



Skin  
Sharp Force Trauma

**Jon Osborne**

**skin: the white power  
murders**

**A DANA**

**WHITESTONE THRILLER**

**BY JON OSBORNE**

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BOOKS

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KILL ME ONCE

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THREE TIMES A LADY

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*For my mother, Della, who inspired my  
love of reading, and my father,  
Richard, who inspired my love of  
writing.*



# PART I

“We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children.”

– The Fourteen Words, by David Lane, deceased leader of the terrorist white-supremacist organization known as “The Order”.





# CHAPTER 1

“You’re going to die out here tonight, nigger. This isn’t some fuckin’ game. This here’s the real goddamn thing.”

Angel Monroe’s heart pounded in her chest like an angry sheriff at the door with an eviction notice in hand as her unconsciousness gave way to hellish waking reality and she took stock of her surroundings hazily; her muscles aching

from being restrained this long. Her brain felt like pizza dough that had been manipulated by a sadistic Italian chef possessed of especially strong forearms. Her left eye pulsed in its socket like an irregular heartbeat; mostly swollen shut by the thick knuckles that had cracked her in the face earlier in the night. But what Angel *could* make out definitely wasn't good.

The hostile words were coming from a white hood. The fat one in front. A dozen more white hoods flanked the man on either side, angled off in a *V* like a flock of oversized Canada geese. Most were holding torches. Off in the distance, the mournful howl of a single heartbroken coyote pierced the stillness of the pitch-black night.

All in all, not exactly her first

choice of company for a sultry Saturday evening.

“How you like your accommodations there, shine? Best we could come up with on such short notice. Next time you really should call first before dropping by.”

Angel gagged on the dirty rag shoved in her mouth. It tasted like a mechanic's handkerchief, and not one who was especially keen on doing

laundry, either. She looked down at her feet and felt her stomach lurch. Nightmare scenarios didn't come much more horrifying than this for black folks.

She was tied to a sturdy wooden cross, its thick base cemented into a barbecue pit behind the Brotherhood's white-supremacist compound deep in the woods of Creek Run, Mississippi. Positioned on the map some forty miles

south of Tupelo and a million miles in any direction from what might reasonably be considered civilization, Creek Run represented the preferred gathering place for the white-power set – a sort of “Club Med” for the racist vacationer. *You bring the hate and we’ll take care of the rest.*

Ratty lengths of rope sliced deep into Angel’s wrists and ankles, cutting off her circulation and opening up nasty-

looking abrasions that had already begun to ooze blood in places. A teepee of kindling leaned up against her bare shins, expertly arranged for maximum burn time once they got the fire going. She almost threw up when she saw what the kindling was made of.

*Human bones.*

There were femurs, ulnas and vertebrae shaped like tiny horse-



collars. Tibias and fibias stacked neatly together. Something that looked like part of a broken clavicle. Something else that looked suspiciously like a shard from a bashed-in skull.

Angel closed her eyes and fought back the overpowering urge to vomit. Stomach acid swam up from her gut and seared the thin lining of her esophagus before flooding into her mouth and wearing away the enamel on her teeth.

Along with the bones, the semicircle of scorched earth around her bare feet let her know that she wasn't the Brotherhood's first guest in the barbecue pit. And at this rate, she highly doubted she'd be their last.

The mountain of a man in front was staring at her hard, his beady little pig eyes glowing excitedly in the flickering torchlight. The glassy sheen

in his bright green eyes let Angel know that he was really starting to enjoy himself now (and more than just a tad bit drunk at the moment). She instantly felt sorry for any stray kittens that might've crossed his path when he'd been a kid.

Still, she felt a hell of a lot sorrier for *herself* right now.

Thousands of strange-looking bugs flittered in from the enormous trees surrounding them, on suicide missions to

the irresistible siren-call of the flaming torches, their only goal in life now to throw themselves upon the fires in a final white-hot flash of agony. Pops and crackles filled the night air while their hard carapaces split and burned at consistent two- and three-second intervals.

Deep inside the pit of her stomach, Angel knew that it wouldn't be

very long before she knew *exactly* how they felt. Because pretty soon that would be *her* carcass over the fire.

The fat man's breathing sounded labored, like a starving hog rooting around in the woods for a mouthful of tasty truffles. This didn't surprise Angel in the least. From the look of him, she doubted he got much exercise other than the occasional hate crime or two. Unfortunately for her, however, tonight

seemed to be exercise night.

And he was just getting warmed up.

The fat man stepped forward and yanked the dirty rag from her mouth, flooding delicious air into her lungs like cold water from a burst levee. Sweet oxygen rushed to all parts of her body in frantic waves and kept her from passing out again. But just barely, and just for

now. If she'd had a gun pressed up against her temple, though, Angel couldn't have sworn with absolute certainty that she *wanted* to stay conscious for this. Not tonight. Not with these people. And certainly not in the hopeless position in which these animals had her tied down.

Not to mention the fact that she just so happened to be wearing her nicest skirt that night – which hardly

marked an insignificant consideration, at all.

“You ready to bleed, nigger?”

Angel jerked another ragged breath deep into her lungs and winced as her tongue found an oily slick of blood on her badly swollen lower lip; courtesy of the world-class ass-kicking she'd taken just a few hours earlier. “I'm already bleeding,” she coughed, forcing



out the words around the painful lump of fear lodged in her throat even though it hurt like hell to talk. “My time of the month and all. Can’t we can just leave it at that?”

To her surprise, the fat bastard actually smiled at that. She knew this only because she could see his dull brown teeth staring flatly back at her through the hole that had been cut out for his mouth. The man’s teeth looked long

and crooked, sharp and broken in places  
— just like a wolf’s.

His derisive snort filled the night  
air. “That right, nigger? It’s your time  
of the month, huh?”

“Something like that.”

The electric sound of mating  
cicadas echoed in the branches to their  
right as the fat man threw back his head  
on his wide shoulders and barked out a

short, ugly laugh. Turning his head, he called out to his hillbilly buddies in a thick drawl ripped straight out of central casting for three-hundred-pound racist rednecks.

“Hear that, boys? It’s this little nigger’s time of the month. Ain’t that just the sweetest thing you ever heard in your whole fuckin’ life?”

A cacophony of whooping and hollering joined the hiss of torches in

appreciation of his hilarious little joke. Rural Mississippi's very own version of Chris Rock. Personally, Angel didn't what was so funny about the whole thing, but maybe it was just the heat frying her brain.

The sun had slipped below the dogwood-lined horizon a little more than an hour earlier, but the muggy night air was still clinging to her skin just as

insistently as a drunken frat boy's hands clinging to a giggling co-ed's chest during a Spring Break kegger that was still raging on the beach long after dark. Unfortunately for Angel, though, this wasn't Daytona Beach and she wasn't kicked back on a collapsible nylon beach chair sipping ice-cold Mai Tais through a multicolored plastic straw while digging her freshly manicured toes into the soft sand in front of her with a

gentle ocean breeze fluttering through her long black hair. Far from it. This was Creek Run in late July, and it didn't even come *close* to featuring that mythical beast known as a dry heat. At least, not for this somewhat-sheltered Northern girl who'd never before stepped a high-heeled foot south of the Mason-Dixon line.

A warm bead of sweat snaked

down the back of her neck as the fat man stretched his own massive neck, snapping the line of vertebrae stationed there like a long string of Chinese firecrackers. Angel's breath hitched in her throat as he reached inside the folds of his flowing white robe and his ham-like fist emerged again a moment later holding a sharp silver blade that glinted wickedly in the crackling orange torchlight. The knife was the kind that

featured a serrated edge, the kind that was perfect for gutting a fish.

Angel cut her eyes down to the ball compass bobbing around in the hollow plastic handle. No doubt there was some fishing line and waterproof matches stuffed inside, all neatly rolled up in a convenient little plastic baggie for added protection.

*A survival* knife.



Needless to say, she didn't find the irony that he was the one holding it in the least bit funny.

“Your time of the month,” the fat man repeated disgustedly, lifting the sharp blade to her face and brandishing it in front of her eyes. “I should pluck out your goddamn eyeballs for saying some stupid shit like that. That’s *exactly* the problem with you mongrels, now

ain't it? You're always *breeding*."

The fat man leaned in even closer, boring his beady little pig eyes into Angel's again. The overpowering stench of stale whiskey and freshly smoked cigarettes on his rancid breath flooded into her nostrils and practically melted all the tiny hairs, causing the sickness to brew in her gullet again.

"But we know how to care of that little problem, don't we, nigger? If

you got a problem you just cut it out.  
Ain't that how it goes?"

Angel didn't respond. She thought it wise considering the circumstances. After all, intelligent discourse didn't seem to be the main thing this guy was after. But when she didn't immediately answer him he reached up with his free hand and suddenly gave her left breast a violent

wrench.

“I asked you a question, nigger!”

Bright white stars danced in front of Angel's eyes. The man's thick fingers felt like heavy fabric scissors slicing hard through her tender nipple, shredding the paper-thin areola and reducing the sensitive flesh surrounding it to tattered ribbons of destroyed flesh. Several long seconds passed before she realized that the hoarse screams

bouncing off the trees and back into her ears were coming from her own raw throat.

“Jesus Christ!” she screamed.

“Get your fucking hands off me, asshole!”

But Mr. Fat Ass just kept on twisting, grunting hard the entire time, the starving hog in the woods again. Tiny black squiggly lines danced in front

of Angel's eyes, replaced quickly by little green lines, then purple, then blue as her aching breast rotated another half turn. More stomach acid crept up her throat and blistered the already traumatized lining of her oesophagus. Her world blurred. Her stomach cramped. Her temples ached. A split-second before she was sure her areola would twist right off like an old-fashioned pop-top, a redneck in back

mercifully hacked out a phlegmy laugh.

“Fuck this shit! Let’s fry that nigger up already, Buck!”

Several assenting opinions punctuated the night air at once, each hillbilly voice agreeing that it was high time to start up the barbecue. The one they called Buck nodded and gave Angel’s breast a final, painful twist before lowering the edge of the serrated

knife between her thighs.

Angel shuddered violently as the sharp steel inched slowly up her thighs, ice-cold goose bumps rocketing up her legs and directly into her crotch as the awful smell of his hot breath invaded her nostrils again. Every time he opened up his mouth he might as well have been opening a thirty-year-old coffin with the decayed corpse still jammed inside. “Gotta keep the boys happy, honey,” he



grunted. “But first we gotta do a little surgery on you. Gotta teach all them other uppity nigger bitches out there a lesson. This is a *white* man’s country, and that’s the way it’s goddamn well gonna stay.”

Angel swallowed hard as the satin of her Chanel skirt slid up her thighs. Then she took a deep breath through her nostrils to steady her

nerves. *Fuck it.* If she were going to die out here tonight, it sure as hell wouldn't be without a fight. Granny Bernice wouldn't have expected anything less from her.

“Not even gonna buy me dinner first, Rambo?” she asked weakly – a so-so 1980s movie reference that she most likely could have improved upon had her brain been functioning properly at the moment. Still, not half-bad, considering

the circumstances.

The survival knife paused between her legs. The fat man snapped off the words with his broken teeth like so many pieces of peanut brittle, and Angel blinked hard and refocused her vision. Hell, she could practically *see* the crumbs of the man's rotten teeth falling from his mouth with every foul word he spoke.

