal door that seemed to beckon them inside. The door was ajar, just a sliver of light peeking through the crack.

“Can you just walk in churches?” Ripley asked.

“Let’s find out.” Ella cautiously peeked around the doorframe. There in the glorious, candle-lit chamber stood two silhouettes. A robed figure, dressed in flowing white priest garb, speaking softly to an elderly woman. Ella’s presence did not seem to disturb them, so she took a moment to consume the majestic interior of Saint Paul’s Church. Rows of pews, a glowing marble floor, an imposing crucifixion scene above a lavish altar. She had to admit, this was some fine architecture.

“Can I help you, miss?” the priest asked.

Ella shifted her attention from the grandiose displays to the matter at hand. “Hi, I’m Agent Dark and this is Agent Ripley. We’re with the FBI.”

“FBI? Oh my.” The man looked to be in his sixties, his skin thin and withered like parchment. His gaze was heavy, a tiredness that spoke of a lifetime of experience.

“We’re investigating a series of homicides in the area. Would we be able to speak with you somewhere private?”

“Yes,” the priest stuttered, “I have an office in the back. I’m Father Kerley, by the way.”

Ripley said, “Good to meet you, Father. Please lead the way.”

Father Kerley guided them down the aisle, through the sacred halls, slow enough for Ella to admire the church’s grandeur again. A stone archway complete with an intricate carving of a nativity scene, illuminated stained-glass windows that cast a rainbows of lights down onto the pews. As they bowed into a corridor leading into the back area, Ella took in a row of four masterful paintings encased in a golden frame. Some kind of Biblical scene in multiple parts: a naked father cradling a child, a fire-ravaged land, a malnourished figure covered in sores praying to the heavens, a conversation between what she assumed to be God and a bearded Satan. It was all harsh, striking imagery that contrasted against the opulence on display in the rest of the church.

Inside the holy man’s office, Father Kerley took a seat at a small desk while the agents stood. There didn’t seem to be enough seats to go around.

“How can I help you?” the priest asked. “I assure you everything is above board here.”

Ella, “We’re sure it is. As I mentioned we’re dealing with a case of multi-homicide, and we understand that at least two, possibly three of our victims were members of this church.”

Father Kerley nodded eagerly, as though this information was already public knowledge. “Half of the people in this community are members here, miss. We’re the central church.”

“I’m sure, and we have reason to believe our perp knew the innermost details of his victims’ lives. The kind of details they might share with a close friend or therapist.”

“Or priest,” Ripley said, devoid of all subtlety. You could always rely on Mia for the sledgehammer approach.

“Well, that’s upsetting to hear,” Father Kerley fired back without pause. “I’ll admit, we do forge close relationships with our parishioners, but these days, it’s only me that works here and I assure you I’m no criminal.”

“It’s just you?” Ella asked.

“Yes. I do nearly everything. The only time I call for assistance is for funerals. I do all masses, services, sermons, and confessionals solo.”

“Confessionals?” Ella asked. “Please pardon my ignorance but what do they involve exactly?”

Father Kerley shifted in his seat, his discomfort palpable. He placed his hands together and rested them on his desk, a sign of false composure. “Anonymous confessions. Anything from issues around faith to marriage troubles. I’m a willing ear, something a lot of people are missing in their hectic lives.”

Ella latched onto something here, although she wasn’t exactly sure what. She just felt that seed of an idea begin to sprout. “Face to face confessions?” she asked.

“No. I can’t see the confessor’s face.”

“Don’t you recognize their voices?” Ripley asked.

Ella watched Father Kerley’s micro-signals closely, assessing where the mask ended and the real person began. That is, if he was even wearing a mask at all. He seemed genuine and helpful and as of yet she hadn’t spotted any signs of deceit in his nonverbals. Given his short stature and feeble physique, Kerley was worlds apart from the mysterious figure in the CCTV footage. He wasn’t their killer, but he might have conversed with their killer without knowing.

“Yes I do. Every time.”

“May we ask if there’ve been any... suspicious confessions in recent months?”

Father Kerley gazed at Ella as though she was a creature from beyond the veil. “Miss, I’m a pillar of this community. People trust me with their innermost secrets. I can’t reveal anything of what’s been said.”

Ella sensed that Kerley was keeping something close to his chest, something he wasn’t willing to share. Judging by Ripley’s stern expression, she did too.

“You don’t have a duty to report any suspicions?” Ripley asked. “Even if they confess to something illegal or immoral?”

Kerley’s hands jittered slightly. Perhaps a product of age, perhaps a sign of sudden apprehension. “Immoral? No. Illegal? It’s a gray area.”

Ripley said, “A gray area, huh? Are you sure you want to be telling two FBI agents that?”

“It’s not my place. I’m a listener, not an advisor.”

“What if it’s a very serious crime?” asked Ella.

“Like I said, it’s a gray area. If someone’s stolen a bottle of wine, I’m not

going to report it. If someone's life is in danger, then I will. There are no set rules, just common sense."

Ella went in for the kill. Joanne Gustafson, David Harper, Gary Weathers. Those names mean anything to you?"

Kerley fast lost his composure. His shoulders tensed up as his hands slipped off the table into his lap. "Joanne? David? Gary?"

"Yes. You know them?"

Kerley nodded, slowly this time. "I... yes... old friends. You don't mean...?"

Ella let the moment settle.

Kerley wheeled away from his desk and locked his stare on an empty glass box sitting beside his computer screen. It was an odd ornament, as though there should have been some kind of relic inside. "Those three?" he asked after a moment of contemplation. "Murdered?"

"Yes," Ella said firmly. "Murdered. In their homes. By a member of this community that *may* have met them here."

"I'm... I don't know what to say. I'm sorry."

Ella stepped forward, leaning over the desk, applying a more personal touch. She had the holy man trapped in an emotional tornado and if he had something that might help them find their killer, she wasn't leaving until she'd torn it from his lips. "There's a serial killer out there, so you're gonna need some more assistance because there's gonna be a lot more funerals."

Kerley glanced around the room, not settling on anything for more than a millisecond.

"Or," Ella continued, "you can tell us about some of these questionable confessions, because I can see on your face there's something you want to tell us."

The priest came around, composed himself. "You'll keep this to yourself, yes?"

Ripley laughed. "No. We promise to do the exact opposite."

Kerley's lips pursed, but then morality seemed to win the inner struggle. "Okay, fine. Yes I knew Joanne, David, and Gary. Regulars, once upon a time. Haven't seen them for many months. However, I assure you no one has confessed any murders to me. Nothing of the sort. In the eyes of God, I swear it."

"But?" Ella asked. She could sense a turn coming.

"But," said Father Kerley, "I got a visit recently. A visit from an old

friend.”

“Details,” Ripley said.

“Anonymous confession. I heard a voice. A familiar one. We used to have a priest here, a fellow named Thomas Alden. He was... troubled. Very intense. He took things to the extreme.”

Ella’s curiosity burned like an inferno. Their killer almost certainly considered himself a Christian, perhaps thought of himself as some sort of *chosen one* whose delusions were fed by Bible stories. “How so?” she asked.

“Father Alden believed in archaic penance. Punishments. He got close to certain parishioners and pushed them far beyond what was acceptable from clergy members. We know at least three cases where Alden encouraged self-harm, even self-sacrifice in one case.”

“Suicide?” Ripley asked.

“Yes. Thankfully I was able to intervene, and when I learned about Alden’s activities I had him banished from priesthood.”

“When was this?”

Kerley scratched his gray hair. “One year ago this month.”

“What did he say to you during this confessional?” Ripley asked.

Kerley swallowed a ball of saliva and said, “That he was on a mission. He was coming back for everyone who wronged him, including me.”

Ella asked, “Have you seen him since?”

“No, never. And I’ll be honest, he didn’t identify himself by name, but I never forget a voice. After he threatened me, he left me. I didn’t leave the confession booth for hours after that.”

Ella fired up again. “Is there anything else you can tell us about him?”

Kerley bit his lip, as though trying to prevent the rest of his story from spilling out. It was a short battle. “Father Alden ran the rehabilitation classes each Friday.”

“Smart Recovery,” Ella said, barely able to contain the sudden rush. She didn’t want to get ahead of herself, especially not after recent disappointments, but the potential for this Father Alden person being their killer was growing by the minute. “Joanne Gustafson went there.”

“Correct,” said Kerley. “I also remember him being close with Gary Weathers. I never saw him interact with David, but there were a lot of things I didn’t see.”

Ella needed to find this man and quickly. For all she knew, he could already have the next victim in his sights. She eyeballed Ripley, who also



seemed to be itching to leave this place and look into this possible suspect. “Do you have an address for him?”

“I don’t,” Father Kerley said. “Rumors are that he’s living on Westbrook Avenue but I can’t confirm. Alden was always something of a drifter.”

“We’ll find him.” Ella prepared to leave, prepared to put this new information to good use. But she stopped, thought better of it. There was one thing still on her mind.

“Father Kerley, one last question then we’ll leave you be.” Ella pulled out her phone, navigated to the footage she had saved from the motel CCTV cameras. She showed the priest a still image of the moment right before the killer attacked Gary Weathers. “Could this be the man you’re talking about?”

The holy man squinted at the phone screen. “Oh lord,” he gasped. “That’s... I can’t believe it.”

Ripley asked, “What is it? That’s him?”

Kerley took the phone in two trembling hands, eyes glued to the still image on the screen. “I can’t say for certain if that’s Father Alden. He’s about the same size, but... there’s something else.”

“What is it?”

“That knife in his hands. It’s, well, not a knife. See the black and gold handle?” Kerley rotated the empty box on his desk to show the agents. “That used to be in here. He’s using my ceremonial blade.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Ella eyed the small, ground floor apartment from across the street while Ripley finished up her phone call with the sheriff. The parked car outside and the drawn curtains suggested whoever lived here was still home.

Thomas Alden had been difficult to track down, almost impossible if not for Father Kerley's lead. Alden had a small file on the police database, but the finer details of his crimes were suspiciously absent. It seemed that someone, perhaps in the inner circle, had attempted some kind of damage control to stop Thomas Alden's crimes from becoming public knowledge.

Alden had no listed address, no family details, no work history. If not for the brief mention of his so-called provocation crimes, Ella would have assumed Thomas Alden was a figment of Father Kerley's imagination. Only when they stopped a passerby and asked them if a Thomas Alden lived around here did they point the agents towards the tiny apartment.

Ripley hung up the phone and joined Ella. They watched their intended destination for a moment before Ripley said, "The sheriff knows about this guy. He worked on his abuse case a year ago. Apparently he's violent and deluded."

"Perfect cocktail."

"We ready?"

Ella asked, "The sheriff didn't suspect this guy when he heard about the murders? Seems like he'd jump to mind."

"He thought Alden had skipped town or died or gone to prison."

"Yeah. I guess we still don't know if he's actually in there."

"We'll know if it's him. Apparently he only has one eye."

"Interesting," Ella said. "I'm ready when you are."

They approached the door to the small apartment complex, and a complete lack of any lock made entry simple. According to the bystander they'd asked, a man named Thomas lived at number one. Ella rapped her knuckles on the door and waited in anticipation. She stood there with bated breath, going over and over the details in her head. This man had connections to at least two of the victims, apparently even running the rehab classes that their first victim attended. He was embroiled in some rivalry with the priest of his old church, even stealing a religious relic from him and using it as part of his killing method, perhaps as some kind of their-blood-is-on-your-hands message to

Father Kerley.

“He’s not answering,” Ripley said as she banged on the door again. “Mr. Alden, please open up.”

A moment passed with no progress, but Ella could feel another presence on the other side of the flimsy door. A mysterious energy, perhaps some unnamed evolutionary sense, but when she glanced down at the base of the door, she realized it was her subconscious doing its handiwork. A shadow was swaying.

Ella nudged her partner and pointed downward. Ripley caught it.

“Mr. Alden, we know you’re in there.”

“You can’t come in here,” a raspy voice said.

Not an invitation, but confirmation that Thomas Alden was inside. That was good enough. “We’re the FBI. We need to talk with you.”

Heavy breathing, audible through the cheap wood. “I haven’t done anything.”

“So open up,” said Ripley.

“I’m busy. Come back later.”

Ella’s fiery, quicker-tempered alter ego rose to the surface. There was a killer two feet away from her and a rickety door wasn’t going to stand in her way of catching him. “You’ve got five seconds to open this door or I’m smashing it to pieces. Five...”

The shadow below the door froze.

“Four, three...”

Then it vanished to the sound of thundering footsteps. Thomas Alden had scurried away like a coward. There was no need for the rest of the countdown because Ella’s shoulder was already lodged against the door. It splintered to pieces as it exploded from its frame, succumbing to its frailty like a mercy killing. Ella rushed inside, overwhelmed by the disorder and the crippling smell of medical fluid; the scent she associated with autopsy rooms.

“Jesus Christ,” she shouted, shielding her nose with her forearm.

“Thomas, come on out. Don’t make this difficult.”

Ripley stepped in but Ella waved her palm. She knew how situations like this played out. Best to go the smart route.

“Hold the fort,” Ella said. “This guy’s mine.”

Ripley gave her the nod, gun in hand, backing away from the doorway and taking sanctuary just out of sight. On the chance Alden backtracked, he’d have Ripley’s boot waiting for him.

Ella scurried through the cluttered apartment, dodging boxes, worn furniture, piles of clothes and food containers. Into the kitchen, no sign of the suspect, and in here the nauseating, gasoline-like scent weighed in the air like a thick fog. As she caught sight of two gigantic containers on the kitchen floor, she couldn't help but make a significant connection between killer and victim. The thought disappeared as quickly as it had begun, because she suddenly heard the scraping sound of a sliding door being forced open.

Ella hurried through to next room in line, senses on high alert, the blend of adrenaline and medical highs creating a state she'd never experienced before. She found herself in a bedroom, equally chaotic, only with a lone figure pushing himself through what appeared to be a lodged door.