“I’m afraid you’re out of luck there, nigger, because I don’t buy dinner for filthy whores.”

The faint sound of wind chimes tinkled in the slight breeze, reminding Angel of hot summer nights spent listening to baseball games on the front porch with Granny Bernice. Those days seemed long gone now, and from the look of things they were never coming

back again.

So – since she clearly had nothing left to lose now – she might as well go out in style.

She barely recognized the sound of her own trembling voice as the words came tumbling out. “Well, if you don’t buy dinner for filthy whores then I’ll bet that ugly redneck wife of yours must be getting awfully hungry by now, Buck. Better get home and feed the bitch before

she starves to death. Hurry, fat boy!  
*Run!*”

From the corner of her eye, Angel caught a flash of black streaking forward. There was no time to turn her head against the heavy butt of a hunting rifle that came crashing down hard into her right temple, switching off her lights.

Angel couldn't be absolutely certain, but she was pretty sure that she

also heard the faint scratch of a wooden match striking to life just before her world went completely black.





## CHAPTER 2

Dana Whitestone checked her appearance in the full-length mirror hanging from the back of her bathroom door for the forty-second time that morning.

She tugged down the fabric of her blue blazer around her waist. *Was it too short?* She brushed imaginary lint from her dress pants. *Did they look like they'd just been dry-cleaned?* She

turned and craned around her neck over her right shoulder to get a good look at her butt. *Were the pants somehow tighter than the last time she'd worn them?*

She fluffed her short blonde hair. She checked her make-up and again hoped she hadn't overdone it. She adjusted her gold-hoop earrings. She debated changing out her white blouse

for a green one.

In other words: she just went crazy.

Certifiably so.

Dana sighed. And why in the hell *shouldn't* she go crazy? Who in their right mind *wouldn't* go crazy on a day like this? And putting aside for now the subject of whether or not she still resided in her right mind following her bone-chilling run-in with a serial-killer

known as “the Censor” just four days earlier, no one with half a functioning brain inside his or her own skull could possibly debate the fact that she had a *very* important meeting scheduled for today. More important than any meeting she’d ever attended before and more important than any meeting she’d ever attend again. Because not only would today’s meeting determine Dana’s future,

it would leave its indelible mark on her past and present, as well. And any way you sliced the bread, that was a lot of pressure for *anyone* to deal with – even a fourteen-year veteran of the Federal Bureau of Investigation who'd faced down some of the most stone-cold killers this side of Freddy Krueger.

Dana shook her head and glanced down at her watch – a silver Rolex that had once belonged to her mother, Sara.

The watch had been a first-anniversary gift from Dana's father, James – who'd worn a matching gold one, saying that he and Sara matched so perfectly as husband and wife that the least their jewellery could was the same. In exactly one hour Dana would meet with Shelley Margolis, a case manager for Child Protective Services in Parma, regarding Dana's suitability to adopt a

child.

Heavy stuff, to say the least.

Dana took a deep breath through her nostrils and let out the air again in a slow hiss over her teeth, trying her best to control the incessant pounding of her heart. No use. The goddamn thing still wouldn't slow down. *Hadn't* slowed down one little bit ever since she'd received the call from Margolis setting up their meeting three days earlier.

Probably wouldn't slow down anytime soon, either, judging by the bongo drums still playing behind her ribs. From what Margolis had told Dana over the phone, the two women should expect to be in the meeting for no fewer than three hours. The case manager had said that she and Dana had *a lot* to talk about. God only knew what *that* meant, but it sure as hell didn't sound promising. If



nothing else, though, Dana knew that it probably wouldn't be something as simple as a basic "getting-to-know-you" chat. No way in hell she'd get *that* lucky. *Nothing* in her life had been that simple since she'd been four years old, so what the hell were the chances of all that changing now?

Not good, to say the least.

Making her way into the living room of her apartment in Lakewood,

Ohio just outside of Cleveland, Dana unzipped the leather attaché case that was sitting on top of the oversized coffee table featuring a custom-cut, heavy glass top before extracting a thick pile of documents from inside to triple-check that they were all there.

Birth certificate: check. Social security card: check. Financial statement: check. Tax returns, health

records and letters of recommendation from the FBI.

Check, check and check.

Sliding the documents back into the bag and re-zipping the case, Dana headed into the kitchen and poured a bowl of dry food for Oreo, her beloved black-and-white cat. A lot people out there – the same sort of people who might consider a cup of Starbucks coffee an accessory, she supposed – referred to

cats such as Oreo as “rescues”, but Dana had always resisted such a lofty characterization of their relationship. Hell, it wasn’t as if the animal shelter had been on *fire* or anything when she and Oreo had first chosen one another five years earlier.

Filling Oreo’s water bowl at the sink, she leaned down and placed his liquid refreshment next to his food bowl

near the refrigerator. Alerted by his favorite sounds in the world, Oreo sauntered into the kitchen a moment later, his flexible shoulders dipping and rising fluidly in that languid feline strut known around the world. He glanced up briefly at Dana and gave her a quick meow to say hello before digging into his food with his customary zeal.

Dana watched Oreo for a little while, envying his obvious peace of

mind. She just couldn't help herself. It might have been ridiculous to feel jealous of a cat, she knew, but nobody could deny that Oreo was one lucky puss. Everybody in the world *loved* him just as soon as they laid eyes on him. *He'd* never needed to prove himself to people from the state who'd most likely be *looking* for things to criticize. *He'd* never been subjected to a third-degree

that would no doubt make the Spanish Inquisition look like a lighthearted parlor game of Twenty Questions by comparison. And *he*'d never had his personal life examined and re-examined until he thought he'd lose his mind. All he needed to do was look cute. And he was damn good at it, too.

Shaking her head and leaning over to scratch Oreo behind his pointy ears, Dana was very careful to avoid

getting any of his fur on the sleeve of her blazer. Wasn't easy. With the way Oreo shed, she probably could've constructed seven more cats from all the hair she collected each and every time she swept the apartment.

Dana straightened back up and pivoted on her heel, leaving her feline friend behind to finish off his breakfast in peace while she went back into the



living room and picked up the leather case from the coffee table again. Slinging the strap over her right shoulder, she checked her watch once more. *11:15 a.m.* Time for her to get the hell out of here. She had exactly forty-five minutes to get all the way across town to Parma and she didn't want to be late for this. Not today. Not when the stakes were this high. She might never get another chance like this

again.

The chance to become a *mother*.

Her adrenalin kicked up another fifty levels as she stole one last quick peek at her reflection in the decorative mirror hanging on the wall next to the front door. Finally exiting her apartment, she purposely shifted her gaze away from the front door of the apartment located directly across the

hall. D13 had been Eric Carlton's apartment, but Eric was dead now and he was never coming back again. Nathan Stiedowe had made good and goddamn sure of that when he'd bashed in her best friend's head with a rusty claw hammer while the sadistic asshole had been recreating the crimes of notorious serial killer John Wayne Gacy during the Cleveland Slasher case a few years prior.

A hard chill rattled the entire length of Dana's spine as she passed by Eric's front door. She half-expected to see her murdered friend open up his door and invite her in for a quick drink, just like he'd always done, maybe even get in a clever dig or two about the ultra-conservative outfit that she'd chosen for today's meeting with Margolis. Mercifully, though, Eric's door stayed

closed. Thank God for small favors. Dana missed Eric with every last inch of her heart, mind, body and soul, but she really didn't think she felt up to having a lighthearted discussion with his ghost out in the deserted hallway today.

Reaching the end of the hall and punching the button for the elevator, Dana's mind buzzed with a million different questions as she stepped inside and pressed the button for the ground

floor, taking another deep breath in an effort to steady her badly jangled nerves. Didn't work, though. Not even a little bit.

*Am I really ready for this?* she wondered as the elevator's guts groaned to life and the car slipped down the thick metal pulleys hidden inside the shaft. Really ready to become a *mother*? What the hell do *I* know about taking care of

someone else? Hell, I can barely take care of *myself* these fair. So is it really fair of me to introduce the little boy to my thoroughly insane – not to mention incredibly *bloodstained* – world after everything he'd already been through in his short life?

Only one way to find out.

Dana exited the elevator when the car finally came to a stop with a high-pitched *d i n g*! a moment later,

crossing the marble-tiled lobby and pushing quickly through the front doors. Crossing the parking lot and reaching her silver Mazda Protégé a moment later, she felt inside her purse for her car keys but her hand came out empty.

She closed her eyes in defeat and slumped her shoulders hard, all the way down to her ribcage.

“*Goddamn* it,” she cursed



sharply under her breath.

Dana shook her head in disbelief as she turned around and headed back to the apartment complex. After all of that time spent double- and triple-checking every last little detail – after all of that time spent making sure she got *everything* exactly right – she'd forgotten her friggin' keys upstairs. But if she'd known then that this would turn out to be the *highlight* of her day, she

never would've left Lakewood in the first place.

Then again, if her aunt had been born with balls, the poor woman would've been her uncle, now wouldn't she have been?



## CHAPTER 3

Two weeks before she was to find herself in her oh-so-charming little predicament down in Creek Run, Mississippi with the sadistic white-power radicals hell-bent upon burning her fine black behind to a crisp, Angel Monroe was minding her own business on a sunny Monday afternoon in downtown Cleveland, Ohio. The only problem with this arrangement was that

Angel got paid to mind other people's business, not her own.

Her office wasn't grand by any means. Far from it, actually. A small entranceway led into a slightly larger main space, room enough for two desks and a conference table piled high with papers and shoved over into one corner. But you really couldn't beat the view.

Her rented space in The Caxton

Building was situated directly behind Progressive Field – home of the Cleveland Indians baseball team – and since today was a game day, the streets were awash in a sea of humanity.

With nothing else better to do that day, Angel was simply looking out her window and watching the foot traffic move past The Winking Lizard bar four stories below on Prospect Avenue, pretty much just enjoying the low hum of

excitement she felt hanging in the air.

Angel smiled to herself. And why not? It had always made her happy to see the city come alive like this. It wasn't often that Clevelanders got this jazzed up about *anything*, but with the city's beloved Tribe taking on the hated New York Yankees in a day-night doubleheader that day, the sidewalks were spilling over with thousands of

smiling fans streaming toward the beautiful downtown stadium in order to take in the highly anticipated athletic spectacle for themselves. Maybe drink a few beers while they were at it. Eat a couple of mustard-slathered hot dogs while they watched the Tribe get its collective ass kicked by the despised Yankees again. Because for all the blood sport the games would likely offer, Angel knew that it might as well



have been the Cleveland Christians taking on the New York Lions. In an away game. At the Coliseum in Rome. With Julius Caesar himself and his silly little George Clooney haircut serving as umpire.

When Angel had checked the standings earlier that morning – which she tried to do *every* morning since she lived with the biggest baseball nut this

side of the Mississippi River – she'd seen that the Bronx Bombers were a comfortable three games ahead of the Boston Red Sox atop the American League East, just like they always seemed to be. As of July 10<sup>th</sup>, however, the Indians had already slipped a full seventeen games out in the Central Division, trailing Chicago, Detroit and Minnesota by a bundle.