His sturdy frame slipped out into a communal outdoor area as Ella rushed to keep up. It was her first glimpse of the man, and while she couldn't get a detailed look at him, his outline seemed to match the figure from CCTV – at least from twenty feet away.

“Alden,” she called as she reached for her pistol. But the figure turned to the right, out of view. Ella followed the trail, through the same broken door, outside and round a corner where she suddenly found herself in an unexpected meeting with some kind of rusty metal bar. The weapon collided with her mid-section, driving all of the air out of her body in a violent heave. Hunched over, Ella steadied herself on the ground as she watched Alden disappear up a fire escape towards the building's roof.

She pushed the pain to one side and scrambled to her feet. She reached the fire escape, looked up and saw Alden directly above her. Maneuvering around the steel bars that made up the stairwell, she reached up, grabbed the man's ankle and tripped him on the stairs with a heavy clang of flesh on metal. Ella used the moment to close the gap between she and Alden, but by the time she got up to the next level the escaper was already on his feet.

The clanging of their footsteps up towards the roof was like a chorus of drum blasts. At the top, Ella finally had a clear view of Thomas Alden, because there was nowhere else for him to run, no corners for him to hide behind. The roof was a square block of concrete, with the only escape being a thirty-foot drop to the ground.

“Give it up, Thomas. It's over,” Ella said, still wheezing from the attack.

To her shock, the suspect raised his hands in surrender. “Yes it is,” he said.

She edged closer, pistol trained as best she could with her shaky hands.

“We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

Thomas said nothing, quietly stepping away, trailing backward in a slow retreat.

“Stop. Don’t move or I’ll shoot,” Ella shouted.

The suspect wore a sly grin, as though he was in on some joke that no one else was privy to. He took a few more steps and said, “You’re gonna have to shoot me then.”

From this vantage point, Ella had a clear view of the hills and mountains in all their glory. The brief distraction brought a flurry of thoughts, old and new, one being the psychological profile of a mission-oriented offender.

Once their missions were complete, they went out in a blaze of glory. A shootout, an explosion, a suicide. Anything with a fatal flourish.

“Don’t do it,” Ella said, turning her target to the suspect’s right leg. Any other shot could pierce an artery or internal organ, and she needed this man alive. Not just because she wanted to see him confess, but so he could pay the price of a lifetime behind bars.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Thomas said as his feet gripped the edge of the roof. “This is where it ends.”

Ella panted heavily, realizing there would be no winners here. If she fired, the blast could send him hurtling off the ledge, or propel him forward. There was nothing more unpredictable than a bullet. If she didn’t shoot, she’d have to live with the fact that her efforts might have kept him alive.

“Why did you do it?” she called. “At least tell me why.” She only now noticed that Thomas’s right eye was completely missing, his eyelid sewn shut.

Thomas Alden pointed to the heavens, then in a flash, plummeted right down to hell. Ella fired a deafening gunshot, completely missing the mark, sending a bullet into the distant hills.

“No!” she screamed, racing to the edge, hearing the sickening impact of body on concrete. She winced at the thought, barely able to look over and see the mess – the mess she’d created.

Her pulse beat like a jackhammer as she swallowed her nausea and peered over the edge. At the bottom lay an unnatural sight, something she thought was impossible.

And two voices, barely audible, but very much present.

“You’re under arrest,” one said, her partner’s voice carrying on the wind. There were no dead bodies, no splattered brains. It was a clinical,

controlled arrest scene.

Ella exhaled the longest, most relieved breath of her life. The game was over. Justice had prevailed. Thomas Alden looked to be wounded and chained, but ultimately alive. Ella saw images of Ben in her head, the times she'd watched him wrestle, the way he'd jump off ring posts and ladders into the waiting arms of his opponent and somehow not cripple himself. Why did she always think of him at times like this?

Either way, the fact remained that Mia Ripley, a fifty-six year old woman with a spine held together by duct tape had pulled off a miracle.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

The journey back had been wrought with silence, the kind of silence that came after a massive victory. Now, back in the precinct and with Thomas Alden locked in an office with two armed guys at the door, Ella could finally ask her partner the question that had been plaguing her.

“Ripley, how the hell?”

“What?” Ripley asked, knowing full well exactly what Ella was referring to.

“How’d you catch a guy falling at terminal velocity?”

“Terminal velocity? Ha. That was what, twenty, thirty feet?”

“High enough to kill a man.”

Ripley slapped her partner on her shoulder and said, “You’re the science girl. You should be telling me.”

Ella shrugged. “No idea.”

“Remember my old pal, Byford? You teamed with him once.”

“Of course.”

“He was my partner for two years. I did a ton of hostage negotiations with him. One thing he drilled into me was impulse control, and I don’t mean drinking.”

“Oh,” Ella said. “You mean momentum?”

“Yeah,” she pointed through the glass at the now-chained suspect. “This silly asshole jumped feet-first. All I had to do was take the brunt of the force, spread the area of impact, and make sure we rolled over together after he landed on me. I’m fine, by the way. Thanks for asking.”

Ella chuckled. She thought she’d seen everything Ripley had to offer but this was new ground. “You still got it. Thank God our guy didn’t dive headfirst down.”

“Yeah. He might be a sneaky killer but he doesn’t know shit about jumping off roofs. We ready to talk to him?”

“Always. I think we’ve got some serious ammunition here. Connections to victims, connections to the church he stole that dagger from, he matches the footage, he literally tried to kill himself when we caught him. Oh, and I don’t know if you saw his kitchen?”

“No?”

“There was something in there that I really want to talk to him about.”

Ripley said, "I'll follow your lead. Let's go."

Ella had a good feeling about this. The man was a disheveled wreck of a person, his mind in tatters, his emotions in turmoil. His living conditions matched his mental state, and he had that indescribable aura of malevolence, as though he could turn on a person at any second. They had the circumstantial evidence, now they just needed either hard evidence or a confession. Ella was confident she could achieve the latter.

The agents entered the office that now doubled as an interrogation room and sat down opposite Thomas Alden, the one-eyed religious maniac. Ripley, perhaps enlightened by their new capture, seemingly couldn't help herself.

"I must ask," she said, "what's with the eye?"

Alden seemed unamused at the question. "Sacrifice," he said. "That's the price of real faith." Alden's voice was rough around the edges, like sandpaper against wood.

Ella asked, "Sacrifice? You tore out your own eye?"

"Yes," said Alden, as though such an action was a completely rational thing to do. Ella couldn't keep her curiosity at bay.

"Why?"

"You have to lose sight to gain it back," said Alden. "I wouldn't expect you to know about that."

Ripley said, "You're insane."

Alden remained quiet.

"Mr. Alden, would you mind telling us a little bit about your past? Apparently you worked at Saint Paul's Church, is that right?"

"Yes I did."

"And according to an old friend of yours, you were a little... extreme."

Alden smiled with the classic psychopath smile. That emotionless, painted-on smirk that was pure surface, no depth. "I validated certain people's impulses. That's all."

"Really? By encouraging them to self-harm and kill themselves?"

"You don't know the half of it," Alden said with sickening pride. Ella suppressed her irritation, telling herself that soon this man would be in a jail cell.

"Sounds to me like you just get off on seeing people hurt. I think you abused a position of trust to indulge your own sick urges."

"Nonsense."

Ripley added, "You ran a class called Smart Recovery, correct?"



“Correct.”

“You must have forged some close relationships during that time, maybe with a woman named Joanne Gustafson?”

Alden’s one eye lit up at the name. “Ah, Joanne. Delightful woman.”

“Yes she was. You were close with her?”

“Not as close as I’d liked,” Alden laughed.

Ella said, “Well you must have been pretty close, considering you were her drug dealer.”

Alden feigned shock, his face a cheap party mask of false emotion.

“That’s a big accusation,” he said.

“Don’t shit me,” said Ella. “I saw about ten gallons of pseudoephedrine hydrochloride in your kitchen. Either you’ve got the worst case of hay fever on the planet or you’re cooking meth.”

“Lies,” Alden said.

“Then why is your kitchen a pharmaceutical factory?”

Alden didn’t respond. Despite his warped mind, he seemed to know when to keep his mouth shut.

Ella continued, “Here’s what I think. Since you got banished from the church, you’ve decided to get revenge on the people you think wronged you. You’re targeting the weak and vulnerable people who you met during your old classes, making easy targets for your little mission. Your homemade drugs lab is how you support yourself. Tell me when I’m telling lies.”

“Targeting?” Alden asked. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh please. Joanne Gustafson, David Harper, Gary Weathers. Those names ring any bells?”

Alden had a far-away look in his eye, deep in thought. “Yes. Old memories.”

“Seen them recently?” Ripley asked.

“Joanne? Yes. The others? No.”

“When did you last see Joanne?” asked Ella.

“Weeks ago.”

Ella violently rubbed her eyes. These short answers were starting to grate. “What for?”

“You already know,” Alden said.

Ella had to up the ante, get something usable out of this man. She grabbed the folder in Ripley’s lap, pulled out the first picture and lay it on the table. It was a close-up of Joanne Gustafson’s dead body.

“Looks like you lost a customer.”

Alden’s expression barely faltered. He maintained the same unwavering glance, the same static mask. “This is Joanne?”

“You tell us,” said Ripley.

“It looks like her. If you’re implying I did this, you’re very much mistaken.”

Ella threw down two more photographs. “How about David and Gary? Remember them? Well, this is them now.”

Alden betrayed no emotion at the sight of three corpses, three people he’d had personal contact with. Even the most hardened psycho usually simulated some kind of response, but Alden seemed to occupy his own emotionless void. Ella turned to Ripley who looked equally perplexed by Alden’s lack of a reaction.

“I didn’t do this,” Alden said after a long pause.

Ella couldn’t read the man, couldn’t see beyond the blank canvas. She had two pieces of ammunition left and she was about to fire them right into his heart.

“Father Kerley. Want to tell us about your relationship with him?”

“Not particularly.”

“We’re not asking.”

Alden shuffled in his chair, rotated his shoulder. For a man who just fell off an apartment roof, he showed no sign of injury whatsoever. Ella had to wonder how the hell this man became a priest. Even without the facial wound, he didn’t exactly have a trustworthy face.

“He pushed me out of the clergy. I wouldn’t call us friends.”

“So you went back and threatened him, isn’t that right?”

Alden gave a slow, thoughtful nod in response. “I just needed him to know he wasn’t going to get away with it.”

Ripley said, “That’s why you stole something of his? A ceremonial dagger, I believe.”

Alden tried to fold his arms but his shackles made it impossible. “Maybe.”

“Not maybe. Yes or no?” Ripley said.

“Yes I did. That was his prized possession. Legend says it belonged to Simeon and Levi. I have my doubts, but it was my way of getting him back.”

“Simeon and Levi?” Ripley asked.

“Murderous brothers. Book of Genesis. You should read it sometime.”

“Wow,” Ripley said. “So if that’s a religious artifact, it must be priceless,

right?”

Alden stayed quiet again.

Ella pulled a final picture from the folder, slid it across to Alden and said, “If it’s so valuable, it seems odd you’d use it as a weapon.” The photograph was a still image from the CCTV camera in the moments before their killer struck Gary Weathers. Alden peered closer, his single eye scanning every corner of the glossy picture. For the first time since Alden stepped in here, he cracked a genuine smile that roused a storm of unease in Ella’s soul. She felt like they were standing on opposite sides of a riddle and Alden had found the answer first.

“Something you want to say?” she asked.

“Yes. That blade doesn’t belong to me, and hasn’t for some time. I sold it.”

“Who to?”

“I don’t know his name. I was homeless for a while, so was he.”

“You’re gonna need to be more specific.”

“Easy money,” Alden said. “He was some kind of assassin. He said he needed the blade to find a new job. I didn’t inquire any further.”

Ella didn’t buy it. “Sure.”

“And,” Alden continued pointing to the picture again, “it’s ironic that a man with one eye can see something you can’t.”

A chill rushed through Ella’s veins, as though a block of ice had replaced her pounding heart. Every beat was now cold and cruel, blood flowing like a subzero current. Alden’s mask of sanity slipped away, revealing an expression of genuine emotion.

Alden scooped up the photograph and placed it next to his face. With a sickening grin, he slowly pointed to his missing eye, then moved his finger to the figure in the picture.

“Who’s the blind one now?” he laughed, the notes scratching Ella’s eardrums like the rumble of a passing train.

Ella couldn’t believe she’d been oblivious to what was right in front of her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Ella stalked the office like trapped prey, temper simmering to a boiling point, a volcanic eruption waiting to happen. Ripley sat at their desk, palms wrapped around her face like a woman in the throes of a fatal mistake.

“This can’t be happening,” Ripley said. “Please tell me we didn’t miss the glaringly obvious.”

“I never even thought about it. His frame matched, his height matched.” Ella picked up the photograph and inspected it again, ensuing the perspectives matched up to their suspect’s deformities. It was all right there. Undeniable.

Despite the grainy quality, both of the suspect’s eyes had been visible at various points in the CCTV footage. Both eyes were present.

Ripley said, “It’s not him. I’m not saying Alden is completely innocent, but the man in the footage and the man in the next room are not the same person.”

“Prosthetics? Makeup? Maybe a double bluff? Like, if we *couldn’t* see his eyes in the footage then that would be enough to send this man to court. Maybe he considered that beforehand, so this was his little insurance policy?” Ella desperately sought out any solution, fully aware that her efforts would be in vain. Grasping at straws, saying these things aloud somehow helped exorcise the outlandish possibilities. It helped remove the impossible and leave only the improbable.

Ripley eyed her partner like she had two heads. She grabbed one of Gary Weathers’s notebooks and said, “You’re starting to sound like this guy.”

“He’s got no alibis for the nights of the murders. He was Joanne’s dealer. He even admitted to stealing the murder weapon. What the hell more do we need?”

Ripley pulled a ringing phone from her pocket, answered. She hung up within a few seconds.

“The sheriff?” Ella asked.

“Yup. Aside from an amateur meth lab, nothing of note in Alden’s apartment. Nothing relating to the victims. No ancient blades. The guy is screwed in the head but our hard evidence is sorely lacking.”

Ella struggled to believe it. “Then why’d he chicken out when we busted him? What idiot would jump off a roof if he’d done nothing wrong?”

“You didn’t hear me?” asked Ripley. “This guy isn’t selling weed. He’s running meth. With his past history, that’s fifteen years in jail. If he’s been robbing pharmaceuticals too, he probably won’t see daylight ever again. To a psychopath like that, death is the better option.”

Ella sighed, irate that the jigsaw pieces created a picture she didn’t want to see. A pinging phone briefly distracted her, but when she saw the name on her screen, her heart sank further still. It was the director.

*Need updates. Why no progress? Call me ASAP.*

“I know that look,” Ripley said. “Edis is on your ass.”

Ella pocketed her phone and nodded. Her teeth clenched as she envisioned herself approaching the end of a marathon only to find someone had pushed back the finish line another ten miles. “Yeah. I don’t know what to tell him.”

“Me either. Might as well just be honest. We’ve had two suspects, we’ve got a picture of the suspect out to the locals. That’s as much as we can do.”

Ella collapsed against the wall, feeling like it wasn’t enough, feeling like the key to this mystery was lurking just beyond the perimeter of her conscious mind. She could feel it swirling like a whisper in the wind, begging her to find that one little element that somehow made sense of this chaos.

The air in the office felt stuffy and cramped, as though filled with invisible weight. With the sudden rise in humidity, it began to feel like a sauna. She needed some reprieve.

“I need to go and think,” Ella said. “Somewhere else. I’ll be back soon.”

Ripley nodded and shooed her away, apparently welcoming the idea of solitude. Ella guessed she had her own ideas she needed to explore.

Ella headed down to the parking lot, jumped in her vehicle and hit the road. A certain place was calling her, a place she’d felt she could truly channel this killer’s thoughts. She’d never been religious in the slightest, but she couldn’t help but feel that some invisible, all-powerful force was telling her to do this.

Time to get inside this killer’s head.

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Ella stood outside Saint Paul’s Church, still as majestic at dusk as it was in the midday sun. She walked through the door, down the aisle, marrying an invisible partner. A red cloth draped gracefully over the grand altar, crowned with a golden cross that glimmered in the stained-glass light. Behind it stood

life-sized crucifixion scene, complete with a disheveled Jesus being impaled by a lance. The scene's brutal and striking imagery left nothing to the imagination, although for reasons unknown to Ella, it rapidly turned the cogs of creativity.

Perhaps it was the contrast between such morbid visuals and the church's magnificent splendor, or perhaps it was the knowledge that she was standing in a place her unsub had also been at some point. She did not doubt that their killer, this deeply religious homicidal maniac, had some connection to this place. He too had laid eyes upon this altar and this crucifixion and used it to fuel his own creativity, as misplaced as it was.

Ella laid it all out from start to finish, leaving no stone unturned. Their killer was a middle-aged white male who lived locally and had probably spent his whole life in this town. He was on some kind of religious mission, putting sufferers out of their misery, establishing himself as some kind of hero in his twisted mind. He was not hurting these people, he was providing a service. Like Thomas Alden, he was deranged enough to believe that death was a better alternative to suffering. Therefore, he targeted those already in a weak and vulnerable state.

The victims consisted of one woman and two men with an age range of twenty-six years. A drastically varied victimology that all but confirmed that the victims themselves were the targets. They weren't substitutes for someone who wronged or traumatized him. There was no sexual component, no financial motivation, no signs of sadism or overkill. Each victim had been killed in the places they lived with a single laceration to the back or abdomen, then posed in the prayer position and left to bleed out.

Each victim had lost something that defined them. Joanne's unborn child had passed away. David's wealth had vanished. Gary's possessions had been burned to the ground. These losses clawed away at their very cores, stripping away their identities and sending them into spirals of blackness. These people descended further and further into despair, unable to overcome their troubles, resulting in their deaths.

Family, wealth, possessions. Important components to a fulfilling life, maybe.

Or perhaps not. Ella couldn't help but thing she didn't have much of either. But then again, she was faithless. The virtues of such things had never been drilled into her, so perhaps that was why she didn't chase any of them.

Exactly where the killer was finding these victims remained a mystery. If

he knew the intimate details of their struggles, he certainly had personal contact with them prior to murdering them. These weren't the kind of facts he could have read on a bulletin board. He interacted with these people, spoke to them, showed them false sympathy whilst secretly planning their demise.

As Ella ruminated on this approach, she realized that this killer could simply be a pillar of the community and nothing more. In towns like this, word spread easily. He didn't need to attend rehab classes to know that another member of the community might be struggling. He could have extracted the information from a friend of a friend, a family member, a local gossip.

Finding this victim source could be an impossible task, Ella thought, therefore, they needed to go a different route to catch him. They needed to intercept him in the act. If he was targeting the vulnerable, they just had to keep an eye on every vulnerable person in town.

Easier said than done, she thought. There were nearly two-thousand people here and she doubted many of them were living trouble-free lives. Few people did, even the most blessed souls. Plus, the crucial factor was how the killer perceived them. Perception was reality, and if this killer believed someone was vulnerable despite them appearing it on the surface, they could overlook hundreds of potential victims.

Children, wealth, assets. What came next?

"Back again?" a voice said, jolting her like an electric shock. "Miss... Dark, was it?"

"Hi Father. I hope you don't mind me coming back."

Father Kerley emerged from a nearby corridor, hands clasped together. "Not at all. Everyone's welcome here."

"We have your old friend in custody," she said. "You won't be hearing from him again for a long time."

"Father Alden? Oh, my. He did this?"

"No, he's innocent of these murders but guilty of a few other things."

Kerley nodded solemnly. "Very sad. I'll never cheer for the loss of another soul, but it comes as a relief, I'll be honest."

"Don't be sad. The man seems... somewhat troubled."

"Of course. God turns tests into testimonies, victims into victories."

Ella had to smile. She guessed Kerley didn't realize just how apt the quote was. "That from the Bible?" she asked.

"Not quite, but the sentiment behind it is. You're religious yourself?" he

asked.

“I can’t say I am,” Ella said. “I never really... got it.”

“Understandable,” Father Kerley said as he bowed his head a little. “Religion is a huge spectrum, but really, it’s a form of moral guidance. Stories to live our lives by, no different than the heroes and villains on television. Be a good person, shun selfishness, embrace love in times of darkness. It keeps away existential angst, and even if it’s all for nothing, at least it distracted us,” he smiled.

Ella had never heard it put so simply. In one short speech, she suddenly understood it. “Very beautiful,” she said. “I’ll give you one thing, you guys seem pretty happy.”

“We try. I’ve had my faith tested a lot over the years, but I’ve always stayed strong. I have Christianity to thank for that. But I’m happy to admit it’s not for everyone.”

Ella stopped for a moment, relishing the calm of the environment, bouncing a single word around her head like a pinball. She’d heard it twice now in the past few minutes, and something about it was sticking, prodding her brain to let it in.

Test.

Why was it speaking to her so loudly?

“By tests, you mean everyday problems?”

“Certainly. Adversity, fuel for growth. The church accepts weakness but encourages strength. We welcome hardships because they’re the ultimate tests of faith.”

Ella glanced beyond Father Kerley to what lay in the background of her vision. The holy man became a blur, while a certain corner of the church lit up like a lens suddenly coming into focus.

Tests.

Her thoughts wandered off the beaten path, taking her down a winding avenue of unexplored possibilities. A flip switched in her brain, turning everything about this case on its head and revealing its full, sinister picture. Ella’s senses awakened with a sudden burst of shock, sparking a newfound vigor, feeling more alive than she’d felt in weeks.

She ran past Father Kerley, into a small corridor leading into the church’s back area. She stopped, stared at the wall.

Four paintings encased in a long, golden frame, depicting some Biblical tale that even Ella’s ungodly brain was familiar with. Paintings that weren’t



too dissimilar from the ones in David Harper's home. She'd seen them hours ago when she'd first met Father Kerley, and while they'd struck a chord with her, she hadn't given them the necessary attention.

And not only did these canvases portray a well-known religious tale, but they were scenes straight from her reality.

A woman cradling a child.

A man living in poverty.

A land destroyed by fire.

A malnourished man praying to the heavens.

"Father!" Ella called. The priest hobbled in her direction, his eyes wide with apprehension.

"Is everything okay, miss?"

"This," Ella said, hammering the paintings like a woman amidst a hysterical breakdown. "These paintings. What do they mean?"

"Oh, these?" Father Kerley asked. "A classic religious tale. One of the most controversial ones."

"Called?"

"These are the trials of Job. From the Book of Job."

*The Book of Job.* She replayed the words, trying to place them. She'd heard the name but the finer details eluded her. "Job?" she asked.

"You're not familiar with it?" Kerley asked. "Job. Jay-oh-bee."

"No. Tell me about it."

"Job was man of wealth and prominence. Devoutly faithful to God in every way. In a challenge made with the Devil, God put Job through a series of trials to test his faith."

More connections came. Ella remembered something Father Alden had said in the interrogation room, something that could very well be the missing piece of the puzzle.

*He was some kind of assassin. He said he needed the blade to find a new job.*

A new job.

Father Kerley pronounced the titular Job differently. *Jobe.*

But she couldn't deny the link.

"The Book of Job," Ella said, struggling to find any other words.

She was in a frenzied state of mind, thoughts hurtling through her head like a bullet train, each one more chaotic than the last.

But every single one of them fit.

It was all right here.

This had to be the answer.

Father Kerley said, “Yes. Job feared God and shunned evil. He was a perfect follower. Blameless and upright.”

“A perfect follower,” Ella repeated. “Blameless and.... wait a moment. What did you say?”

Kerley looked at her with trepidation. “It’s how God describes Job to Satan. Blameless and upright.”

Restlessness itched at her legs, telling her to flee, get back to the precinct. She saw it all as crystal-clear as a mountain stream, all it took was a single, three-letter key.

Job.

These weren’t mercy killings. They were tests of faith.

Ella clasped Father Kerley’s hand in hers, shaking it with a fervent grip. “Father, you have no idea how much you’ve helped. Thank you for this. You might have just helped catch a murderer.”

“Oh, my. Good luck. I wish you all the best.”

Ella hastened out of the sacred temple, heart on fire, new life coursing through her veins.

Art imitated life, life imitated art.

She knew what she had to do now.

She had to find Job.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Ella came barreling through the door with the force of a hurricane, her entrance shaking walls and rattling windows. She found Ripley in the exact same position as she'd left her, only now with caffeine beside her.

"Ripley!" Ella shouted. "Listen to me. I know what's going on."

Her partner jolted to life, suddenly alert. "What did you find?"

Ella fired up her laptop, furiously typed an online search and turned the screen to show Ripley. "Our killer is recreating the Book of Job."

Ripley's face betrayed no acknowledgment. "The what?"

"A book from the Bible. Look." She showed Ripley a synopsis of the story.

Ripley took one glance and looked back at her partner. "Just give me the overview, Dark. Tell me what you found. I'm not a literature fetishist like you."

"The book's about a righteous man named Job. He had everything: family, wealth, material gain. Satan told God that the only reason Job was so virtuous was because he had everything, so took it all away from Job to show that he'd still be faithful in times of suffering."

"Right. And how does that relate to these killings?"

"We thought these were mercy killings but they're not. These are trials. Trials that our victims failed."

Ripley still looked none the wiser. "Keep talking. I'm not seeing the correlation."

"God put Job through a number of trials, taking away the things he loved one by one. First, he allowed Satan to kill Job's children. What happened to our first victim? She lost her child."

"Okay. I'm following. Next."

"Next God took away all Job's livestock – the source of his wealth. He was forced into poverty, the same as our second victim."

Ripley flashed a look of surprise. "Interesting. You could be onto something. Next?"

"God scorched Job's land. Burned everything to ashes. Remind you of anyone?"

"Gary. The last victim." Ripley scratched her cheek and said, "You're sure about this? You're not grasping at straws?"

Ella tapped her laptop screen. “It’s all right here in black and white. Read it for yourself.”

“It’s half making sense. I’m worrying that we’re molding things to fit the evidence. For example, Joanne lost an unborn baby, not a child.”

“I know, but that’s the only anomaly I can find. That’s not all, either. Remember that audio sample we caught from David’s murder? We thought the killer was saying something like *nameless and unright*. Maybe *aimless*. But that’s not what he was saying at all.”

“No?”

“No. He was asking David if he was *blameless and upright*. The same way God describes Job in the book.” She grabbed her laptop, highlighted the text on the page and showed her partner. “Right there. Blameless and upright. Our killer wants these people to remain virtuous in times of hardships, but they all sunk further into despair. In our killer’s eyes, they failed God’s tests, so they had to be punished. He’s not killing them out of mercy, he’s killing them because they didn’t show perseverance.”

Ripley clasped her hands in the prayer position. Perhaps a subconscious move, Ella thought. “That would explain the positioning of the bodies. Praying to the heavens, asking for forgiveness.”

“Right? I’m not imagining things here, am I? This all weaves together like a delicate pattern?”

Ripley began reading the page in front of her. After a moment, she said, “If what you’re saying is true, I can’t see any faults, at least not yet.”

“Me either. I’m tossing and turning everything over trying to find a discrepancy but it fits like a glove.”

“Wait a minute,” Ripley said. “Aren’t we looking at this from the wrong angle?”

Ella’s heart stopped beating for a second. She was worried she’d missed something obvious, again. “How do you mean?”

“Well, this Job fellow is being punished. Whereas our killer is the one dishing out these punishments. So, our killer can’t possibly see himself as Job.”

“Exactly right,” Ella said. This was the part she’d battled with on the journey home, but something Father Alden had said helped her make sense of it. “What did Alden say back in that room? He said he’d sold the blade to an assassin.”

“Yeah, total horse shit.”