But at least they were still ahead

of Kansas City, right? And if nothing else, Angel knew that you needed to take your victories wherever you could find them – however large or small those particular victories might be.

Especially when you lived in a city like Cleveland.

*The Mistake by the Lake. The Armpit of America. The Crown Jewel of the Rust Belt.* Angel's hometown's

had *plenty* of nicknames, but none of them were particularly flattering. Try as Cleveland might (and the good Lord above knew they tried their damndest) the star-crossed city never could quite seem to get its act together. Sometimes Angel felt like Cleveland had been destined to play the part of the Charlie Brown of the United States forever, with the rest of the country playing the role of Lucy and yanking away the football each

and every time Cleveland pulled back its leg and gave it the ol' college try just one more time.

Angel sighed heavily and leaned her forehead against the reinforced glass of her office window while she surveyed the scene below. Two things about the crowd immediately jumped out at her. The first thing she noticed was that she saw both black and white faces

bobbing around down there, but it was mostly the white faces going to the game while it was mostly the black faces scalping the tickets. Angel noticed this each and every time she looked out her window on game day, and it never failed to irritate the living crap out of her.

The second thing she noticed about the crowd was the annoying number of turncoats down there sporting pinstriped jerseys to go along with the

intertwined *NY* logos on their navy-blue baseball caps. Most of these Benedict Arnolds had probably been born and raised right there in Cleveland, but you wouldn't have known it just by looking at them. Then again, where was the big surprise in that? There'd *always* been an odd lack of pride that had defined the residents of The Renaissance City, hadn't there, pervading everything they

did – or even *tried* to do, for that matter?

Damn right, there had been.

For example, the city had been awarded the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame more than twenty-five years earlier, right? So why in the hell did the powers that be always hold the induction ceremonies in *New York City*? What sort of *sense* did that make? What *good* did it do them?

Were strung-out rockers like



Vince Neil and Tommy Lee from Motley  
Crue and Gene Simmons and Ace Frehly  
from KISS too good to drag their sorry  
asses into Cleveland? Were Keith  
Richards and Mick Jagger from The  
Rolling Stones too busy to be bothered  
with the plane trip into Hopkins? Did  
Iggy Pop and Ozzy Osbourne have  
something *better* to do that day?

And don't even get Angel started

on Courtney Love and Axl Rose. Hot messes, both of them. Hot messes that obviously hadn't received a single day of proper home training in their entire lives based on the reprehensible behavior they displayed every time they stepped a bare foot out into public.

In other words: it was all complete and total bullshit

Angel shook her head and sighed again. Much like an ugly middle sister

with neither the poise of the eldest nor the precociousness of the youngest, though, Clevelanders had always suffered from a debilitating inferiority complex. You really couldn't blame them for this, however. When the rest of the country had kicked you around for as long as it had kicked around Cleveland — making the residents of the city the butt of some hilarious national joke the local

populace never quite understood – it was bound to eventually take its toll. And once you'd had a *river* catch fire – as Cleveland had with the horribly polluted Cuyahoga way back in 1969 – you might as well just forget about it. It was almost impossible to recover from that kind of psychological damage.

But at least they were still ahead of Kansas City, right? And Angel knew that you needed to take your victories

wherever you could find them –  
however large or small those particular  
victories might be.

Especially when you lived in a  
city like Cleveland.

She was still chewing on these  
thoughts when a soft knock at her door  
bumped her out of her depressing  
socioeconomic reverie and back into the  
present.

She turned her head just in time to see an old woman hobble into her office, helped along by a collapsible metal cane.

Angel looked the woman over from head to toe as the elderly gal struggled farther into the space of her modest office suite. The snow-white hair on the top of the old woman's head and the leathery skin stretched drum-tight

across her prominent facial bones let Angel know the woman was around Granny Bernice's age. Very *unlike* Granny Bernice, however, this woman looked small, almost slight. As a matter of fact, Angel had very little trouble imagining a stiff breeze blowing in off Lake Erie and lifting the woman into the air like a flimsy paper hot dog wrapper swirling around at Progressive Field. Sort of like an inner-city version of

Mary Poppins – only cooler, somehow.

“Are you Angel Monroe?” the old woman asked uncertainly. “The private investigator?”

The old gal’s voice featured the distinctive sandpaper scratch of someone who’d been smoking far too many unfiltered cigarettes for far too many years, so Angel didn’t immediately sense a likely partner for her daily three-



mile jog along the Lake Erie shoreline. Lifting herself off her perch on the window ledge and smoothing back her jet-black hair, she leaned down to adjust her knee-length skirt, using her palms to chase away the wrinkles. The time-strapped woman's equivalent of an iron.

“Yes, ma’am,” Angel said. “I’m Angel Monroe. How may I help you?”

The old woman bit down hard into her lower lip for several long

seconds before the façade of calm suddenly came crashing down with all the subtlety of the wooden blocks in a drunken, frat-house game of *Jenga*. Milky-looking tears sprang up into the corners of her yellowing brown eyes. “I need your help,” she croaked. “Please help me.”

Angel hustled around her desk and pulled out a chair for the old

woman, taking her lightly by the elbow and steering her gently into the seat. It was a sad sight, to be sure, but one she was all too familiar with. After all, *nobody* ever came to see her unless they were upset about something.

Helluva gig, huh?

“Would you like some water, ma’am?” Angel asked softly.

The old woman nodded and settled down into the chair, balancing

her cane against one of the arms. Then she reached into the side pocket of her heavy sweater and extracted a badly rumpled Kleenex, dabbing at her eyes.

Angel felt sorry for the old woman as she walked over to the mini-fridge in the corner of her office and pulled out two ice-cold bottles of Aquafina from inside, though she still didn't know *what* she should be feeling

for her about. Twisting off the cap from one of the bottles of water with the gunshot sound of snapping plastic, she walked back to the old woman and handed it over. “That’ll be a dollar fifty,” she joked.

The old woman didn’t laugh. Didn’t even crack a fake smile. So much for lightening the mood here.

Angel stowed the rest of the jokes and gave the old woman a chance

to take a sip of her water and gather herself before again asking how she could help.

“It’s my granddaughter, Sasha,” the old woman said finally, still dabbing at her eyes with the highly abused Kleenex. “She’s gone missing and I can’t find her nowhere.”

Angel lifted her perfectly plucked eyebrows halfway up her

forehead in surprise. A missing persons case. That was certainly different for her. Not the kind of work that usually presented itself on her daily docket of chores as a licensed private investigator, anyway. Angel had lasted thirteen long years on the Cleveland police force before walking away from her pension two years earlier and hanging out her own shingle – a pretty ballsy move for someone not actually born with balls, if

she did say so herself. These days, she spent the majority of her time spying on cheating spouses. Not exactly the most glamorous gig in the world, to be sure, but it usually paid the bills.

Emphasis squarely on *usually*.

“I’m very sorry to hear that, ma’am,” Angel said, twisting off the cap from her own bottle of Aquafina and taking a small sip. “But why come to



me? Missing-persons cases are police business. Why not go to them?"

The old woman stared at her like she was a goddamn fool. Apparently, the old gal and Granny Bernice had a lot more in common than Angel had first thought. "I *can't* go to the police," the old woman said, shifting irritably in her seat and shaking her head in thinly veiled disgust, as though Angel had just asked the *stupidest* question possible.

Maybe even the stupidest question *ever*.

“Why not?” Angel asked, doing her best to ignore the shaming look. Wasn’t easy.

“Cuz they won’t do nothin’ about it.”

Angel was grateful that the old woman didn’t actually tack the words “dumb ass” onto the end of the sentence. Because if *that* had been the case, it

would've practically made the feisty old lass and Granny Bernice twins separated at birth. Figuratively speaking, of course. From what Angel could see, no fewer than two hundred pounds separated the two women in weight. And not even fraternal twins showed *that* much of a difference.

Walking back around her desk and sliding open a drawer, Angel pulled out a tattered, spiral-bound notebook

before settling down into her office chair. Missing-persons cases really weren't her thing – never had been – so she highly doubted she'd be taking the case based on what she'd heard so far. Still, it never hurt to look professional, now did it? Besides, regardless of whether or not it happened to be her “thing”, she hadn't exactly been rolling around in clover lately. What she *had*

been rolling around in lately, however, was plenty of bills. Gas, food, electric, car note... Granny Bernice had been absolutely right when she'd said that those things didn't magically pay themselves.

Who knew?

“Why wouldn't the police do anything about it?” Angel asked, swiveling back and forth in her office chair and resisting the sudden urge to

swing up her feet onto the desk like some sort of hardboiled dick in a Raymond Chandler novel. Not the brightest idea in the world when you'd worn a skirt into work that day. "It's their job to find missing people."

The old woman's eyes looked dry now; the flash of vulnerability Angel had witnessed earlier replaced by something else. Something *harder*.

“They won’t do nothin’ about it ‘cuz of who I am.”

“And just who exactly *are* you, ma’am?” Angel asked, trying desperately to keep the underlying knife-edge of impatience out of her voice but no doubt falling miserably short.

A second “goddamn-fool” look was followed at once by the defiant thrust of a bony chin. “I’m Jelani Diggs,” the old woman said. “I’m

Razor's mama.”

For as long as she would live, Angel would never understand how she managed to avoid snapping off the tip of her pencil against the notebook as the old woman's words filtered deep into the center of her brain and slammed hard into her cerebral cortex. Razor Diggs was the murderous gang-banger who headed up the Cleveland chapter of the



Bloods street gang. He ran drugs, guns, women and just about everything else under the sun. But most of all he just ran anybody stupid enough to cross him six feet into the ground.

Angel tried her best to maintain a neutral look but her poker face must have needed some serious work, because Jelani Diggs immediately read her mind every bit as easily as a bright schoolchild might read *Green Eggs and*

*Ham.*

“I ain’t got nothin’ to do with that boy no more, so you ain’t gotta worry about that,” the old woman said.

“I wasn’t worried about it,” Angel lied.

The old woman leaned back in her chair and stared at her evenly. “Oh yes you was. But that’s OK. I don’t blame you none for it.”

Angel tossed her notebook onto the desk and took another long sip of her water before steering the conversation back around to the granddaughter. “So, you want me to find Sasha, is that it?”

*Boy, did she ask great questions sometimes. Certainly a medal of some sort was in the offing for her.*

“That’s right,” the old woman said. “I want you to find Sasha.”

“Why me?”

“Because you black,” Jelani Diggs said, shifting in her chair again and looking uncomfortable now. “Look, I know it ain’t pretty to hear, but white people don’t give a shit when black folks go missing. ‘Scuse my language, but it’s just the truth.”

Angel pressed her lips into a tight line. Having watched the Laci

Peterson, Natalee Holloway and Elizabeth Smart cases play out *ad nauseum* on the evening news over the years without a single mention of the hundreds of black people missing around the country, she found it pretty hard to disagree with the old lady's assessment of the huge chasm that existed in the media's coverage of such cases. Still, she wasn't quite sure she wanted to get mixed up in all this just yet. Was pretty

sure that she didn't.

That being said, her interest was piqued now – always a dangerous sign.

“How long has Sasha been missing?” Angel heard herself asking.