“No, he did sell it to someone, but not an assassin. He interpreted it wrong. Alden said the buyer had told him he was looking for *a new job*.”

Ripley’s eyebrows jumped up to her hairline. “A new Job. As in, our killer is looking for this Biblical character.”

“Yes! Joanne, David, Gary. He wanted one of them to rise up and prove they could overcome massive hardships. Our killer is playing the part of God, and these victims were all test subjects. He wants to create a Job of his own.”

Ripley muttered something under her breath. “And they all failed, that means he’s not going to stop until someone prevails. But how could we possibly know what other subjects he’s got his eyes on? It’s not like we can monitor every vulnerable person in this town for the next year or whatever.”

Ella was ready to put the finishing touch to her masterpiece. The final piece of information that would help them catch this maniac. She grabbed her laptop, scrolled down to the bottom of the page, and showed her partner.

“Easy,” Ella said. “Boils.”

“Boils?”

“Job’s final trial. God afflicted him with boils, sores all over his body.”

“How does that help us?”

“Given how specific our killer has been, this final trial has to match. We need to check out hospitals, dermatologists, and medical centers in the area, because our last victim will have a skin condition.”

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“Three,” Ella said as she scoured over the new information at her desk. “Three possible victims.”

They’d called in the help of every available officer – a grand total of five – to check the area for people who suffered from any kind of skin condition. Sores, extreme acne, dermatitis, any condition that was visible that would leave the skin permanently scarred.

There were no hospitals nearby, only three doctors’ surgeries and one nursing home. From their calls, they’d identified three locals who suffered from serious skin ailments. Now, Ella had to dig into their lives and see which one fit the offender’s victim profile.

“We need to get all three of these to safety, but me and you need to visit the most probable victim, see if we can catch this guy in the act.”

“Agreed,” Ripley said from across the desk. “Okay, first one is Agnes

Palmer. Seventy-two years old. Lives on Pinewood Road which is..." Ripley checked her online map. "Four miles from here. Suffers from a rare condition known as ichthyosis since birth. I think I'm pronouncing that right."

Ella tried to make it fit. "If she's had the condition from birth, our killer might not see it in same vein as the others. Also if she's lived with it for seventy-two years, he would see that as a success."

"Got it. Next name is Harold Billingham. Sixty-five, lives on Madeley Avenue. Four miles away from here, but close to David Harper's storage unit. Harold suffers from scleroderma. Started as an allergic reaction twenty years ago and never went away."

Ella compiled the pieces, trying to imagine this Harold person as a potential victim.

She couldn't visualize it with any believability. "I don't know about you, but I can't see it."

"Me either. Age variance is too much. And I hate to say, but his condition doesn't seem to be extreme enough."

"Agreed. It needs to be a debilitating condition, something that has drastically altered their life. Who's the last person?"

"Patricia Edwards," said Ripley. "Forty years old. Lives on Savage Hill, which is..."

Ella got there first. "Not far from Joanne's house. I saw signs for it."

"Right. She suffers from something called eepidermolysis bullosa. Chronic condition according to her notes. It doesn't say how she got it, but she requires daily care. Apparently it's given way to a bunch of other conditions too. Boils, sores, "

Ella pictured it. Patricia was the right age. This killer would believe she had still had some fight left in her. She found her name on the police database, and as she had no criminal record, all she had were the woman's basic details. "According to this, she lives alone. No family to speak of. Currently unemployed."

Ripley bit her lip. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Are you thinking Patricia is the most logical victim of the three?"

"Yup."

"Then yeah, I'm thinking what you're thinking. How should we do this?"

Ripley stood up, phone in hand. "I'll get the details to the sheriff. He can assign some officers to keep an eye on these guys. We'll go and keep Patricia safe."

Ella nodded in agreement. She grabbed Patricia's address and readied herself for what could be their confrontation with this unsub, providing he was planning on striking tonight. Given his sudden escalation, it seemed likely he would, especially as mission-oriented offenders carried out their murders without much respite. They tended to draw up a plan and carry it out in one violent swoop, leaving as quickly as they arrived. If he knew that the FBI were on his trail, which was very possible considering he invaded the very motel they were staying at, he would act fast and then flee. If he'd developed a taste for murder, he'd move to another town and start searching for his next Job there. If this was a one-time experiment, he'd disappear into the shadows, off the grid, until it was safe to return home.

"Done," Ripley said. "You got Patricia's details?"

"Yes. I'm ready to catch this guy. Are you?"

Ripley checked the ammunition levels in her pistol and concealed it. "Just try and stop me. And Dark, one thing before we go."

"Anything. What?"

"Try not to throw this guy off anything high."

A cowardly murderer, taking innocent lives for his own misguided needs, targeting vulnerable individuals out of some warped fantasy. So far, he'd struck in both the daylight and midnight hours, and with two victims in two days, he'd be experiencing the rush that came with progression. Serial killers were at their most dangerous and unpredictable during periods of evolution, so Ella needed to ensure these victims were safe immediately.

"No promises," she said. "Let's go."

## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

The house on Savage Hill was a tranquil and modest place, its peaceful atmosphere belying the surrounding wildness. It was a small, single-story structure with a gray roof and white walls, and a small porch with a few wooden chairs. Night had begun to set in, and Ella only prayed that she wasn't too late.

With the car abandoned in the small driveway, she hammered on the front door as Ripley damned all privacy and peered in through the windows. "Can't see anyone inside," Ripley said.

"Come on. Please be in."

Time seemed to stand still as Ella awaited an answer. She couldn't help but feel a sinking sense of dread, as if the silence was an omen for what was to come.

Ripley interjected, banging again. "Patricia. Please open up if you're in," she shouted.

Ella reached for the handle. Locked. "Try the back?" she asked.

Ripley was at the edge of the house when a loud, persistent buzzing made her jump.

"Hello?" said a woman's voice.

Ella turned to the doorbell, not realizing it doubled as a speaker. "Is that Patricia Edwards?" Ella asked.

"Umm... yes," the woman said.

"I don't mean to disturb you, but we're with the police. Could we speak to you?"

"Police? What's this about?"

Ella didn't want to terrify the woman, but fear got quick results, and right now they couldn't waste any time. "Mrs. Edwards, we believe you might be in danger. Could you let us in?"

Ripley had heard the voices and returned to the door. Then, the sound of a latch coming undone. Ella tried the handle again and the door opened. They stepped into a short hallway with a gray carpeted floor and two doors either side. "Patricia?" Ella called.

"In here. To your left."

Ripley went first, opening a door into a warm and spacious living room. Soft cream walls, plush rugs and furniture arranged in an inviting circle. At



the center sat a blonde woman in a gray robe and sweatpants, looking worse for wear but very much alive. Her skin condition was clearly visible, her face and hands a mosaic of red, angry patches. A patchwork quilt of discomfort.

“Patricia, we didn’t mean to startle you. I’m Agent Dark, this is Agent Ripley. Sorry to burst in on you like this.”

Ella’s verbal comforts didn’t seem to accomplish much because Patricia wore a mask of terror. “What’s going on?” she asked, mouth partially open.

“There’s been a series of homicides in the area. We theorized that the perpetrator could strike here next, but we’re here to keep you safe.”

Patricia’s jaw fell further. “I heard about them today, but... me?”

“Possibly,” Ella said. “Do you know anyone who’s recently been enquiring about your medical condition? Could be someone new, could be someone you’ve known for a long time. He would have asked you questions obsessively. His interest would have peaked in recent weeks.”

Ella realized she was overloading the woman with information but time was of the essence.

The woman stuttered a little. “No one. Nobody talks about my condition. Everybody is nice about it. Why?”

“It’s possibly he’s targeting you because of that. I’m sorry to be so blunt.”

Patricia pushed her short hair off her face and said, “Well, I don’t know what to say. I’m going to be safe, right? Someone is going to stay with me.”

Ripley said, “Yes, absolutely. And if you don’t mind we’ll conduct a more formal interview with you at a more appropriate time. We just had to get in here quickly to confirm your safety.”

Ella began to pace around the room, unsure where to go next. There was no killer here, but if Patricia was the target, she certainly knew the man that was potentially targeting her. But before that, she had to unearth some details about the woman’s life. If she *wasn’t* the target, this was all a futile effort.

“Patricia, would we be okay asking some personal questions?”

The woman shuffled around the sofa, each twitch apparently stinging her. “How personal?”

Ella wondered best how to phrase it without going too far. “Our perpetrator is targeting people going through hardships. Aside from your skin condition, how is everything else?”

“Tough,” Patricia said. “Lots of pills and creams needed, but I’m surviving. Still got plenty of life left in me.”

Ella and Ripley exchanged an identical look. A bittersweet revelation. If

Patricia Edwards wasn't going through immense suffering, she wouldn't be the target.

"Good to hear it," Ella said. She clocked a gold cross above Patricia's fireplace. "You're religious?"

"Until the day he comes for me," Patricia said.

"Any connection to Saint Paul's Church?"

"Yes, actually. I go to mass there once a week, and I used to visit the Sanctuary Class."

Ella hadn't heard of that one yet. "Sanctuary Class?"

"Uh huh. Just a place to discuss mental health, really. Depressed, anxious people. Some had physical problems."

Ella felt an avenue opening up. "Did anyone there take an obsessive interest in your condition? Who lead the class?"

"No one in particular. The priest who led it was Father Alden. Strange fellow, but nice enough."

*Dammit*, Ella thought to herself, concealing a quick pang of frustration. A pile of bricks in the shape of Alden's one-eyed face blocked off this new avenue, forcing a sudden reroute.

Ella took herself to the other side of the living room, shrouded in darkness, looked out the patio window at a lengthy garden illuminated by solar lights. She breathed deeply, composing herself, telling her this wasn't a dead end like the others. She had faith that the psychological profile was accurate because nothing was out of place, nothing contrasted against the evidence. And just because the killer hadn't arrived tonight, it didn't mean he wouldn't arrive another night, or even in a few hours. Twice he'd struck in the dead of night, once in the afternoon. He had no discernible pattern. He struck whenever was most opportune. For a woman who lived alone, that was a huge window.

She gazed at the impeccable lawn and the soft silvery glow that mimicked the night sky. Her thoughts turned to the other potential targets, hopefully safe by now under the watchful eye of police officers, then back to the woman sitting behind her. Ella heard Ripley talking in the background about something.

"Dark," Ripley said. "The others are safe. No signs of anything suspicious."

Ella nodded, not wanting to go too deeply into things for fear of unsettling their new friend any further. These people were alive and that was good

enough for her, at least for the time being.

She went back to star gazing, lawn gazing. She clenched her eyelids tightly, straining for ideas on how to proceed. Should she check on the other victims herself? Maybe quiz Patricia in an attempt to find this culprit? Or wait out the night here in case of any invading murderers? What if there were other people with similar conditions that hadn't showed up in their search? After all, they'd only spoken to the admin workers at the local centers and they could easily have missed something.

When Ella opened her eyes, she had to blink a few times to clear the mental fog. She viewed the magnificent garden again, but her eye was drawn to something that hadn't been there before. Something swayed in the silver light. A bush? An animal?

"Patricia, you live alone?" Ella asked, eyes locked on the garden.

"Yes I do."

"Pets?"

"None."

Ella took a moment to breathe, adjusting her eyes to the darkness outside. "Ripley?" she said.

Her partner called back, "What?"

"Get here."

The moving figure outside was now pressed against the fence, mingling amongst the shadows. Ella took the time to ensure this wasn't some figment of her imagination, some mirage borne of desperation. Ripley appeared beside her.

"Well, it's a lovely garden," Ripley said, "but we're busy here."

Ella lowered her voice. "There's someone out there. To the left. By the fence. He hasn't seen me."

"What? You're sure?"

"Yes. Are you ready?"

Ripley clutched her pistol. "Go. I got you covered."

"Patricia, stay there," Ella said.

The confused woman called from behind, "Where are you going? Into my garden? Why?"

Ella grabbed the silver key lodged in the lock, turned it to the left. Outside, the figure moved again, this time noticeably. Ripley slapped her on the shoulder. "Go! He's heard you."

She hurtled out into the crisp night air, striding towards the figure with

reckless abandon. She could barely see what lay in front of her, but she wasn't going to stop until this figure was at her mercy. Her sudden arrival startled the now-moving silhouette, rushing down the garden towards the rear fence.

"Stop!" Ella shouted.

The figure didn't listen. He'd now taken on the full outline of a human being, complete with dark clothes and black hood, suspiciously resembling the same figure from the CCTV footage. Even at ten feet away, Ella could feel his sinister aura radiating like heavy smoke. He was here, within grabbing distance, sneaking around a woman's garden.

He reached the fence, bounced off it, then tried to scramble up.

But to no avail.

Ella grabbed him by the jacket, hauled him off down to the ground, driving his spine into concrete. The man gasped for air, furiously kicked his sudden attacker. But his frenzied movements stopped when he saw a gun barrel pointing at his chest. His hands shot up in surrender.

"Don't shoot," he yelled.

"Who are you?" Ella screamed back. Ripley and Patricia quickly appeared beside her, Ripley bringing insurance in the form of another pistol aim. Ella's trembling hands gave her away her excitement, because the man on the ground was a dead ringer for the man she'd seen on camera. He had receding hair, a weathered face, a few extra pounds.

"Jasper?" Patricia cried. "It was... you?"

The grounded suspect nodded quickly. His cowardice was plastered on every inch of his body. Ella breathed easy, the evening chill cleansing her lungs of the past few days.

"You know each other?" Ripley asked.

Just as Ella guessed. Another nail in the coffin. This had to be their man.

"Yes. He's my ex-husband," Patricia said.

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Outside Patricia Edwards' home, Ella threw their cuffed suspect into the back of their cruiser. The journey had not been without its issues, namely Patricia, who'd taken to punching her ex-husband. Ella couldn't say she blamed him.

Still beside, the scorned woman clearly hadn't finished.

"Why'd you do it?" she screamed. "I always knew you were a monster. You're going away for life!"

Ripley's efforts to calm the woman down were in vain. Ten minutes ago she could barely move off the sofa, now she'd miraculously summoned the abilities of a mixed martial artist.

"Patricia, please," Ella said. "We'll take it from here."

"No. I want to know. I have a right to know."

Ella couldn't argue. She did indeed have a right to know why her ex-husband had been stalking through her garden.

Ella asked, "You going to say anything, Jasper Edwards?" She gave his name a final sendoff, the last time it would be spoken outside the confines of a courthouse or prison.

"I just wanted my things back," Jasper spat with a heavy Boston accent. Lots of unnecessary vowels. "You know, the things you owed me?"

"You deserve nothing. I hope you rot inside."

Ella turned her attention to Patricia while Ripley took care of the suspect. "Patricia, you have every right to be furious, but we'll help you get what you're owed. He's going away for a long time. You're still legally married?"

"Yes we are," Patricia said, her stare still firmly planted on the man chained up in the car.

"Then everything he owns is yours. Okay?"

"Good. He's a pervert and a cheater, frolicking with Junkie Joanne behind my back."

Ella paused for thought. She tried to usher Patricia away from the car but to no avail. "Joanne Gustafson?" she asked.

Patricia's eyes widened with further rage, defying ocular physics, reaching a circumference Ella didn't know was possible from the human body. "Yes! You know her?"

Ella felt Ripley's stare on her. She looked over to see a smiling partner,

clearly ecstatic at the unexpected connection between killer and victim. The first nail of many in Jasper Edwards' coffin.

"Joanne Gustafson is dead. Killed a few days ago."

Patricia began pacing in a circle as though her bodily response system had malfunctioned. The sign of a woman in the throes of mass distress, processing a storm of conflicting emotions. Patricia exhaled deeply, buried her face in her hands and began crying. Ella used the moment to lead Patricia away from the car towards the house, away from the influx of neighbors who'd begun watching the theater performance from their doorways.

"I know it's a lot to take in. I'm sorry you had to find out like this."

Patricia rested her hands on Ella's shoulders and between sobs said, "Thank God you were here. I owe you everything."

"You owe me nothing. But if you're willing, you could help us secure a conviction for Jasper. Make sure he never gets out."

"Anything. That rat bag deserves to die in there."

"He most likely will, but can you tell me some things about him, just in case I need to pull them out during questioning."

Patricia's tears slowed to a stop. "Okay. What do you want to know?"

"Jasper is religious?"

"Not really," Patricia said firmly.

Ella suffered a brief jolt of electricity in her bones. Nothing to worry about, she told herself. He might have found God only recently. "Okay, you were with him a while, right?"

"Nine years."

"Were him or you familiar with a David Harper? Or a Gary Weathers?"

Patricia glanced directly to the left then downward, signs of auditory and dialogue recollection. More importantly, signs of a truth-teller.

"No. Those names mean nothing to me. I'm sorry."

Ella kept cool again. Their killer might have kept these acquaintances secret. "Was he affiliated with Saint Paul's Church in any way?"

"No. He never went to church. I tried to make him, but..."

Now Ella's nerves were beginning to shake. Lastly, she asked, "You know Jasper better than anyone. Nine years together. You know what he's capable of. You've seen him at his highest and lowest. Do you think he could have stabbed and killed three people, nearly four, including his ex-wife?"

Patricia clutched her forehead with one hand and began circling again. The tears came, thicker and faster this time. She grabbed a mass of blonde hair

and tugged, like a masochist trying to get her fix. “No I don’t,” she cried.

Ella embraced the woman with a tight hug. Doubts began to take root, snaking around her short-lived joy like an insidious weed. She caught a glimpse of Ripley standing beside the car, hand on her pistol, watching Jasper Edwards like a hawk.

They needed to talk.

“Thank you for your help,” she said. “I just need to see my partner. I promise you’ll be safe from here.”

Their hug broke apart as Ella edged back towards a waiting Mia Ripley. She double-checked the car door and the windows were shut. She didn’t need Jasper Edwards to hear any of this.

“She going to be okay?” Ripley asked.

“Mia, you’re not going to like this, but I don’t think Jasper is our man.”

“What? We profiled he’d target this house and he was in the garden. He’s got a connection to our first victim. Dark, he’s looking pretty damn good to me.”

“Agreed, but that’s all we’ve got. Patricia said he’s not religious, never has been. No connections to the other victims that she knows of. No involvement with the church. Plus, I think we’ve done it again. We’ve missed something obvious.”

Ripley sighed. “Go on. Tell me.”

“I’m going to ask him a few questions. Watch him closely. Listen closer.”

“Shouldn’t we do this back at the precinct? We can document everything there. If we do it here, it could be inadmissible.”

“And if we take an innocent man back to the precinct, we’re leaving Patricia alone, maybe to be attacked by the actual unsub.”

Ripley nodded, but it was obvious she didn’t like it. “Go, but make it quick.”

Ella unlocked the back door. Jasper Edwards slumped forward, his forehead pressing against the headrest of the seat in front. All the life had drained from him, leaving behind a vision of defeat that had seemingly accepted his fate without much of a fight.

“Jasper. We need to ask you a few things.”

The suspect muttered incoherently, muted by the fabric against his mouth.

“Look at me,” she demanded.

Jasper slowly turned his head. “What?”

“Why did you do this? Explain your reasoning and you might not go to jail

for life.”

“Life?” Jasper spat. “I wanted my things back. You can’t put me away for that!”

“Sure. What about the others?”

“What others?”

“Don’t play dumb. Joanne, David, Gary.”

Jasper’s face as an inscrutable mask. The needle pricks of the victims’ names did nothing to alter his composure. Not even a slight shift of weight or an involuntary twitch. “I was only seeing Joanne. I don’t know a David or Gary.”

“Joanne Gustafson is dead,” Ella said bluntly, invoking the shock factor.

“I know,” Jasper said. “Everyone knows. It wasn’t me. I haven’t seen her in months.”

Ella let the moment breathe, checking her partner’s reaction. Ripley had that look of unwavering doubt. Ella was in a quandary, unsure of which path to take.

She took a deep breath, steeled her nerves, and then decided to deliver the bombshell. The few words that, if Jasper was guilty, would register a sudden and perceptible change in his demeanor. If there was one thing she’d learned during her time in this game, it was that even the most hardened psychopaths couldn’t hide absolutely everything. When you reflected their own innermost thoughts back at them, you could sense a shift in their nonverbal language.

“The Book of Job,” Ella said.

The comment washed over him like an invisible gas, inducing nothing but a frown and a look of vacancy. Her verbal bullet had fired and dispersed into the empty void behind Jasper’s eardrums. She wasn’t sure if he’d even heard her.

“The Book of Job,” she repeated, this time with more venom.

Jasper gaze swept from Ella to Ripley to the crying woman watching from afar. “My job? I work at the Old Brick Store.”

“Okay. Are you blameless and upright?”

More confusion. Narrowed eyes, like Jasper was trying to visualize something small and obscure. “No I’m not.”

Fury and frustration burned from her core to her fingertips. Ella slammed the door on the man, that crippling sense of disappointment injecting her like an unwelcome drug. She had her answer. The answer she didn’t want. Her partner was looking up to the heavens, smirking, a maniacal laugh only one



prompt away.

“You see what I mean?” Ella asked.

Ripley sighed and slammed her fist on the hood. “Yup.”

Not only did Jasper show no response to Ella’s comments about the Book of Job, but his Boston accent was thick and undisguisable. He looked similar to the figure on the CCTV footage, but his voice and intonation were worlds apart from the audio sample.

“Massachusetts,” Ripley finished. “I used to like that place, too.”

“He could have hid the accent, maybe,” Ella said.

Ripley gave her the once over, eyeing her like she was an extraterrestrial. “Don’t be stupid.”

“You’re right.”

“So, what now?” Ripley asked. “We definitely have to take this guy in. I don’t expect much to come from it, but we still need to check out alibis.”

“The other targets are safe, right?” Ella asked.

“That’s what the sheriff told me.”

Ella gazed up to the heavens, stars twinkling like tiny diamonds. The low-hanging moon cast a stunning light across the distant mountains. Ella lost herself for a moment, playing out possible scenarios in her head like overlapping movie reels. Potential victims were safe. The real killer was still out there, hunting his next target. One of the other police officers might already have him in their sights right this second.

Or the killer’s next target could be someone completely different.

“Ripley, I’ve got an idea.”

“Good. We need ideas right now.”

“I’ll take Jasper back to the precinct and keep him safe. You should stay here with Patricia just in case the unsub shows up.”

“Yeah. Poor woman can’t exactly be alone. We can arrange protective custody for them tomorrow.”

“Right.”

Ripley asked, “What are you going to do?”

It was a long shot, but Ella had to give it a try. So far, they’d had four suspects and not a single killer between them. She’d reached the point where she was willing to try anything. “Patricia said something earlier. Something that got me thinking. I’m worried we’ve missed something.”

“What?” Ripley asked.

“No time to explain. Just... trust me.”

“You’ve said that before.”

“And it usually works out pretty good.”

Ripley smirked. “I never said it didn’t.”

“If you get any news from the other houses, let me know straight away?”

“You got it. Same to you.” She tapped the back window of the car. “Don’t let this asshole out of your sight.”

“I won’t,” said Ella as she dived into the driver’s seat. She rumbled onto the road, back towards the precinct, one more last-ditch effort at capturing this maniac cosplaying as God.

She didn’t need to find the killer. She just needed to find Job before he did.

And there was one person who might know exactly where to find him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Ella escorted Jasper Edwards through the Alfa Creek precinct, down to a dank basement with some ancient holding cells, not used for decades judging by the rusted iron bars. Another officer locked Jasper inside while Ella stepped back, took a deep breath, and mustered her courage, ready to make her bold request of the man inside.

But she wasn't asking Jasper anything.

Instead, she moved to the other end of the corridor, another holding cell, this one detaining a former priest with one eye.

He sat on the bench, staring blankly into a foam cup of water. Ella gripped the rusty bars with both hands and said, "Prison's a bitch, isn't it?"

Thomas Alden grinned. "You think these chains can hold me?"

"Yeah," Ella said. "You're looking at a long time for drug distribution."

"We'll see about that," Alden laughed. It was the laugh of a man unwilling to accept his fate, as though pure stubbornness might help him evade justice.

"We could, or I could help you."

Alden placed his cup down on the floor, sat back on the bench and folded his arms. He turned his single eye to his capturer. "I don't need your help."

"Yes you do. You're what, forties? You're looking at fifteen years easily given your past. By the time you get out you'll be in your sixties, nearing retirement age with no savings, no assets. You want to live out your later years in poverty?"

Alden stayed silent, his mouth clamped shut like a steel trap.

"But I can reduce your sentence... if you help me."

Something registered on his face. A faint twitch of acknowledgement. "Help you? You're the one who put me in here."

Ella ignored his comment. "I can't promise I'll get much off your sentence, maybe five years. But if you help me, you can make things right with the lord. Do something good before you get put away. Isn't that what the Bible teaches? Moral guidance, shun selfishness, keep away existential angst." She found herself channeling the words of Alden's rival. The irony, she thought.

Alden shuffled uncomfortably on the bench, using the moment to distract from the fact he was clearly weighing up the proposition. Ella expected a stern refusal. After all, she couldn't offer him much. All things considered, it

was an unfair trade.

“Make right with God?” Alden said. “What would you know about that?”

Ella said, “The groans of the dying rise from the city, and the souls of the wounded cry out for help. But God changes no one with wrongdoing. Repent each time you think you know better than him.”

Something roused in Alden, a new spark. He stood up from his bench and approached the bars, scrutinizing Ella with something that resembled kinship. “The Book of Job,” he said.

Ella hoped she’d recited the speech properly. She’d only learned it ten minutes before. “Know it?”

“Like the back of my eyeball,” Alden said.

Ella smiled. The last thing she expected from this eyeless lunatic was a joke, but it meant he was coming round. If she wanted his full compliance, she needed to give him something, something that might arouse his curiosity and appeal to his sinister nature. “Our killer is reenacting that book. He’s taking away things people love the most, testing them, then murdering them when they fail.”

“Fail?” Alden asked. “Job didn’t fail. Far from it.”

“Exactly. He wants to find his own version of Job. The people he killed all spiraled into despair.”

Alden scratched his chin then looked out of the tiny window in his cell. “You’re seeing this wrong. God *wanted* Job in a state of despair. He wanted him to suffer the fury of the Devil’s wrath. The only thing God cared about was that Job remained virtuous. Blameless and upright, even in the face of true hopelessness.”

Ella’s mind whirred as she frantically replayed the details of the case, a mental movie flickering at high speed. Joanne, David, and Gary had all been at death’s door, but Alden had a point. Surely, this killer would want them in that state since that was how Job ended up. But then a certain connection flickered like a sky-filling firework in her mind’s eye.

All of the victims had given up their faith.

Joanne had stopped going to her church rehab classes.

David had destroyed his religious paintings.

Gary had said: *if he was a good lord, this would never have happened. A lifetime of prayer and this is how he repays me.*

They’d abandoned God in times of darkness. *That* was why he killed them. Not because they hadn’t gotten back on their feet, but because they

were deserters. They weren't blameless or upright.

"Oh... Christ," Ella said. "You're absolutely right."

But the question remained, how could this little revelation help her find the true target? An hour ago, Patricia had said that she would embrace God until the day she died. Therefore, she couldn't be the target. Ella needed to get on the phone to Ripley as soon as possible.

She continued, "You used to run something called Sanctuary Class, is that right?"

"Yes. A while ago."

"Was there anyone there with skin conditions? Sores, boils, rashes?"

Alden paused, contemplating. "One or two. Lifelong sufferers."

"Names?" Ella asked frenziedly.

"A woman named Patricia. One named Harold. I can't remember their surnames."

"Dammit!" Ella shouted. Two potential victims they'd already covered. "No one else?"