Jelani Diggs balled up her tattered Kleenex and worried it some more in her liver-spotted hands. “Been gone three days now. It just ain't like her. I raised Sasha up since she was a

baby. She don't even know Razor's her daddy. She's a good girl, missy. I always made sure of that. We always lived right in the eyes of Jesus."

The old woman's voice had that edge to it again, as though she were daring Angel to contest this statement. Angel didn't. Instead, she simply suggested what usually turned out to be the answer in most of these missing-persons cases.

“Maybe she ran off with a boyfriend,” Angel said, pivoting at her hips in an unsuccessful effort to loosen up the twisted muscles in her badly aching lower back. Somehow – despite her best efforts to avoid the nightly fate – she’d managed to fall asleep again in front of the television set in the creaky living-room recliner, an ancient piece of furniture that obviously hadn’t been



constructed from the same space-age materials they used in Tempurpedic beds. “Wouldn’t be the first time that a gal ran off with a guy, you know. Young girls have been known to do crazy things from time to time when they’re in love. Hell, I once staked out a boy’s house for an entire *month* after he turned me down for prom.”

The old woman knitted her sparse eyebrows on her ashy forehead

and shook her head firmly. “Well, that may be the case for you, missy, but my Sasha ain’t nothin’ like that. Ain’t nothin’ like that, at all. She gonna be a doctor. That’s all she care about.”

The old woman paused and studied Angel’s face for a reaction, pressing her own lips together now. “You don’t believe me, maybe you’ll believe this. This was in the *Plain*

*Dealer two weeks ago.”*

Angel reached across the desk and took the newspaper clipping Jelani Diggs was offering. A thirty-point headline was stripped across the top of the metro page.

## CLEVELAND WOMAN WINS RHODES SCHOLARSHIP

Angel scanned the story quickly,

gathering that Sasha Diggs had paid her own freight at Cleveland State University by working nights as a waitress at a downtown Denny's. A near-perfect academic record had prompted the prestigious invitation to Oxford.

The photo accompanying the article showed the smiling face of a truly *stunning* young woman. Smooth

caramel skin. Huge hazel eyes. Long, shiny black hair. A soft-but-firm body that stuck out in all the right places.

All in all, an embarrassment of riches.

Angel sighed wistfully, remembering when *her* body had stuck out in all the right places like that.

“Very pretty,” Angel said, handing back the article across the desk. “What else can you tell me about

Sasha? Did she have any enemies you know of? Anybody who might have wanted to hurt her in any way?"

Jelani Diggs shook her head again. 'No, no, nothing like that. Everybody *loved* Sasha. The only thing I can think to tell you is that she went missing the night before she was supposed to leave off for England. That struck me right odd, what with her being

so hell-fired up about goin' off to Oxford and all.”

Angel leaned back in her chair and took another long sip of her water but didn't say anything.

A moment or two of uncomfortable silence hung in the air between them before Jelani Diggs placed her Kleenex back into the side pocket of her heavy-knit sweater and retrieved her metal cane from her side,

rising unsteadily to her feet. Angel mirrored the movement on the other side of the desk, a little more steadily, for her part.

“Look,” Jelani Diggs said. “I ain’t meanin’ to sound rude here or nothin’, but I don’t got all day to wait on your answer. You gonna help me out or not?”

Angel’s initial impulse – and it



was a damn solid one at that, she'd realize later on – was to stay as far away from Razor Diggs and his crazy family as she could possibly get. She'd crossed paths with Razor just once before in her life, but that time had been more than enough to let her know that she never wanted anything to do with him again. Plain and simple, the man was a certifiable psychopath. Always had been and no doubt always would be.

She was about to tell Jelani Diggs as much when Granny Bernice's voice suddenly sounded in the back of her mind.

*You'd best help this woman out, Angel. Where the heck would you be if ain't nobody helped you out every now and then?*

Angel sighed. Who the hell needed a conscience when you had

Granny Bernice hanging around all the time? So, against her better judgment, she found herself taking the plunge. “I’ll take a look into it and see what I can do, but I can’t make you any promises.”

Jelani Diggs smiled, displaying an ill-fitting set of dentures that Angel guessed she’d been toting around in her mouth since somewhere around 1975.

“You a good girl, missy,” the old woman said. “I guess you musta been

raised up right too.”



## CHAPTER 4

An incredibly powerful man known throughout the white-power world simply by his intimidating moniker of “the Race Master” leaned back in his comfortable leather office chair and stroked his dog’s coarse black coat while the comforting sounds of Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* poured forth from the antique record player over in the corner of his fine den.

*Perro de Presa Canario*, or *Dogo Canario*, had originated in the [Canary Islands](#). Originally meant as a multipurpose [farm dog](#), for hundreds of years the breed had mostly been used to drive cattle. But its name also translated to *Canarian Dog of Prey*. And that was exactly what the Race Master's dog represented.

A fearsome dog of prey.

Unlike the leader of The Brotherhood himself, Bane's exact ancestry remained unknown. It was believed that *Perro de Bardino Majorero* – a farm dog from the Canary Islands – had been crossed with a mastiff brought over from England in order to create the foundation for the modern-day *Presa Canario*. The breed had been mentioned in historical



documents dating all the way back to the 16th century, so its bloodline had certainly been around for quite a while. Among its many sterling attributes, the *Presa* breed enjoyed a lofty reputation for its fierce fighting skills, a tradition the English colonists had brought over with them when they'd first settled the Canary Islands in the 1500s.

Canary Islanders had always considered these vicious battles to be

“honor fights” and not the sole purpose of the animals, but the Race Master had raised Bane since puppyhood to fulfill that purpose far better than any dog that had come before. *His* dog was a fighter, and the very best there’d ever been.

Balanced and imposing in form, Bane displayed all of the physical tools needed to excel in the underground world of dog fighting. Heavily built but

still able to move with great athleticism. Powerful muscles that rippled like those of a thoroughbred horse's beneath inch-thick skin. A highly aggressive and fearless nature. The dog's dominant character had required obedience training very early on, but the Race Master's patient tutelage in the area had been well worth the time and effort invested. The massive canine still showed signs of unbridled aggression

toward strangers, of course, resisting the urge to open up their throats with his sharp white teeth simply because of the Race Master's constant presence, but the animal never showed any signs of aggression toward the Race Master himself. Somehow, Bane seemed to have known that it would have meant an instant death sentence had ever shown even the slightest *hint* of disobedience to

his master, so that sort of thing never happened.

Good thing, for Bane, to say the least.

A soft knock at the door to the den caused the huge dog to stir at the Race Master's feet. A menacing growl came from deep within Bane's thick black throat. Long strings of sticky drool dripped down from his sharp white fangs. His entire body *quivered*

with the delicious anticipation of the kill.

Frothing at the mouth and snorting excitedly through nostrils the size of quarters, Bane looked up at the Race Master, clearly seeking permission to attack.

The Race Master looked down at his beloved dog and smiled. Leaning over to stroke Bane's enormous head, he

tried his best to soothe the poor thing's jangled nerves.

“Soon enough, Bane,” he said in his most reassuring voice. “Be patient, my friend – your time is coming soon enough.”





## CHAPTER 5

Dana angled her silver Mazda Protégé onto the entrance ramp for Interstate 90 East and downshifted the vehicle to fourth gear before merging with the heavy mid-day traffic that was zipping along the busy highway.

The car's engine purred like a contented tiger beneath the hood and slipped Dana effortlessly into the rat race. Forty-five thousand miles and the

Protégé still ran like a dream, like it had just rolled off the showroom floor. She only wished that everything else in her life ran even *half* as smoothly.

Flipping down the visor above her head to block out the bright sunlight that was streaming in through the windshield, Dana punched the button for cruise control and glanced up into the rearview mirror at the empty back seat,

suppressing a small smile as she did so. If all went well for her, there might be a child's safety seat back there soon. Maybe even some half-chewed Cheerios crushed into the carpet to go along with the bright red Kool-Aid stains soaked deep into the light-gray fabric of the floorboards and a smattering of sticky handprints across the back windows.

Dana widened her smile at the thought and thumbed on the radio with

the steering-wheel control. *It's a Beautiful Day* by U2 came blasting over the stereo speakers and she cranked the volume all the way up. Perfect driving music for a day like this. Because today *would* be a beautiful day. She just *knew* it. One of the most beautiful days of her entire life.

Or so she hoped with every last fiber of her being.

Activating her turn signal, she eased the Protégé over into the fast lane, sliding her vehicle behind a green Porsche doing at least ninety-five in an effort to avoid any potential speeding tickets on the horizon. People who drove Porsches could *afford* the fine, after all. Single FBI agents who hoped to adopt children in the very near future, however, needed to keep a *very* careful

eye on their budgets.

Dana breathed in deeply through her nostrils, wondering if Bradley even liked Cheerios and Kool-Aid. Still, even though she didn't know *everything* about the little boy's tastes yet, one thing she *did* know was that he didn't like broccoli. Hated the stuff, as a matter of fact. Despised the icky green stuff with every last ounce of energy in his tiny little body. He'd told her as much only a

few hours before their plane had crashed into Lake Erie the previous May.

The smile abruptly ran away from Dana's face at the thought of the tragic day six months earlier that had changed both their lives forever. Faulty landing gear had prompted an emergency water landing on Lake Erie that hadn't quite gone as planned, plunging Continental Flight 942, nonstop LA to

Cleveland, deep into the murky waters of the forbidding lake and plunging Dana deep into a prolonged coma from which she hadn't emerged for a hundred and eighty-two days. And hard as it was for her to believe, she'd actually been one of the *lucky* ones on the plane. Because six people had lost their lives in the crash that day – including Bradley's delicately pretty, twenty-eight-year-old mother, Lucy May.



Dana's heart sank in her chest, all the way down to her stomach. The loss of the boy's mother was made all the worse by the fact that Bradley's father had also died just a couple of months prior to the plane crash, turning the poor little thing into an orphan at the tender age of just four years old – not so much different from the way *she*'d become an orphan at just four years old

when a deranged serial killer had entered their house in the dead of night and butchered both of her parents in cold blood way back in 1976. A deranged serial killer who'd gone by the name of Nathan Stiedowe and who'd just so happened to have been Dana's very own half-brother...

Dana shuddered violently against the image of her brother that danced in front of her face, and then she shook her

head to banish the unwelcome ghost from the passenger seat of her car. Nathan Stiedowe wasn't welcome here today. He wouldn't ruin this day like he'd ruined so many other days before. Not if she could help it. She wouldn't *let* him. This day would be a *happy* one, no matter what.

Right?

Finally sliding the Protégé into

an empty space in the parking lot of the Department of Children and Family Services in Parma fifteen minutes later, Dana glanced down at her watch. *11:42 a.m.* Thank God for small favors. She'd made it on time – with eighteen minutes to spare, to boot. Things were going swimmingly already. They could only improve from here on out, right?

*Right?*

Only one way to find out.

Dana switched off the ignition and took another deep breath before letting out the air again in a slow rush over her bottom teeth, looking up into the rearview mirror and checking her make-up one last time before exiting the car. Happy day or sad one? Happy or sad? Which one would it be?