"This was a year ago," Alden said. "You've read the Book of Job, yes?"

Ella couldn't lie. "Not in full."

"First of all," Alden said, "Job's suffering is generally considered to have lasted only a few months. Also, Job's afflictions were no accident. Did you ever consider that?"

Ella had not, but at Alden's comments she felt the pieces align in perfect symmetry. Her pulse raced, her body thrumming with energy. The thud of her heart echoed like blast beats in a metal container. *These afflictions were no accident.*

"No I didn't," Ella said.

Alden moved away from the bars. "I think I've given you enough, but if you're looking for someone with a skin condition, the condition wouldn't be... natural. It would have been forced upon them."

Ella's hands sweat against the rusty iron. She let go, inspected her blotchy palms.

She didn't want to show appreciation to a man like Alden, but she owed him something.

"Thank you," Ella said.

The night wasn't over yet.

But she knew exactly where to turn.

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“Sheriff!” Ella called as she barged into his office upstairs. Sheriff Hale was hunched over a mountain of files, eyes heavy, forehead creased with worry. His hands were clasped together, as if praying for the strength to persevere. “Sheriff, I need your help.”

The man lifted his eyes from the paperwork, looking a little taken aback by the sudden intrusion. “Ella. What’s wrong?”

Her stomach was a bubbling pit of anxiety. If she had this wrong, she was ready to give this all up, go back to the Intelligence department, spend the rest of her days behind a desk. Every pushback gnawed her at soul, and one day it might just eat her up from the inside. This was her last shot, at least for now.

“Remember when we met the other day? At the Securicall Storage place?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

“You told me something. You said you dealt with an acid attack recently. Some young girl left disfigured with sores. Remember?”

Sheriff Hale unclasped his hands and stood up. “Yes, of course. Terrible case. I told you about it?”

“Only the basics, but I need the finer details. When did this happen?”

The sheriff leaned over his desk. “About three months ago. Why?”

Ella ignored the larger question. “What happened exactly?”

“A completely random attack. A young girl was walking home. A car pulled up, threw acid on her, ran off.”

Ella had to breathe off the rising fury. The details enraged her, but she reminded herself that if she was right, she’d find herself face to face with the perpetrator, and she’d do a lot worse than scald him with acid.

“Name and address of the victim?”

The sheriff sat back down at his computer and pulled up the local database. He typed, waited, typed again. “Here. Melissa Wall. Thirty years old. Lives at 311 Wilder Moore Avenue.”

“Alone?”

The sheriff squinted his eyes. “Yes.”

Ella felt it. Embraced it. The signs pointed to this.

“I don’t mean to sound like a heartless bitch, but how serious was the attack?”

“From what I remember, not life threatening. Her wounds will heal within

a year.”

“Not life threatening?” Ella asked. “She was burned. If no one had intervened, surely she’d have died.”

The sheriff nodded. “You’re way ahead of me. There was a strange anomaly. Someone called the paramedics immediately.”

Another piece of the puzzle slotted in place. “He did it. Whoever burned her did it.”

“We wondered that too, but why?”

“Because he didn’t want to kill her. He just wanted to test her.” Ella rushed around to the other side of the desk and scanned the details on screen. She memorized the woman’s name, address, basic information. As she got deeper into the notes, something stood out amongst the wall of text. A word she’d heard not too long ago.

“She was burned with... perfluoroalkyl?”

“Yeah. Some kind of chemical.”

Her pulse went from a heavy metal drumbeat to a pneumatic drill in a flash. Exhilaration sent her knees quivering. She could barely stand still.

“Church goer?” Ella asked.

“Absolutely not,” Sheriff Hale said. “One of our guys tried to talk her into going to mental health classes at the church and she told him where to go. I’ll never forget the look on his face.”

“Sheriff, you’re the best,” Ella said as she made for the door. “You’re going to catch this guy, alright?”

“I hope so. You’re off?” he asked.

“Yeah. Keep an eye on those guys in the holding cells. Two sleazebags together in the same place. Could get ugly.”

“We’ve got them covered, but where are you going now? It’s nearly eleven PM.”

Ella channeled her new least favorite book. A book she hadn’t even read but still despised with all her being. “All that a man hath he will give for his life.”

The sheriff looked at her blankly. “Okay.”

Just before she left, she turned to Sheriff Hale and said, “I’ve got an appointment with God.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY

The man stepped out of the shadows, repositioned the blade in his jacket then checked his reflection in a car window. All he saw was a silhouette in the shape of a human being, but he was much more than that now. He was God's most beloved child, a man of supreme righteousness. Blameless and upright. A dedicated servant of the lord. It was a calling he welcomed with open arms, and he only wished this bestowed privilege would have come much sooner.

Before this, his life was as uneventful as a cloudless sky. A creature of unremarkable qualities, trapped in a quicksand of monotony. He thought he was content with his daily rituals, more than happy to stay on the beaten path until his dying day. His life was a canvas of the ordinary, until one day the extraordinary beckoned.

One morning, he'd readied himself for work then said goodbye to his wife and children. They'd been sitting at the kitchen table eating Frosted Flakes. An odd choice of breakfast, he thought, because they usually opted for eggs or pancakes or strawberries. But of course, he and his wife had barely been on conversational terms for a while, but he smiled and endured the marriage for the sake of appearances.

Nine hours later when he returned, his family and all of their belongings had vanished. Every object that didn't have his name etched had been uprooted, dissolved into the ether. A note on the kitchen table detailed all of the bills that his wife used to pay, along with the instructions to pay them. But weirdly, the note wasn't written in her hand.

Searching for answers, he walked down by the river behind his house. He fantasized about jumping into the murky waters and accepting his wrongdoings as a poor husband and worse father, but something floating on the surface caught his attention.

It was a simple box of Frosted Flakes.

He thought nothing of it for a while, but then he realized why his efforts to track down his missing family had been in vain. They'd been taken by a higher power. They were no longer a part of the earth's fabric, instead waiting for him in the clouds of heaven.

The thought seemed absurd at first, but more and more signs appeared over the ensuing months. People began shunning him, as though his hand-



picked destiny was something he could control. He soon lost his job and was forced out onto the streets since he couldn't afford his four-bedroom house on his paltry warehouse salary. Out there amongst the elements, more signs came that this was all part of a bigger plan. Graffitied walls pushed him to new places. Meetings with equally impoverished souls forced him to seek out certain sanctuaries, certain towns. He ended up in the mountains of Alfa Creek, and it was here that God spoke directly to him.

In a culvert outside Saint Paul's Church, the lord appeared in his all glory and told him he'd been chosen to deliver his message. His punishments were a test of his own, and surviving them would lead to greater pastures. To flourish, he would need to channel God's will and test others with similar hardships.

The Bible was his canvas. A blade he'd purchased from a fellow homeless man was his paintbrush. By night, he had nothing to do but read the Holy Scripture from start to finish, and there was one book above all else that really spoke to him: the Book of Job.

That was how his mission began.

But unfortunately, few people seemed to be as virtuous as him. Most people upheld faith on the surface, but when the time came to really prove their worth to God, their faith was nowhere to be found. To them, devotion was disposable. A virtue to be discarded when they fell on hard times.

Not to him. He was the devout messenger that God could rely on. No matter what the world threw at him, he'd remain blameless and upright. Just like these people, he'd lost everything he loved too, but

Before him, the house loomed ominously in the night, shrouded in an inky blackness that made entry much easier than it should be. The woman inside, he knew her well. After all, he was the author of her pain. Months of watching and waiting had resulted in full knowledge of her life, her schedule, her gradual descent into the fiery pits of despair. She was test subject number four, but this one was a little different than the others. Tonight's subject had never been particularly close to God, but he hoped that her suffering might help her welcome the lord into her life.

He placed one hand on the door handle, squeezed and opened it up. Simple. A little too simple.

Into the hallway, he listened closely to the sounds of the still house, familiarizing himself with its layout. Nothing stirred, the downstairs lights were off. The owner was asleep. Even simpler still.

He edged up the stairwell, readied his blade.  
The final test was a heartbeat away.

## CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Ella sprinted towards the house on Wildermore Avenue, barely able to keep steady from the adrenaline tsunami crashing through her system. She'd called Ripley on the way here and told her everything, but Ripley was around six miles away. Not enough time for them to both make the trip. She'd have to do this one alone.

The house was small and quaint on a semi-residential street, about eight houses in total, spaced out around fifty feet from one another. There was a large back, easily accessible back area and a balcony on the first floor. More than enough ways to get in, more than enough solitude for a killer to strike.

She raised her fist to bang on the door then immediately thought better of it. It was nearing midnight, and if there was a killer inside then he'd strike quickly and maybe escape through a different exit. Instead, she rested her fist on the glass and gently pushed. An icy breeze blew a mass of raven hair across her face as she tried to shake off the sudden chill.

Why would someone leave their door ajar at midnight?

Only one answer.

Someone was desperate to make a quick getaway.

Ella thundered inside. If she was wrong, she'd owe a real big apology. If she was right, she might just save a life. High risk, high reward.

She shone her flashlight around the hallway. Nothing out of the ordinary. She stepped into the next room - a sparse living room - and found nothing of note. The kitchen was equally empty, and other than a grand piano and clarinet, so was the rec room.

Then Ella heard it. Movement. Slow and purposeful steps spread across the landing area up above. Ella covered her flashlight, listened, but heard nothing but her fast-beating heart threatening to erupt from her chest. She thought about calling out, revealing her presence, but it was still too risky.

Over to the stairs. Ella stepped on the edges to muffle her movements. Three steps in, the walker in the darkness struck again. Light, methodical thuds that certainly didn't mimic the way people usually walked through their own homes. She couldn't be sure, but she'd attuned her senses to the whims of human nature.

She continued up, holding her breath, a pistol in one hand and a flashlight in the other. Ella reached a landing spot where the stairs turned in the

opposite direction, giving her full view of the upstairs area.

Four doors.

One of which was wide open.

Two options. Run inside or approach silently. If there was no one in there but a homeowner, the first would incite unnecessary terror. But if there was a killer in there, it would be a different story.

One more step up, her instincts decided for her, because her reverie was cut short by a piercing shriek, shattering the tranquil silence like a bomb. Ella rushed forward, dread choking her, adrenaline pushing her into the unknown. Two more screams followed, two disparate voices. Ella arrived, illuminating the room with her flashlight, expecting the worst. Her footsteps drew the attention of the two occupants, one of whom was lying beneath the bedcovers, eyes glazed with terror.

The other of whom had a hand around her neck and a blade in his hand.

“Don’t move!” Ella screamed. “It ends here.”

Time stood still. Silence descended upon the room, an eerie quiet that seemed to last an eternity. With her gun trained on the standing silhouette, Ella smashed her hand against the walls beside her, her domestic senses telling her that there should be a light switch nearby.

She found it. The room was bathed in an orange glow, giving Ella full sight of the two strangers. The first, a young brunette woman concealed beneath a sheet, although the scars of her attack were plastered across her face. Deep sores, heavy rashes, bumps, and cysts.

The other was a hooded figure. A faceless, shapeless mass of loose clothes with a black mask concealing his mouth and nose.

“Melissa Wall?” Ella shouted.

The bedbound woman gripped onto the headboard for life, paralyzed, unable to turn away from the masked stranger now retreating, freeing his grip, backing against the far wall. She hummed and cried. A symphony of dread.

“Melissa!” Ella called again. “You’re safe. Go.”

The shaking woman scrambled out of her bed, landed on the floor, and scurried towards the door. She held on to her new heroine, pointed at the masked man with a trembling hand and said, “It’s.... him.”

“Go,” Ella pushed her towards the stairs. “Outside. Somewhere safe.” She pointed her gun at the stranger opposite her. “This is going to get ugly.”

Melissa clambered out of the room, down the stairs, leaving the two

opponents alone in their personal steel cage. Ella had a mind to put a bullet in his head right here and now. No talking. No showdown. Just instant death. After all, she knew what he was truly capable of.

“Want to take that stupid mask off? You’re going away for a very long time.”

The man remained motionless for a second, breathing heavily, his little black eyes staring a hole at his new enemy. Then he slowly raised his hands like a magician in the throes of a grand illusion, dropped his hood, tore his mask off.

Ella had never seen the man before. He was perhaps in his forties and unremarkable. Around five-foot-ten, gray hairs outnumbering those still dark. He now stood stoically, hands clasped firmly behind his back, as if evaluating the scene with a keen eye. He held an intense gaze beneath heavy eyelids, eyeing Ella with a ferocity that pricked at her nerve endings.

“So, you’re God, huh?” Ella asked. “I’m disappointed.”

He remained stoic, silent. Ella had to push him, had to extract his reasons. She wanted to see this man suffer for the rest of his days, but a small part of her needed to hear his motivations from his own mouth.

“Got nothing to say for yourself? I profiled you as a coward. Happy to strike from the shadows but spineless in the face of a real challenge.”

He thrust his blade through the air. Some kind of intimidation. “You don’t know anything,” he spat.

“Please. I know about you and your little mission. Tell me, did you find anyone who was blameless and upright?”

A spark of life. The man roused up, his shoulders tensing, his teeth clenching. “Whatever you think you know, you’re wrong.”

She was dealing with pure stubbornness, someone who couldn’t conceive that anyone else could understand their master plan.

“Doubt it. Found you here, didn’t I?”

The man began to twitch. His fingers suddenly jerked in hyperactivity. He buried his weight further into the ground. He was about to erupt and Ella knew it. She stepped closer, ready to cuff him at the first opportunity.

“The Book of Job,” she said, laying it all out. “You wanted to find a Job of your own, didn’t you? Someone who accepted faith in times of suffering? Well, you must be new to the world of Christianity because, for one, you’ve been saying it wrong. It’s *Jobe*, not Job.”

The stranger’s frown turned into a smirk. “I don’t know what you’re

talking about.”

“Come on, buddy. You poisoned Joanne so she’d miscarry. You manipulated David into some investment. You burned Gary’s house down. You even attacked poor Melissa with acid. All for your stupid game.”