She filled her mind with as many happy thoughts as she could possibly

think of as she hurried across the blacktopped parking lot and pulled open the glass doors on the front of the building a few moments later. Thoughts of picnics and long days at the beach and movie nights with freshly popped bowls of popcorn as she and Bradley sat on the couch and snuggled in their most comfy sets of pyjamas while watching the latest sequel to *Ice Age* or *The Lion King* or *The Little Mermaid*, giggling

uproariously the entire time.

Stepping deeper into the marble-tiled lobby, Dana made her way up to the front desk and asked the receptionist sitting there where she might find Shelley Margolis. The receptionist smiled brightly and pointed her down a long hallway to the left.

Forty-five seconds later Dana was standing outside a heavy wooden

door with an engraved plaque on it reading, *Shelley Margolis, LCP*. She lifted a hand and knocked lightly. This was it. Do or die time. No turning back now.

The door opened almost at once. On the other side of the door stood a woman even shorter than Dana's own modest height of five-foot-three. The licensed clinical psychologist smiled warmly at her and beckoned her inside.



“Special Agent Whitestone,” the woman said. “Please come in. I’m Shelley Margolis.”

Dana shook hands with the psychologist, who asked, “Would you care for a drink, ma’am? How about some coffee? Or maybe a nice cup of tea or a cold bottle of water? I’ve think I’ve got some Perrier chilling in the fridge.”

Dana shook her head and hoped against hope that Margolis wouldn't notice the sweatiness of her palms. The butterflies had *really* begun to swarm now and a cold blanket of perspiration had broken out across her entire body. And why not? This was *real* now. No more preparation, no more conjecture, no more imagining what it *might* be like. The moment Dana had been

waiting for her entire life had finally arrived, and she was standing in the middle of it *right now*. “No, thank you, Dr. Margolis,” she said, praying that her voice didn’t sound half as shaky as she felt inside. “I’m fine, but thank you very much for asking.”

Margolis nodded and turned to her right, motioning to a pair of comfortable-looking leather chairs that were positioned over in the corner of the

office with a fresh box of Kleenex sitting on a small table between. “Wonderful,” Margolis said. “Then shall we begin?”

Dana took her eighty-third millionth deep breath of the day and nodded. “Yes, ma’am,” she said. “That sounds great. Let’s begin.”

When they’d settled down into the chairs, the psychologist laughed good-naturedly and leaned forward to

touch Dana's knee. "I don't know about you, Agent Whitestone, but for some reason or another I've been feeling nervous about this meeting all day."

Dana's answer tumbled out of her mouth before her frazzled brain had a chance to properly filter the words. "I know exactly how you feel, Dr Margolis, because I've been feeling nervous about this meeting my entire life."

Margolis gave her a sympathetic look and flipped open a folder. Poising a pencil over a data sheet paper-clipped inside, she held Dana's stare. "So, Agent Whitestone, when you were born?"

"September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1972."

Margolis scribbled down her answer on the chart. "Where were you born?"

“Cleveland, Ohio.”

“What are your parents’ names?”

“James and Sara Whitestone.”

“Are they still alive?”

“No, ma’am. They’re both dead.”

Margolis pursed her lips. “I’m very sorry to hear that, Agent Whitestone. If you don’t mind me asking, what were the circumstances

surrounding their deaths?”

Dana shifted in her seat. Much as she dreaded the proposition, though, she recounted to Margolis the tragic night of July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1976 in bloody detail – the awful night when Nathan Stiedowe had butchered both of her parents in cold blood directly in front of her horrified four-year-old eyes, causing Dana to pee her pajama as she’d stood in the doorway of the master bedroom just ten



short feet away.

As she worked her way through the soul-crushing story, Dana tried her best to remain strong, but it wasn't easy. She reminded herself again that she was doing this for Bradley. It helped. After all, there wasn't *anything* she wouldn't do for the little boy. She already *loved* him, had fallen madly in love with him the very first time she'd laid eyes on him

on the plane all those months ago.

More than anything else in the world, Dana wanted to become his mother. *Needed* to become his mother, actually. For both their sakes. And if in order to do that she'd need to relive the most horrible night of her life all over again for a complete stranger, then so be it. Because if all went well for her and Bradley, two broken people might just get the chance to make each other whole

again. And any way you sliced the bread, that wasn't a bad payoff, now was it?

Nope, wasn't a bad payoff, at all.

She didn't leave anything out about the bloody July night back in 1976 that still haunted her dreams to this day, sharing things with the psychologist that she'd never before shared with another

human being.

Every. Last. Graphic. Detail.

And why not? There wasn't *anything* she wouldn't do for the little boy, right? She'd *die* for him, if need be. And if that turned out to be the case, Dana couldn't think of any other cause in the world she'd rather give her life for.

Then again, wasn't that the way *all* mothers felt about their children?



## CHAPTER 6

Getting raised up right is what Granny Bernice had done for Angel Monroe. Pulling up to the house they shared on the west side of Cleveland after work that day, Angel honked out a greeting when she saw her grandmother sitting on the front porch and fanning herself with the sports section of the *Plain Dealer*.

The first thing most people

noticed about Angel's grandmother was her size. Granny Bernice was a big woman, no debating that simple fact. *Huge* even. As a matter of fact, if you ever lost a sail on your boat out on Lake Erie during some freak thunderstorm, the flower-patterned housedress she was wearing right now most likely would have filled in quite nicely as a replacement.

“What you doin’ home already?”

Granny Bernice asked her as Angel ascended the creaky wooden steps in front of their house. “Ain’t you supposed to be out there peepin’ on folks in their underwear, or whatever the hell it is that you do with all your time these days? Don’t the freaks come out at night no more?”

Angel sighed and leaned down to



plant a kiss on her grandmother's feathery cheek. "It's nice to see you too, Granny Bernice. So what the heck's got you in such a great mood today?"

Angel's grandmother shook her head in irritation, sending her impressive jowls quivering into motion. She leaned over to pour Angel a glass of lemonade from the ice cube-filled pitcher sitting at her side and pursed her plump lips. "C.C. Sabathia threw a two-

hitter at us in the first game of the doubleheader against the Yankees,” she said. “Lowered his earned-run average to 3.18. Can you believe that? The Indians are seventeen and a half games out now, Angel, and Ivan Novoa is pitching the second half of the twin-bill, so it ain’t lookin’ too good for us.”

The second thing most people noticed about Angel’s grandmother was

the veritable *library* of baseball knowledge housed inside her non-nonsense brain. Try to test Granny Bernice in this area and you'd get burned like a forgotten flapjack left too long on a hot griddle. More than one of Angel's boyfriends had learned this lesson the hard way over the years.

“Who's taking the bump for us?”

Angel asked, referring to the pitcher's rubber located in the center of the

baseball diamond – a technical term of which she'd have absolutely *zero* knowledge were it not for Granny Bernice's debatably patient tutelage in the subject.

Angel's grandmother took a long sip of her lemonade and eyed her only grandchild suspiciously. "Josh Tomlin, not that you give a whit. Why you pretendin' to be interested in baseball

all of a sudden, anyway? What happened at work today that's got your pants all on fire, girl?"

Angel shook her head.

*Unbelievable.* This woman could smell a good story through a brick wall. Bloodhounds didn't have a *thing* on her grandmother.

"How do you know anything happened at work today?" she asked, even though she already realized the

utter pointlessness of the question.

Granny Bernice snickered.

“Don’t you play games with me, little girl. I know you better than you know yourself, so quit stuttering already and just spit it out.”

Angel blew out a slow breath.

But knowing that it was a fool’s errand to argue with an old black woman hot on the trail of some juicy gossip, she

quickly shared with her grandmother all the details of having agreed to take on the case of tracking down Razor Diggs's missing daughter.

“What you go and do a damn fool thing like that for?” Granny Bernice asked her once she'd finished.

An ice cube banged up against Angel's front teeth. She almost choked on her lemonade. “Because you *told* me to,” she sputtered.

Angel's grandmother leaned forward in her chair and calmly adjusted her voluminous housedress around her knees, brushing away an imaginary piece of lint from her tree-trunk right thigh as she did so. "I didn't tell you nothin' of the sort, little lady. Razor Diggs is a bad man, Angel. You should know better than to go messin' around with the likes of him. I taught you *way* better than



that.”

Angel shrank back in her seat, feeling four years old again. Granny Bernice had the uncanny ability to whisk her back and forth through the years with the simple tone of her voice, and she wasn't in the least bit afraid to use that power. Her grandmother had taken Angel in as a baby shortly after she'd lost both her parents in a horrific car crash back in 1978 and – much like

Jelani Diggs had been for Sasha – she was the only parent Angel had ever known.

She couldn't have asked for anyone better on God's green earth.

“I appreciate everything you've done for me, you know that,” Angel said softly, meaning it more than her grandmother would ever know.

Granny Bernice waved a hand

lazily in front of her face, jiggling the thick layer of fat hanging off her left biceps like a rooster's comb. "Hush, baby. You always been the light of my life. You know that, too."

Angel smiled. "And you've always been the light of mine. Anyway, the bottom line is that I took the case. I start work on it tomorrow morning."

Granny Bernice shooed away a fat black fly that was buzzing near her

sweating glass of lemonade with an irritated sweep of her right hand. “You gotta do what you gotta do, I suppose,” she said. “But if you ain’t startin’ ‘til tomorrow, what you got goin’ on tonight then? You steppin’ out with that fool boy again?”

Angel’s heart twinged in her chest. Her grandmother was referring to her on-again, off-again boyfriend,

Malachai Grimes, who she'd first started dating at the tender age of seventeen. Malachai was a graying thirty-eight now, a lawyer, for Christ's sake, but no matter how old or how successful he got he'd always be "that fool boy" to her grandmother.

At the moment, however, she and Malachai were off again. And then some.

And for *very* good reason, too.

A week earlier, she'd caught him stepping out with Beatrice Patterson when he was *supposed* to be at home in bed nursing a bad case of the flu. That little stunt had earned him an indefinite suspension from Angel's love life – a suspension she wasn't sure would ever be lifted.

“No, I'm not going out with Malachai tonight,” Angel said quietly,

the thought of not being with the cheating jerk hurting her far more than she cared to admit. “So that means I’m all yours for the night, Granny Bernice. What would you like to do with our time?”

Granny Bernice lifted her left eyebrow halfway up broad forehead and leaned over to turn up the radio just in time to hear the Indians’ play-by-play announcer rattle off the Tribe’s starting lineup for the second game of the

doubleheader against the Yankees.

“You know what I want to do,” she said, straightening in her seat again and patting Angel’s left knee. “We gonna drink our lemonade and listen to the second game. We gonna listen to our boys finally beat them goddamn Yankees.”

Three hours later, the Bronx Bombers topped the Tribe five to four



on the strength of Alex Rodriguez's sacrifice fly in the top of the ninth inning, putting the Indians a full eighteen games out of first place two weeks before the All-Star break. When the contest had finally wrapped up and given way to the post-game show, Granny Bernice leaned forward in her chair again and flipped off the radio in disgust. "*Goddamn* it," she muttered underneath her breath. "Ain't that just par for the course with

them bums?”

Angel put a comforting hand on her grandmother's shoulder and gave it a small squeeze. “Don't let it get you down, Granny Bernice,” she said. “At least we're still ahead of Kansas City, right?”

Granny Bernice's red-hot glare let her know that the foolish conversation was over even before it

had a chance to begin. “Don’t you patronize me, little girl. You ain’t too big for a butt-whuppin’, you know. Don’t you ever forget that.”