Ella spotted a purse of the lips, flicker of curiosity. “How’d you find out?” he asked.

“Perfluoroalkyl. You used it on both Joanne and Melissa. The other two? I don’t know, but I filled in the blanks.”

“Put the gun down. Fight me properly. If you win, I’ll tell you everything.”

“Ha. You see, I’m used to dealing with murderers. I don’t mind putting you people behind bars until your dying day. But taking someone’s baby,” Ella said as she moved closer, pistol trained on the man’s forehead. “Well, I’d have no hesitation in killing you in this room.”

One year in the field, Ella’s body count was a respectable one. She’d only taken a single life, but face to face with this human monster, she was willing to add another one to the list.

“Kill me and you get nothing. No explanation. No confession. Is that what you want?”

Ella had heard enough. Her fury reached critical mass, so she threw her pistol behind her, towards the door and assumed her fighting stance. If this son of a bitch wanted a fight, he was going to get one.

He suddenly came at her lightning fast, thrashing his blade, slicing through the air. Ella was ready. She sidestepped him, reached out and clutched his wrist, then she sunk her knee into his abdomen with every ounce of fury in her body. The man bent over and spluttered up phlegm, then Ella grabbed him and flung him across the room, smashing into the far wall and collapsing him to the floor.

This maniac had the size advantage. He had to be fifty pounds north of her, but no one was immune to the right attacks. She mounted him, burying her knuckles into his face, professionalism be damned. This guy had purposely destroyed at least four people’s lives for his own twisted games, so he deserved every single punch that came his way. Her attacks became relentless and merciless, not ceasing, not slowing down for anyone or anything.

He fell limp, eyes frozen still in a parody of life. Ella caught her breath, the furious beatdown having depleted her energy supply. She worried for a

moment if she hadn't killed the man, but he stirred and hummed beneath her. A little reassurance came. She reached for the cuffs in her back pocket, but the demon beneath her suddenly resurfaced from the bowels of hell.

Ella cried out. Her thigh throbbed with searing agony, as though it was being burned from the inside out. The sensation spread through her body like a wildfire, numbing her nerves, scorching her muscles, sending her nervous system into a sudden panic.

The man dislodged a bloody knife from her flesh, and Ella knew that a second thrust was only a breath away. She rolled away from her opponent, finding herself outside the bedroom now. She was on a landing illuminated by the bedroom light. Visibility wasn't in her favor.

Her heart began to beat at a rapid pace, her breath short and shallow. She clambered to her knees as a rush of footsteps signaled her opponent's arrival. A heavy boot connected with her skull, knocking the vision out of her, sending her into a realm of pure blackness. She felt herself being hauled up by a pair of thick hands, and so she fought by instinct, aiming for the key areas: eyes, groin, spine. She furiously flung her feet at whatever body parts might be in front of her, and a groan of pain and shower of spit told her that she'd hit her mark. She landed on her foot and again threw punches wherever she could, sidestepping to avoid any oncoming knife attacks.

Vision began to return, slowly but surely, and Ella retreated across the landing to somewhere with more space. Her attacker wasn't far behind, clawing at her, hounding her every step. A sudden push sent her slamming into the door at the end of the landing, prizing it from its hinges, planting Ella into a second bedroom. Two French doors let in light from the streetlamps, and Ella welcomed the increased visibility.

Before she could compose herself in any way, this so-called messenger of God came thundering in from the rear. Ella rolled to one side, swept his leg, and downed the man to one knee. In the minimal light, she saw the trail of blood that had followed her in here. It was worse than she thought, but now wasn't the time to dwell on pain. That always came later.

Ella's focus was the blade. Remove the blade, remove the biggest threat. She surged from behind, wrapping her forearm around the man's neck and gripping his wrist. She tried to crowbar the knife from his fingertips, but she found her energy fast waning. She got one finger loose, two fingers, but then her opponent rose to his feet with Ella still clinging on by the throat. She tightened her grip in an attempt to choke him into submission, but the lack of

oxygen sent him into a violent, superhuman frenzy. He charged backward, smashing Ella's spine into a wall. It sapped the air from her in a sudden heave, but Ella maintained her chokehold. All she had to do was ride the bull, hold on until the life drained from him.

But the stranger didn't seem to have an ounce of quit in him. He briefly dropped to his knee again, but then began stalking the room like cornered prey, hunting for something sturdier to bounce against Ella's spine.

Ella peered up as a beam of light from outside spotlighted their battle. Ella sensed the man's intentions a mile off. If she was in his position, she'd do exactly the same. It was almost inevitable.

The glass doors.

Ella rode the wave, unable to let go, unable to do anything but brace herself for impact. He strode towards the glass without any hesitation, gaining speed and traction with every step. Ella tried to free herself but he had her locked in place with his free arm. The glass beckoned her, invited her to test its durability, to taste its pleasures. It loomed closer still, the moment playing out in slow motion. This wasn't Ella's first journey through a pane of glass, and she felt the full-body sting before it had even happened.

Then a collision came. Spine first. Shattering the door into a million pieces and raining crystal shards down from the heavens. Over her short career, she'd been beaten, stabbed, shot, and burned, but a million miniature cuts across her back, arms, shoulders, and neck was a sensation even the most hardened masochist wouldn't endure.

Their end destination was a wooden balcony, now littered with painful and prickly debris. The impact had broken their embrace, but Ella was now at the man's mercy. She couldn't move from her position. Her nervous system was in the throes of shutdown, so all she could do was look out at the quiet street around fifteen feet below.

He had her by the neck. Pulled her to her feet and rested the tip of his blade against her heart.

"Was it worth it?" he spat in her face. "Was this worth dying for?"

Even in her delirious state, there was only one answer. "Yes."

"You can never stop me. God is with me. He wouldn't let you catch me."

"You're an idiot," Ella laughed. She had no life left in her. Blood oozed from more places than she could count. Her old friend pain had come to greet her one last time before death took her to whatever lay beyond this realm. If God was waiting for her, she had a lot of questions.



“You still think you can beat me?” the man asked. “Your faith is strong, if only it wasn’t so misguided.”

“Bullshit. I don’t believe in God.”

He pushed the blade closer to her abdomen. “Fine. Then you deserve what’s coming to you.”

If nothing else, Ella’s last view was a gorgeous mountainous landscape, the kind that always inspired her. The warm glow of the orange streetlamps below mingled with the moonlight, creating a velvet tint that made an acceptable backdrop for death. She only wished that, by some miracle, Ripley would charge up the street and save her life.

But there was no sign of her partner.

Ella felt the knife begin to pierce her stomach. Try as she might, there was no fight left in her. The game was over. She closed her eyes and thought of her dad, her aunt, her roommate. She even saw a flicker of Ben’s face in there too.

She prepared herself for it.

Welcomed it.

“Kill me you...”

The shrill sound of a clocking gun pierced the night, disrupting the surprisingly peaceful moment. Ella and her nameless attacker glanced to the broken doorway to see a trembling woman, still in nightclothes, aiming Ella’s own Glock at God’s messenger. Her stance was unwavering and almost perfect, the sign of a woman comfortable with firearms.

“I heard you talking.” She pointed to her face. “*You* did this to me?”

Maybe Ella did believe in something. Maybe God did have a plan after all.

Melissa, this victim-turned-hero, didn’t wait for a response. She pulled the trigger four, five, six times, emptying the chamber, exploding the night with deafening gun blasts. The moment shot by in a flash, and the next thing Ella saw was God’s messenger in a lifeless stupor hanging over the balcony rails.

One little push and he’d be sent down to hell where he belonged. This killer, this destroyer of lives. Every fiber of her being told her to rid the material world of this monster. She could hear him groaning in agony. He still had life left in him.

*Dark, try not to throw this guy off anything high.*

Sadly, she had a promise to keep.

Ella clutched the man’s leg with her last scrap of energy, pulled him back onto the balcony. Ella looked at her savior in the doorway, gun still

smoldering in her hands.

Ella never believed in divine intervention, but this moment made a good argument.

## CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Ella sat in the lounge at Morgantown Municipal Airport while Ripley hovered around with a phone to her ear. It had been twelve hours since Ella's final battle with the unsub, and there'd been no sleep for either her or her partner. Ella had spent three hours in hospital, but was finally cleared for flying an hour ago. It meant they could catch the one PM flight back to D.C.

Ella hadn't yet given her side of the story to Ripley, but her partner didn't seem to care as long as she was alive. Ripley returned from her call, dropped down next to Ella on the gray sofa and said, "They got him. They know his name. He's homeless. Alden's story about selling the blade to him was true. He's confessed to everything."

Ella breathed a sigh of relief. "The rest is up to God. The irony."

Ripley laughed and tapped her partner on the knee. "Excellent work back there, Dark. I don't say that enough, but you put it all on the line. I wish I could have been there to help, but I was stranded at Patricia's house."

"Yeah, I bet getting a cab round there is pretty difficult. I didn't expect you to show up. You're the consultant, remember? No more reckless situations for you."

"True. But you know, it showed you don't need me. You brought that guy down single-handedly. You're as good as I was. Maybe not at my peak, but you know what I mean."

Ella stifled a laugh. "Single-handedly? Melissa saved my ass. She definitely got vengeance last night."

"Yeah. Apparently she only hit him twice. Both in the shoulder. Congratulations on not throwing him to his death, by the way."

"It was a struggle," Ella lied. "But I remembered what you told me. Don't throw anyone off anything high." Ella felt her phone buzzing but chose to ignore it. It was probably the director and he'd have to wait. She'd write up her reports as soon as she wasn't buzzing with every medicine under the sun.

"You did well. But next time, just shoot him and be done, yeah?"

"I know, I know. It wouldn't be an Ella and Ripley case without a little lecture now, would it?" she laughed.

"You got that right. But honestly, I get why you did it. I'd love to have punched him too."

"You still can. No death penalty in West Virginia. He's going to be in a

cell for the rest of his life.”

An announcement told passengers for the one PM flight to Reagan International Airport will begin boarding in five minutes. The agents collected their things and held them in their laps, ready for the long journey home.

“No. If there’s one thing I’ve learned, you gotta let things go. Don’t dwell on these scumbags. A lifetime in jail is worth a thousand punches.”

Sound advice, she thought. “Put that on a t-shirt,” Ella said.

“Wisdom’s my thing. If you need any help writing up your reports, let me know. I’ve got nothing else to do when I get back.”

Ella couldn’t deny that her relationship with Ripley had been turbulent. They’d had more disagreements than she could count, even a brief rivalry at one point. Ella had seen herself as equally capable as the FBI legend sitting beside her, and that had stemmed heated arguments that left them exhausted, furious and neither of them parading the best versions of themselves.

It had taken a year, but Ella saw it was all from a place of love. Mia Ripley was a friend first, teacher second, and the two standings did not overlap well. When Ripley scolded her for not checking the corners or diving in recklessly or deserting her weapon, it was because she didn’t want to see her friend get killed.

Then there was this darkness Ripley always talked about. The growing darkness, the same darkness that had clouded many of Ripley’s own years. It wasn’t some outdated notion that had no place in the modern world as Ella wrongly believed. It was real.

Ella didn’t want to do it. She hated moments like these. But she owed it to her partner to show her gratitude.

“Mia,” she said. “Thank you for being by my side.”

Ripley looked at her partner like she was insane. “Don’t do it, Dark. Don’t get sentimental with me.”

Ella refused to accept the refusal. “I have to. You kept telling me about the void this job leaves in your heart. I thought it was nonsense. I thought I knew better. I didn’t. You were right.”

Ripley’s face lit up with a warm smile. “Well smack my ass. If it isn’t Miss Dark admitting I was right.”

“Drop it, woman. You know that’s exactly what you want to hear.”

Ripley shrugged off the compliment. She reached over and gave her partner a hearty hug. It stung Ella’s back but she didn’t care.

“Thanks, Dark. You might be a nerd, but you’re the shot in the arm the FBI needs. You’ve got everything you need to go far. I just want you to retire without a broken spine and more good memories than bad. Listen to me and that’s exactly what you’ll get.”

“I will. One day, I hope to be the next you. I don’t just mean the accolades or that massive house. I mean the heroism, the knowledge that I did what I could to make the world more bearable.”

Ripley wiped away a little tear. Ella had rarely seen the woman betray emotion before, even on the multiple times they saved each other’s life. This was new territory for both of them.

“Don’t be the next me,” Ripley said. “Be the first you.”

A serene tranquility settled between them. Both agents sat back, letting the silence do the rest of the talking. Ella always believed that true friends could sit in absolute silence without it being awkward. One year in, they’d reached that milestone.

Ella had one more thing to say. Something that she’d felt fraudulent holding back.

“Mia, want to hear something funny?”

“Always.”

“Remember when you said I was a literature fetishist?”

“Yeah. You’re not?”

“No,” Ella said. “I remembered the Book of Job from South Park.”

Ripley’s laugh started off as a chuckle then grew into a robust cackle. “Brilliant. I love it. You had me fooled at least.”

“Who says TV isn’t educational?”

Ripley tapped her partner’s leg again. “By the way, do you want to know his name?”

“Whose?”

“The killer’s.”

The thought hadn’t even crossed her mind. To her, he was just a run-of-the-mill psychopath, as deluded as a million other people out there. She couldn’t deny his motive was uniquely fascinating, but that was where her curiosity started and ended.

“No, thank you,” Ella said. “I’m good.”

“That’s the right answer.”

The overhead voice told them it was time to begin boarding. Home beckoned. Ella grabbed her things, tapped her pockets to double-check her

essentials were in their right places. Her phone buzzed once more. She gave in, if only to tell the texter she was out of bounds for the next twenty-four hours.

But then Ella had a sudden change of heart, because Ben's name flashed up on the screen.