Angel smiled as her grandmother rose to her feet and headed back into their house to go get ready for bed. Turning around in the front doorway once she’d made it that far, Granny Bernice asked, “You comin’ inside or what?”

Angel looked up into the night sky that was dotted with thousands of brilliant stars and shook her head. “No, Granny Bernice, not yet,” she said. “I think I’ll just stay out here a little while longer and enjoy the night.”

Granny Bernice nodded. “Suit yourself then. Goodnight, girl.”

“Goodnight, Granny Bernice.”

When the screen door creaked

closed behind her grandmother, Angel stared up into the night sky for fifteen solid minutes, trying her best count all of the bright points of light scattered across the heavens. As a kid, she'd always imagined that God was playing with an enormous Lite-Brite set up there – and she'd always secretly hoped that He might invite her up sometime to join him. And counting stars *still* helped her relax before bed. Still, if she'd known

then that this night would mark her last chance at getting a good night's sleep for the next two weeks, she'd have followed Granny Bernice inside the house just as quickly as her frantically pumping legs would have carried her.

Then again, if she'd known last Wednesday's lottery numbers, she'd have been a millionaire many times over by now, too, now wouldn't she have

been? And the last time she'd checked her decidedly anemic bank account, she'd still been as broke as a joke.

It wasn't the kind of joke you laughed at, either. Not the *haha* kind. Nothing funny about it at all, actually. As a matter of fact – as Angel would soon find out the hard way – she wouldn't be laughing at *anything* again for a very long time to come.

Because the cold-blooded

murder of someone you loved had never  
been a particularly funny subject, now  
had it been?





# CHAPTER 7

Josef Sullivan entered the Race Master's elaborately decorated den and cast a wary eye at the huge dog standing at its master's side.

The Race Master smiled. "Do not be afraid, Josef. Bane knows better than to attack without my permission."

Sullivan nodded, also knowing better than to do *anything* without the Race Master's permission. Twenty

years with his employer had taught him very well. No move – not even something as simple as eating dinner – could be made until the Race Master himself first approved it.

Sullivan remained on his feet and waited until instructed before daring to sit down in one of the two wooden chairs that were positioned on the other side of the massive mahogany desk.

Taking his own seat, the Race Master leaned back in his comfortable leather chair and waved a hand breezily in front of his handsome face. “Now then, Josef, what is it?”

Sullivan cleared his throat nervously. “We’ve acquired a target we think you may find to your liking, sir. Our operatives are in place now, just waiting for your final approval.”

The Race Master reached into

his shirt pocket and extracted his smoking materials. Snipping off the tip from a huge Cuban cigar, he held it between his strong white teeth and brushed the orange flame of a gold Zippo across the fragrant tobacco before puffing hard against the expensive contraband and squinting his clear blue eyes against the thick cloud of smoke that curled up into his face. “Tell me

about this woman, Josef.”

Sullivan shifted uneasily in his chair. “A lawyer in New York City, sir. Twenty-five years old and a Harvard graduate. She fits your specifications perfectly.”

“Her name?”

“Laura Settle, sir.”

“And her lover’s name?”

“Michael Timmons, sir. A moderately successful novelist.”

The Race Master took another long, hard pull on his cigar and ran his hand thoughtfully across the back of Bane's thick neck. The dog lifted its massive head and licked his fingers softly in return. "What sort of books does this Michael Timmons write, Josef?"

"Murder mysteries, sir."

The Race Master laughed

heartily. He just couldn't help himself.

“How very appropriate. And we're sure the girl has been seeded?”

Sullivan nodded. “Yes, sir.

Confirmation came from the doctor just moments ago.”

The Race Master leaned forward in his chair and tapped a short line of gray ash into an ivory ashtray sitting on his desk; an ashtray he'd carved himself from the tusk of an African elephant that



he'd brought down while on safari as a young man. "How long has this doctor been in my employ, Josef?"

"Ten years now, sir. He's proved himself a faithful servant."

The Race Master considered this for a moment, then waved his hand in front of his face again to disperse the curtain of smoke hanging there. "Very well, Josef. You may proceed with the

next execution.”

Sullivan nodded excitedly.

“Will we claim credit for this one, sir?”

The Race Master frowned and picked up his dog-eared copy of *Mein Kampf*; already weary of Sullivan’s presence. “No, not yet, Josef. We still have more work to do. I’ll let you know when the time is right for us to step from the shadows. For now, instruct our operatives to keep their heads down and

their mouths shut.”

Thumbing through the book, the Race Master found his favorite chapter and began to read. Nearly a full minute of heavy silence hung in the air between the two men before the Race Master finally looked up from his book again.

“You are *dismissed*, Josef.”

Sullivan rose quickly to his feet. Growling, Bane immediately did the

same at his master's side, every muscle in his powerful body tensed and ready for action.

The Race Master placed a comforting hand on top of the canine's massive head and spoke to it softly in German. "Settle down, Bane. *Das blut der mutanen in die hande fallen fruh genug.*"

The blood of the mutants will be yours soon enough.





## CHAPTER 8

Half an hour into their incredibly tense meeting, Shelley Margolis continued to fire one uncomfortable question after another at Dana.

“Have you ever been the victim of a sexual assault, Agent Whitestone?”

Dana dabbed at her watery eyes with a soggy Kleenex, feeling more embarrassed than she had in years. She'd never been one for crying – not in

front of other people, at least – but Margolis had broken her down worse than Barbra Walters deconstructed Hollywood celebrities on television for all of America to see.

Dana sniffled and again reminded herself that she was doing this for Bradley. It helped. Leaning forward in her chair, she plucked a fresh Kleenex from the box between them and dabbed



at her watery eyes some more. “Yes, Dr. Margolis, I was raped last year.”

Margolis looked up from her chart. “Again, I’m very sorry to hear that, Agent Whitestone. You’ve certainly been through more than your fair of tragedy in your life. What were the circumstances surrounding your rape?”

Hard as it was for her to do, Dana soldiered forward and told the

psychologist all about the snowy night the previous December that she'd been held down and violated by two men in the parking lot of the Cuyahoga County Coroner's Office while she'd been investigating the crimes of the serial killer known as "the Censor".

Margolis pressed together her lips into a sympathetic line when she'd finished recounting the horrible story.

An apologetic look glinted in her bright blue eyes. “That’s absolutely heartbreaking, Agent Whitestone. Still, I don’t mean to sound insensitive here, but it seems to me that your work may present something of a danger to Bradley’s welfare. Tell me: do you feel confident in your ability to protect him?”

Dana held the psychologist’s stare. ‘I’d *die* for that little boy,’ she said, her voice trembling inside her

throat and threatening to shatter into a million tiny pieces like a dropped mirror. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep him safe.”

Margolis nodded and dropped her gaze back down to the chart in her hands. “Wonderful. I’m extremely happy to hear that, Agent Whitestone. Because, as I’m sure you’re well aware, Bradley was exposed to more than his

fair share of violence himself in his previous adoptive home, not to mention the fact that he lost both of his parents at such a young age. So we need to make absolutely certain that he's never subjected to those kinds of horrors again."

Dana's heart clenched in her chest at Margolis's reference to Bradley's previous adoptive home. She was all too familiar with the YouTube

video that showed Bradley being mercilessly whipped with a thick leather belt by the traffic-court judge who'd taken him in following the death of the little boy's mother – a video that had amassed more than two million hits in its first week on the World Wide Web.

Dana squared her slender shoulders and sat up straighter in her seat. “If my work presents any

impediment to adopting Bradley, I'll quit," she said, meaning it. "I've got absolutely no problem doing that. He'll always be my number one priority, Dr. Margolis. That much you can count on."

The psychologist lifted her eyebrows thoughtfully and scribbled something else down on Dana's data sheet. Then she immediately fired off the next uncomfortable question. "How many people have you killed in the line

of duty over the course of your law-enforcement career, Agent Whitestone?"

Dana shifted in her seat and sighed. From the look of things, she hadn't even known the *half* of it when she'd left her house that day. But she was finding out. In a big way. With each and every uncomfortable question that Margolis fired off like so many bullets from a gun.



Good God, almighty, was she  
ever finding out.



## CHAPTER 9

When Angel's alarm clock sounded at six o'clock the next morning, she rolled out of bed with a groan and slapped a pair of New Balance running shoes onto her feet before heading out the door, being very careful to not wake her grandmother on the way out. Anybody who woke Granny Bernice before she'd gotten her full eight hours was playing with his or her own life for

the rest of the day.

Fifteen minutes later, Angel was winding her way down the cement jogging path at Edgewater Park along the rocky shore of Lake Erie.

As she ran and looked out at the lake on a slightly windy but still absolutely *gorgeous* day – diamond-kissed ripples of sunshine on the water winking back at her as they danced in

and out of the waves – she let out a contented sigh. It didn't get any better than this. Still, while the lake was certainly beautiful to look at, you wouldn't want to ever actually jump in for a swim. No telling what you might catch from it.

Sort of like Beatrice Patterson.

The hussy.

Angel shuddered and picked up her pace, trying her best to outrun the

thought of Malachai with another woman. It hurt like hell knowing that his lips had been on hers, his hands had been all over her naked body, the two of them had moved together as one...

Reaching down and turning the volume all the way up on her iPod Shuffle, she sought some sort of relief in the sweet, soulful sounds of Etta James, letting Etta's magical voice wash over

her and transport her to another place. A place far away from Cleveland. A place far away from Malachai Grimes and his cheating ways. A place far away from where she always *hurt* so goddamn much.

Five minutes later, Angel was in the zone. Now it was just her, Etta and the rhythmic, reassuring sensation of her feet slapping against pavement. That was what she'd always loved so much

about running. Unlike life itself, no matter what speed you were going, somehow it always seemed to be the right one.

When her legs hit the good kind of sore half an hour later, she returned home and took a quick shower before dressing quickly in the brand-new burgundy skirt-suit that she'd picked up on sale at H&M the previous week. As



she did her hair and makeup in the mirror hanging above the bathroom sink, she appraised her reflection carefully.

*Not too bad for an old broad,* she decided finally.

Tiny age-lines were evident around her hazel eyes whenever she smiled or crinkled up her nose, but a few expert touches of Covergirl foundation and you couldn't even tell they were there. Queen Latifah would've been

proud.

As for the rest of her, Angel supposed she'd weathered the storm of the advancing years as much as could be hoped for. Her nose was cute enough: small and slightly upturned. She had a tiny dimple in both of her cheeks, smooth, full lips and straight white teeth. All her life she'd been told that her smile marked her best feature.

*My body's holding up OK, too,*

she thought, craning around her neck to see how her butt looked in her new skirt. Not too bad for a thirty-six-year-old. Not too much junk in the trunk yet, so that was certainly a good thing. But she'd really need to start taking it easy on the Hershey bars if she wanted to keep it that way.

Angel scanned the rest of her

physical checklist while she applied her lipstick: flat stomach; somewhat-tapered legs; reasonably pert breasts, although not especially big.

Unlike Beatrice Patterson and her ridiculously huge bazooms. The hussy.