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Ella stood outside her ex-boyfriend's apartment, weighing up the pros and cons of what she was about to do. It was early evening and the aftereffects of her showdown with were beginning to take their toll. Her back stung with a thousand pinpricks and the wound in her leg was beginning to throb like a war drum. But more concerning was that she was about to glimpse her ex in the flesh, letting back in all those emotions she was trying to keep at bay.

His text had said: *Come to mine tonight?* Disconcertingly vague. If nothing else, it might give her a chance to apologize in the flesh. If that was all she got out of this, so be it.

Ella knocked on the door. A weak knock, far from her usual knuckle-rapping. Ben answered instantly. A hearty, determined yank, like the door of an aircraft tearing off mid-flight. A red-eyed Ben stood in the dim hallway, his static composure betraying nothing of his intentions. He wore black shorts, no shoes and a figure-hugging t-shirt that accentuated the things most women would like about him. Ella didn't care about that. They were just bonuses.

A slight head movement summoned her inside. She felt like a leaf, caught in the cyclone of her own emotions, whirling around, and changing direction with the slightest breeze. She thought she'd let him go, but his presence tingled every sense she had. Even six feet away, she could feel him. She heard the sound of his heart, matching the same rhythm as hers. And that sweet vanilla scent that she was powerless to resist called her forward.

"Come here," he said.

Ella obliged. She walked into Ben's waiting arms. He wrapped them around her tightly, then planted a soft kiss on her lips. If history had taught her anything, it was that her ability to sense innocence was greater than her ability to sense guilt. She felt it now. An overbearing aura of innocence that she'd been foolish to dispute.

"I want to make this work, but I can't do it if you think I'm someone I'm

not.”

She placed a gentle hand on his chest. It felt good to touch him again, to be so close to the only man she felt safe with. “I know who you are. I’m an idiot for doubting you. I’m sorry.”

“I was a different person when I was younger. I was the last person to see her alive, I admit that. Did I kill her? Hell no.”

“I believe you. I have no reason not to.”

“No, I’m going to talk you through everything. I forgive you, and I want you to know I’m innocent.”

Ella welcomed his persistence but she was over it. She’d let the darkness do the talking and she was leaving that in the past. “What made you change your mind?” she asked.

“The other night. It was about one in the morning. I saw you typing a message to me, then nothing came through. I knew you were thinking of me.”

Ella laughed, feeling a little foolish. She remembered it well. Her first night in the motel in West Virginia. “God, I was hoping that you wouldn’t see that.”

“Unlucky,” Ben said as he brushed the hair off her face, “but I’m going to do it. I’ll talk you through everything. I know mysteries itch that stupid brain of yours.”

“I trust you. You’ve never lied to me before. Except when you broke the lamp next to my bed, remember that?”

Ben laughed, his eyes welling up at the memory. “Umm, that was a joint effort, Miss Dark.”

Ella lightly smacked him on the shoulder, a little flustered, even in present company. “True.”

“Stay here tonight?” he asked.

Ella didn’t give it a second thought. “I’d love to, but I want to take it slow. I think we can get back to where we were as long as things don’t get too heavy.”

“Of course. What we had was good, and I don’t care if you have to fly across the country every week. As long as I know you’re coming home eventually, I don’t care.”

“It’s a deal,” Ella said.

“Oh, thank God. And you’re okay with staying? Does that count as taking it slow?”

“Very much so,” she said. “I’ll stay, but…”

“But?”

“I can’t promise your lamp will last the night.”



## EPILOGUE

On this wonderful spring morning, Ella had made good on a promise. She sat on the terrace of the Black Horse beside her new friend Dennis, a man who may or may not have known her father. Four days ago, she promised she'd return to his coffee shop with money since she'd forgotten to bring some the first time round. She'd done that, paid for one coffee, but then man had plied with enough caffeine to tranquilize a horse. Now they sat with fishing rods hanging into the Clinch River, neither of which had seen any action but Ella didn't mind at all. She was here to talk to this man and makes his days a little less lonely, and she guessed he was doing the same for her.

"That's real sucky about your old man," Dennis said.

Ella had told the man everything. She wasn't sure why, but she felt a kinship with him. Or maybe it was just another way of letting the darkness out and the light in. Bottling these things up hadn't worked well for her in the past, so maybe it was time start talking about them.

"Those items you found in his storage place," Dennis continued as he toyed with his line. "You've got no idea what they mean?"

Dennis was talking about the hidden items she'd accidentally found among her dad's possessions. They consisted of a cigar, tobacco, lighter and a box of matches that apparently came from the place she was now sitting in. Dennis, however, never passed such an item to anyone named Ken, so how Ella's dad ended up with them remained a mystery.

"Absolutely no clue. My dad didn't even smoke as far as I know." Ella's line began to unreel.

"We got a live one."

Ella gripped the line, attached what Dennis has informed her was a *bait runner* and began her battle with the sea creature down below. A few seconds of awkward tugging followed, then Ella pulled an empty line out of the river.

"Dammit. Nature wins again."

Dennis plunged his hand into some brown slop and applied it to the end of Ella's line. "Fishing is a numbers game," he said. "Anyone who tells you it's skill is talking out of their backside."

"Thanks for the encouragement," Ella said.

"You say your old man wasn't a smoker?" Dennis said, back to the subject. Ella wasn't sure she'd ever told anyone other than Mia and Ben

about her dad's death, so it felt a little odd to reveal the details to someone who was essentially a stranger.

"Nope. Well, I never saw him smoke anyway. I guess he might have done it in private."

"Well," Dennis said, "you ever think that maybe they're not about smoking?"

Ella hadn't. "How do you mean?"

"Well, you keep talking about smoking, but those matches led you here and we've got nothing to do with smoking. Maybe it's about where they come from rather than what they're used for."

Matches, cigar, tobacco, lighter. Ella plucked them one by one out of her pocket and placed them on the table between her and her new friend. Dennis put his reel down, picked up the cigar and mock-smoked it. He held it up to the light for a better view. "Darjeen brand. That takes me back."

"You know it? I've never heard of them."

"Young gunslinger like you wouldn't have. Some short-lived company. Pretty cheap from what I remember." He rolled the cigar over in his fingers then scrutinized the small print on the back of the label.

"How's your eyesight?" Dennis asked.

"Bad," said Ella. "Yours?"

"Worse than yours. Here, check the fine print on this bad boy. See where it was manufactured. Could have been round here."

Ella held the label right up to her glasses lens and it was still a struggle. She managed to make it out once her eyes adjusted to the tiny letters.

"Imperium Brands," Ella said. "Heard of 'em?"

Dennis's eyes bulged in surprise. "No kidding? Haven't heard that name in a long time. They made these matchboxes for me too."

Ella's reel begun to run again but she wasn't paying attention. "Really?"

"Yeah. Small company down in Hayter. God, that takes me back."

A connection. Ella's mind flared with possibilities, one of which stood out more than the others. She grabbed the bag of tobacco and inspected the fine print on the back, barely readable thanks to lax legal laws from thirty years ago. Her eyes scanned it wildly an inch away from her glasses, but one line at the very end jumped out at her.

*Manufactured by Imperium Brands, VA.*

"Oh Christ," Ella said. "Same manufacturer on here too."

"We found the link?" Dennis asked, nearly as excited as she was.

Next up was the lighter. Plain and nondescript. She ran her fingers along its surface and metal clasp but found nothing. No brand name, no manufacturer name, no label.

She paused, not wanting to jump to conclusions. The past few days had told her just how damaging that could be.

“Nothing on here,” Ella said. “Dammit.”

Dennis reached over. “Here, let me take a look. You kids with your video games. You didn’t spend your childhoods taking things apart and putting them back together.” Dennis pulled the metal hood off the lighter and handed it back to Ella.

She flipped it over. There it was, engraved on the underside.

Imperium Brands.

“We got it?”

Ella could barely believe it. “Oh we’ve got it.”

“Looks like a connection to me,” Dennis said.

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The old building stood in a state of disrepair: paneless windows, crumbling walls, weeds curling up the exterior like a hungry viper. This was the Imperium Brands building in Hayter, Virginia. Or at least what used to be. It looked like no one had been here in decades.

Ella fought her way through a chain-link fence, kicked her way through knee-high grass and arrived at something resembling a doorway. A loose door hung in place on its side, and so Ella easily pushed it aside and walked right inside the old building.

She entered a vast open space, the smell of charcoal and rust permeating her senses. Old machines, forges and anvils stood frozen in time, patiently counting down the eons until full corrosion. She saw metal buckets, old shovels, hammers long past their use-by date. Despite faint signs that still read *Imperium Brands*, this place looked more like a blacksmith’s workshop than a tobacco factory.

Why would her dad want to bring her here? Had she interpreted the clue correctly or was she way off the mark? Aside from a bunch of forgotten relics of the industrial age, there was nothing much here she could use.

She must have gotten it wrong, she thought. Worth a try but no dice. Or perhaps the items from her dad’s lockbox didn’t mean a single thing. What if

they were just the concealed possessions of a former smoker, or a symbolic gesture that he'd kicked the habit? Ripley always told her not to look too deeply into things that might not mean anything, so maybe that's exactly what she was doing here.

Back to square one, she thought.

"How did you get in here?"

A voice carried on the dark, echoing from the past. Ella instinctively reached for her non-existent pistol as her heart rate tripled in speed. She frantically scanned every corner of the room, finally resting on a moving figure emerging from a distant hallway.

An elderly man in oil-stained overalls stepped forward, his snowy white hair now the brightest thing in the room. He had the face of a man who'd seen too many winters. Haggard, but with the wisdom of a thousand kings.

"I walked in. I thought this place was abandoned."

"Looks it, don't it? What are you doing here?" The old man stepped closer, wiped the sweat off his face. Ella guessed this place was the guy's amateur workshop. "You're Ken's daughter, aren't you?"

Ella's spine turned to ice, a welcome remedy for the back pain. She wasn't sure she heard the man right. "Yes I... am. How did you...?"

"I know all about you. And your old man." This stranger wiped a bronze pipe down on his overalls then caressed the item with his fingertips. "You're surprised?"

Ella's thoughts overflowed, her brain whirring like a cog in a machine. She had so many questions, each one vying for her attention. "Yes I am. You knew him? How do you know me? I don't think we've ever met before? What do you...?"

The man held up a single finger. A gesture to stop talking. "All in good time. Now, do you want to know what happened to him or not?"

Ella felt she'd stepped into some alternate reality, a realm of fantasy and imagination where all of her deepest questions could be answered with a click of the finger. She kicked herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming, feeling the sting of yesterday's stab wound running up and down her leg.

No, this was real.

"You know? You know what happened to my Dad?"

The old man nodded.

"Please tell me. It's tortured me for years. I've never met anyone who knows anything about it. What are you, old friends with him?"

The man turned around and retreated away from the main area of the building. "I'd love to tell you, but I can't."

"What?" Ella shouted. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"I can't tell you," the man said, "but I can show you."

Ella froze in place, rooted to the charred floor. This had plagued her for twenty-five years, so why was she so hesitant to step forward?

"But I'll warn you, what I'm about to show you isn't for the faint of heart."

For the first time in a long time, Ella was lost for words. The man dissolved into the darkness, turned around and asked one last question.

"Are you coming?"

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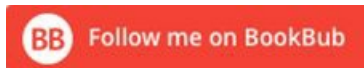
## Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSIE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising twenty-eight books; of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books; of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising six books; of the ADELE SHARP mystery series, comprising sixteen books, of the EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy mystery series, comprising six books; of the LAURA FROST FBI suspense thriller, comprising eleven books; of the ELLA DARK FBI suspense thriller, comprising fourteen books (and counting); of the A YEAR IN EUROPE cozy mystery series, comprising nine books, of the AVA GOLD

mystery series, comprising six books; of the RACHEL GIFT mystery series, comprising ten books (and counting); of the VALERIE LAW mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the PAIGE KING mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the MAY MOORE mystery series, comprising eleven books; of the CORA SHIELDS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the NICKY LYONS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the CAMI LARK mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the AMBER YOUNG mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the DAISY FORTUNE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the FIONA RED mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the FAITH BOLD mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the JULIETTE HART mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), and of the new MORGAN CROSS mystery series, comprising five books (and counting).

[ONCE GONE](#) (a Riley Paige Mystery--Book #1), [BEFORE HE KILLS](#) (A Mackenzie White Mystery—Book 1), [CAUSE TO KILL](#) (An Avery Black Mystery—Book 1), [A TRACE OF DEATH](#) (A Keri Locke Mystery—Book 1), [WATCHING](#) (The Making of Riley Paige—Book 1), [NEXT DOOR](#) (A Chloe Fine Psychological Suspense Mystery—Book 1), [THE PERFECT WIFE](#) (A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller—Book One), [IF SHE KNEW](#) (A Kate Wise Mystery—Book 1), [MURDER \(AND BAKLAVA\)](#) (A European Voyage Cozy Mystery—Book 1), [LEFT TO DIE](#) (An Adele Sharp Mystery—Book One), [A MURDER IN PARIS](#) (A Year in Europe—Book 1), [CITY OF PREY](#) (An Ava Gold Mystery—Book One), and [HER LAST WISH](#) (A Rachel Gift FBI Suspense Thriller—Book One) are each available as a free download on Amazon!

An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit [www.blakepierceauthor.com](http://www.blakepierceauthor.com) to learn more and stay in touch.



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FOR RAGE (Book #2)  
FOR LUST (Book #3)  
FOR WRATH (Book #4)  
FOREVER (Book #5)

### **JULIETTE HART MYSTERY SERIES**

NOTHING TO FEAR (Book #1)  
NOTHING THERE (Book #2)  
NOTHING WATCHING (Book #3)  
NOTHING HIDING (Book #4)  
NOTHING LEFT (Book #5)

### **FAITH BOLD MYSTERY SERIES**

SO LONG (Book #1)  
SO COLD (Book #2)  
SO SCARED (Book #3)  
SO NORMAL (Book #4)  
SO FAR GONE (Book #5)

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JUST NOW (Book #7)  
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ALL FOR ME (Book #7)  
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