Angel shuddered again at the thought that she'd managed to outrun on the jogging path. Thinking about Beatrice and Malachai together really

*did* make her want to throw up, but at the moment she had much more important things to worry about. After all, twenty-two-year-old Rhodes scholars didn't go missing for no good reason, and Angel wasn't kidding herself into thinking that finding Sasha Diggs would be an easy payday.

Finishing up in the bathroom a couple minutes later, she flipped off the

light switch near the door and followed the smell of percolating coffee into the kitchen, where she found Granny Bernice scrambling eggs with a steel whisk in a large porcelain bowl. True to her baseball-junkie form, Angel's grandmother was listening to *Mike & Mike in the Morning* recap the Indians' latest loss on ESPN Radio, a half-smoked Newport hanging casually from the right side of her mouth.

“Those things are going to kill you, Granny Bernice,” Angel said. “Kill. You. Dead.”

When her grandmother turned around to face her, Angel felt a sudden flutter in the pit of her stomach. More like a vicious punch in the gut, actually. Because for the first time in her life she found herself thinking that her grandmother looked *old*.

Granny Bernice had always been a robust woman – there was no debating that simple fact – but at sixty-four years old now with at least a hundred and fifty pounds of extra fat hugging her five-foot-six frame, even the simple act of cooking breakfast was enough to cause a light sheen of sweat to break out on her forehead these days. In the unforgiving morning light that was streaming in



through the small window above the kitchen sink, the thinning silver hair on Granny Bernice's head looked sparser and more brittle than Angel remembered, and not even the excess weight in the old woman's face was enough to hide the wrinkles anymore. Worst of all, the low, wheezing sound that was coming from deep within Granny Bernice's massive chest did absolutely *nothing* to lessen Angel's very real concerns about

the condition of her grandmother's health.

Granny Bernice removed the Newport from her lips with a soft cough and flicked a long line of ashes into a cheap plastic ashtray sitting on the counter. "You a doctor now?" she asked with a smile.

Angel didn't smile back. "No, I'm not a doctor, Granny Bernice. But I

*can* read. And the warning on the side of that box pretty clearly states that those things will kill you dead.”

Her grandmother rolled her eyes but humored Angel by stubbing out the cigarette. Wiping her hands against the front of the red-and-white-checkered *Kiss the Chef* apron tied around her thick neck, she held them up for inspection. “There. All gone, see? You happy now, Little Miss Cranky Pants?”

When Angel didn't immediately respond, her grandmother's smile finally faltered.

“Look, Angel,” Granny Bernice said, shifting her weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other. “I know they ain't good for me, but every time I try to quit I just end up feelin' more miserable than I do when I'm smokin' 'em. It's a Catch-22, honey, if you wanna know the

whole truth.”

“Catch-22 or not it’s time to eighty-six the goddamn habit, Granny Bernice,” Angel snapped, the words coming out much sharper than she’d intended.

Her grandmother stared at her for a long moment before slowly turning her attention back to the eggs.

Angel, of course, immediately felt like a complete asshole for the way

she'd just spoken to her grandmother.  
And why *shouldn't* she feel like a  
complete asshole? Who the hell was  
*she* to say anything to this woman who'd  
spent her entire life going without just so  
Angel could have whatever she needed?  
Had Angel ever gone hungry? Cold?  
Scared?

No, she hadn't. *And it's all  
because of that saint over there you*

*just yelled at, jackass.*

She crossed the kitchen and came up behind her grandmother, placing both of her hands lightly on the old woman's shoulders. "Look," Angel said, "you don't need those cigarettes, Granny Bernice. They're just a crutch. Hell, half the time you don't even inhale."

When her grandmother turned around to face her again, the deep, wheezing sound inside her lungs

reminded Angel of a slowly deflating balloon. “You’re absolutely right, baby girl,” Granny Bernice said, reaching up and softly patting her granddaughter’s right cheek. “You’re absolutely right and I’m absolutely wrong. It’s just as simple as that. Plain as the nose right here in the middle of my face. Smoking’s a nasty habit and I’m gonna quit right now. Right this instant.”



Angel raised a perfectly plucked eyebrow. “That makes me happy to hear, Granny Bernice, but you’d better be serious about it this time. I’m worried about you, you know.”

Upon hearing this, Angel’s grandmother’s face immediately broke out into a wide smile that lit up the room like a sunburst, allowing Angel a quick glimpse of the beautiful woman she’d

once been. “Well now, if that don’t just beat all! You takin’ care of me now! Okay, girly – that works for me!”

Angel smiled back. “Good. It works for me too.”

“So does this mean we can be friends again, or are we just gonna spend our whole mornin’ harpin’ at each other like a couple old biddies?”

Angel laughed and finally felt the tension drain from her neck and

shoulders. Taking her grandmother's beautiful face in f her hands, she looked deep into the old woman's soft hazel eyes – eyes that were practically identical to her own. “We’re always going to be friends, Granny Bernice. You look out for me and I look out for you too. That’s why we’re the perfect team.”

“Best friends forever,” Granny

Bernice said.

Angel nodded. “That’s absolutely right. Best friends forever. Besides, who *else* would put up with us, right?”

Both women laughed.

Her grandmother gave Angel’s shoulder a quick squeeze before glancing up at the plastic clock hanging on the kitchen wall over the garbage can. “Got time for breakfast, honey?”

she asked.

Angel followed her grandmother's gaze to the clock. Almost eight a.m. If she wanted to catch Razor Diggs while he'd still be in bed, she'd have to leave now. "Sorry, not today, Granny Bernice," she said. "I want to get an early start on this case."

Her grandmother nodded. "OK, but you just be careful out there, Angel

Monroe. I worry about you too, you know. I love you more than I love life itself, little girl, and I don't know what I'd do with myself if anything ever happened to you. Probably die of a broken heart right then and there on the spot."

Sentimental fool that she was, Angel immediately felt her eyes well up at that. Kissing her grandmother softly on both of her plump cheeks, she gave

Granny Bernice a long, meaningful hug before leaving the house. “That’s why we’re always going to be best friends forever, Granny Bernice.

“Because you love me and I love you, too.”





## CHAPTER 10

Twenty-five-year-old Laura

Settle stared at the huge stack of papers piled up high on her desk in front of her and sighed heavily. The stack never seemed to get any smaller, no matter how many hours of overtime she put in or how many case files she took home with her at the end of each exhausting workday.

Laura sighed again, even more

deeply this time, sagging her slender shoulders in defeat. The higher in rank she rose at the District Attorney's office, the larger her workload seemed to get. She'd only just graduated from law school the previous spring, but already she found herself one of the most senior assistant D.A.'s in the building. Sticking around longer than just a few months had certainly precipitated her quick rise

through the ranks, of course, but she felt confident that she'd received the necessary training back at Harvard to keep her rising even higher. Hell, who knew? Maybe one of these days she'd even become the district attorney herself. The head honcho. The big cheese. If nothing else, though, she knew she'd eventually find her place in the world here.

What was more, she actually

*needed* to find her place in the world here now. Because it wasn't just herself that she had to look out for anymore.

The turnover rate at the D.A.'s office was staggering, however, even for a bustling metropolis like New York City. Most of Laura's younger colleagues had quickly forsaken public defense in favor of more-lucrative private practices scattered all around the

country just as soon as the opportunities had presented themselves. Still, she felt happy enough in New York doing the work of the people. She only wished that she could have been in court more, instead of endlessly pushing papers across her desk on the eightieth floor of a downtown high-rise.

When the clock neared nine p.m. an hour later, she finally rose from her seat and collected her things. That was

enough for today. Besides, she had a dinner date at nine-thirty that she didn't want to be late for.

Laura smiled to herself. She'd met Michael Timmons during a ridiculous speed-dating event that her mother had convinced her to attend. She'd felt goofy the entire she'd sat there – until Michael had settled into the chair across the table from her.

He'd had ninety seconds to state his case.

“Hi, my name is Michael,” he'd said. “I write books for a living. Personally, I don't think I'm very good at it, but somehow I've managed to pull the wool over the publishing industry's eyes. No accounting for taste, I guess.”

Laura had laughed at that, immediately feeling at ease in his

presence. Something about Michael's easygoing nature took the nervousness right out of her *own* chest – and any way you sliced the bread that was an *extremely* attractive quality in a man. “What kind of books do you write, Michael?” she'd asked.

The handsome blonde thirty-something had shifted uncomfortably in his seat and cleared his throat, and Laura had empathized with him at once. And



why not? After all, if ever there'd been a pair of hot seats, these two definitely fit the bill. "Well," he'd said, "I write murder mysteries, mostly. Excellent therapy when you live in the city, I find."

As she'd watched his adorable dimples flicker in and out right along with his nervous smile, Laura had immediately decided – right then and there – that she'd help the charming

writer work on a romance novel next. Who knew? If everything went well for them, it might even turn out to be their own personal love story. And that goal wasn't a bad foal for which to shoot, now was it?

Nope wasn't not a bad goal to shoot for, at all.

After penciling in his name on her scorecard, they'd exchanged phone numbers at the end of the night and the

rest, as they said, had been history.

They'd been dating for four months now, and Michael had hinted at the possibility of them dating a lot longer. Like, maybe even *forever*. Laura only hoped that the news she'd share with him tonight wouldn't make him change his mind about all that.

Her flesh tightened at the skin-stitching memory. The little blue cross

on the plastic stick that she'd peed on had preceded a frantic trip to the doctor's office, where an elderly gynecologist with a long, jagged scar running down his left cheek had confirmed the news that Laura was with child for a hell of a lot more than the fifteen bucks she'd spent at CVS.

Out in the lobby of the D.A.'s office, she smiled a quick goodbye at the security guard and punched the button on

the elevator for the ground floor. Three minutes later, the doors opened up and she stepped inside.

Riding an elevator in a New York City skyscraper wasn't quite like riding an elevator anywhere else in the country. Sometimes it might take as long as ten minutes to get all the way down to the street because of all the frequent stops.

Laura's companions to start the trip were an old woman and two men in dark blue business suits.

On the forty-third floor, the old woman got off and two more suits got on. Ninety seconds later, one of the suits exited on the twenty-ninth floor, followed by two more suits on the eighteenth, leaving just Laura and a handsome young man dressed in a Pierre

Cardin ensemble left in the elevator car.

The young man looked over at her and smiled as he punched the button to exit on the eighth floor. The doors slid open, but he allowed them to close again before hitting the STOP button and turning back to face her with an embarrassed look coloring in his features. “Oops, sorry about that. Almost forgot I had to kill you, nigger.”

Laura’s confused brain didn’t

process the statement until it was already too late. “*Excuse me?*”

The man smiled sheepishly at her and withdrew a long knife from the inside pocket of his expensive suit jacket.

“Sorry, nigger, but I’m afraid I’m gonna have to cut out that disgusting baby from your stomach, too. Nothing personal. This here’s just business to



me— and I just so happen to be in the business of getting America back to where it needs to be.”



# CHAPTER 11

Finally – blissfully – Shelley Margolis wrapped up the seemingly never-ending interview with Dana concerning her suitability as a prospective adoptive parent for Bradley two and a half long hours after it had begun.

Margolis had promised to call her in a day or two after talking over the matter with the agency's board of

directors. God only knew what the child-care advocates would talk about after everything Dana had revealed during the interview, but she doubted that murders, rapes and shooting deaths in the line of duty constituted everyday fare for the stuffed shirts.

Then again, who knew? Maybe they did. Lord knew there were more than enough sick people in the world

who didn't think twice before hurting kids. Just ask Casey Anthony about that much.

Dana's mind was still spinning as she drove back across town to her office in the federal building on Lakeshore Avenue in downtown Cleveland. She wasn't scheduled to work today, but she needed something to take her mind off the meeting with Margolis, needed to lose herself in the

muck of someone else's life for a little while rather than in the muck of her own.

Sadly, though, to do that first she'd need a new case, and her docket had been wiped as clean as a whistle following the culmination of the Censor case a week earlier – a case that had seen her blow off the top of the killer's head in a crowded baseball stadium

while the horrified crowd had stampeded toward the exits screaming in terror. When the dust had finally cleared and all of the shooting had finally stopped, the bloodthirsty murderer's severed scalp lay in a bloody pile of shredded flesh more than fifty feet away from where it had initially begun, finally coming to a gentle, rolling stop beside the foul line along the third-base side of the baseball diamond. Still, Dana knew

that the lull in activity likely wouldn't last for long. Never did in the FBI.

Nodding nodded at one of her fellow agents as she walked down a long hallway to her office on the fourteenth floor and pushing open her office door a moment later, she'd just settled down into the chair behind her desk when a knock sounded at her door.

“Agent Whitestone?”



Dana looked up to see a tall man around her own age standing in her doorway. His sandy brown hair had been cut in such a fashion to immediately let her know that he was a fellow member of Bureau. Wasn't all that difficult to spot one of your own. "Yes?" she asked, rising to her feet.

The man smiled and crossed into her office, extending his right hand

across the desk. “Hi, there,” he said.  
“I’m Bruce Blankenship.”

Dana smiled back tentatively as she shook his hand but didn’t say anything right away.

“I’m your new partner.”

Dana pulled back her hand in surprise. She just couldn’t help herself. Rude or not, she couldn’t have been any more shocked if Nathan Stiedowe had just breezed into her office and told her

the exact same thing.

She creased her lips into a frown. “My new partner?” she asked.

Blankenship nodded. “Yep. I’m your new partner, all right. Ready to do all sorts of partner-y type things with you, too. Catch us some bad guys. Put away some killers. Maybe even drink a little coffee together if we can find the time.”

When Dana again didn't immediately respond, he lifted his eyebrows into twin brown question marks on his forehead. "Don't tell me that Bill Krugman didn't tell you about this."

Dana shook her head. "No. As a matter of fact, he didn't."

She paused and searched her memory to make sure that she'd just told

Blankenship the truth. The man known to everybody in the FBI simply by his title of “the Director” had mentioned at one point during the Censor case that he might bring in Blankenship from Nebraska as backup for Dana, but as far as she knew nothing had been made official. Then again, Krugman hadn’t exactly had time to pass along his decision to her, now had he? Because shortly after the Director’s suggestion

that he might pair up her and Blankenship, Dana had fled down to Florida following her brutal rape in the parking lot of the coroner's office in an effort to lose herself in the crowds of suntanned tourists dotting the sandy beaches. Ultimately, Florida had actually been the place where she'd *found* herself again, but life was funny like that sometimes, wasn't it?

Sure as hell was. Damn shame there was no humor in it most of the time.

Dana shook her head again and finally remembered her manners. She might have been raised in six different foster homes, but not a single one of them had been a barn. She motioned to a chair on the other side of her desk. “Please sit down, Agent Blankenship,”

she said. “Can I get you something to drink?”

Blankenship shook his head and pulled back the sleeve on his navy-blue blazer, glancing down at the Timex watch strapped around his left wrist without sitting down. “No, thanks. As a matter of fact, you and I need to get going. We’ve got a plane that we need to catch in exactly thirty-eight minutes.”

Dana stared at him across her



desk. “What the hell are you talking about? Where are we going?”

Blankenship pressed his lips into a tight line. “New York City. Murder of a young lawyer out there that the Director thinks might be connected to a white-supremacist hate-group. Krugman said that he wants us to go out there personally and check things out. Do you need to pick up anything before we

leave?”

Blindsided, Dana swept her gaze quickly across the small space of her office and took a hasty visual inventory: a picture of her parents; a small plaque from the FBI in recognition for work on the Cleveland Slasher case; a Cleveland Indians bobblehead doll. “No,” she said, “nothing I can think of.”

“Great. Ready to go then?”

Dana looked around her office

again. This time her eyes didn't process any of the decorations on the shelves or walls. Her eyeballs were much too busy popping out of her face with shock. Finally slipping the strap of her leather briefcase over her left shoulder, she nodded. "I guess so."

“Awesome. Then let's get a move-on.”

Dana shook her head in utter

disbelief as she and Blankenship rode the elevator down to the ground floor before crossing the parking lot and hopping inside her Protégé for the short trip over to Hopkins International Airport. The lull in activity in the FBI never lasted too long, did it?

Nope, never lasted too long, at all.

And thank God for that much.



## CHAPTER 12

Amy Winehouse on the CD player, Angel eased her twelve-year-old Cabriolet out of the driveway and hit Interstate 90 for ten minutes before getting off at the West 25<sup>th</sup> Street exit and heading downtown.

In the 1990s, Cleveland had been nicknamed “The Renaissance City” due to its dramatic and highly successful urban-renewal efforts (one of the long-

suffering                      town's *only*                      flattering  
nicknames), but in the past ten years or  
so Cleveland had managed to slip right  
back into the same ugly, gloomy mess of  
never-ending construction and boarded-  
up storefronts that had marked its time in  
the 1970s as one of the most-depressed  
big cities in the country. As far as pure  
aesthetics went, Angel didn't kid herself  
into thinking they were ahead of even

Kansas City on that count anymore.

Having skipped breakfast with Granny Bernice this morning, her stomach was growling louder than the Cabriolet's engine now, so she pulled into a Dairy Mart on the corner of St. Claire and Piedmont to grab a bran muffin and a quick cup of coffee before embarking upon the unenviable task of tracking down Razor Diggs. After all, when seeking out a murderous



psychopath like him, it always proved helpful to do so on a full stomach.

What happened next shouldn't have come as a surprise to her, because even the simplest things in her life had never *really* been simple, had they? Still, it managed to slam her across the forehead with the sheer blunt force of an aluminum baseball bat cracking into a cinder block.

She'd just poured herself a large, steaming cup of wake-up juice at the serve-yourself counter and was busy trying to avoid burning the shit out of her wrists while she fitted the plastic cap over the Styrofoam cup when a loud cough abruptly sounded directly behind her. Spinning around to trace the source of the noise, Angel almost dropped her coffee on the floor.

There stood Malachai Grimes, holding his own insulated cup of java and looking like a million bucks. Maybe even two million. Clean-shaven and bright-eyed, he'd slipped his lean, six-foot-two frame into an immaculately pressed, double-breasted Brooks Brothers suit today, looking for all the world like he'd just stepped out of a Starbucks ad on the glossy pages of *GQ*

magazine.

Angel's heart immediately leapt up into her throat and began taking vicious potshots at her carotid artery. She wasn't at all ashamed to admit that she wasn't happy to see Malachai like this. After all, any woman worth her vagina would tell you that there were very few things in this life more depressing than running into an ex who looked like he had the world by the tail.

Truth be told, they wanted to see their former flames looking all run-down and bleary-eyed, like they hadn't been getting much sleep lately.

Like the thought of losing their supposed soul mates actually *mattered* to the cheating bastards.

Several long seconds passed before Angel managed to recover from the initial shock of seeing him there. But

when she finally did she didn't bother trying to disguise the utter *contempt* in her voice. "Leftover remnants of that nasty flu bug, lover boy?" she asked harshly.

Malachai dropped his stare to the floor and kicked at a stray piece of paper with one of his shiny black dress shoes. "I've been wanting to talk to you about that, Angel," he said. "I've been calling you all week but you never

answer your goddamn phone.”

Angel stared at him, not believing her ears. Why the hell did cheating men always try to turn things around and make the *woman* feel guilty about it? Like it was *their* fault somehow?

Uh-uh. Not kosher. Wasn't happening. Not today, anyway. Not with this chick.

The icy tone of her voice was enough to give her teeth frostbite. “First of all,” she said coldly, “I’d really appreciate it if you wouldn’t swear at me, Malachai. There’s absolutely no need for it. Second of all, does it really surprise you that I don’t answer your calls? Why don’t you give Beatrice Patterson a ring if you really need someone to talk to that bad? I’m sure



she'd be more than happy to discuss anything you'd like."

Malachai stepped past her and placed his coffee down onto the prep counter next to the burners, the musky scent of his cologne drifting up into her nostrils and making her feel dizzy as he passed. *Woods* by Abercrombie & Fitch. He knew it was her favorite, and that only made her hate the son of a bitch that much worse.

“Angel, I’m sorry...” he began.

She cut him off with a stormy look before he could continue. “I don’t want to hear it, Malachai. Sorry is just another sorry-ass word coming out of your mouth. It’s completely empty. It has absolutely no meaning at all.”

She lowered her shoulder and tried to move past him, but Malachai shuffled his feet and blocked her path.

“Aren’t we even going to talk about this, Angel?”

“No, we’re not.”

“So that’s it for us then?”

Angel looked past him and out the store window to where her Cabriolet was parked. “Guess so.”

For as long as Angel could remember, the easiest way to tell if Malachai was upset about something was by simply watching his nose. Sure

enough, his nostrils flared for the briefest of moments before he stepped past her again and plucked his coffee off the prep counter.

“If that’s the way it has to be, then I guess that’s just the way it has to be,” he said. “But I love you, Angel. You know that.”

“Well, maybe you should’ve thought about that before you stuck your

dick in Beatrice Patterson last weekend.”

The sudden anger in his voice caught Angel completely off-guard. “I *did* think about it, Angel. That’s the whole fucking point. So if you ever decide to come down off that high horse of yours, why don’t you give me a call sometime? If not, fuck you too.”

And with that, he stormed right past her and out the front door, leaving

Angel standing there open-mouthed in the middle of a downtown convenience store wondering what the hell had just happened.

One thing was for sure: Whatever idiot first said it was better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all didn't have the faintest goddamn clue of what they'd been talking about.

And they sure as *shit* had never  
dated Malachai Grimes.





## CHAPTER 13

Breathing in deeply enough to fill his lungs to capacity, the Race Master smiled contentedly. He'd always considered the woods in New England to be among the most beautiful in the world, mostly because the land here remained pure and unsullied by the encroachment of industry. Perhaps the only locations that could match the splendor here were in Sweden and, of

course, his native Germany.

The Race Master's heart twinged in his chest at the thought of his beloved homeland. Though he'd left the Fatherland behind as a young man, he still carried it around with him wherever he went. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 had precipitated the ugly influx of niggers and hordes of other undesirables, making the painful

decision to leave Germany a bit easier, but only marginally so. Still, he knew that if you wanted to get anything done these days, you needed to get it done in America.

And what better place than the United States to make the point that he was currently trying to make? By not controlling its borders properly, the country known around the world as “the melting pot” had turned into a disgusting,

homogenous goop where you could hardly tell the race of one brown mongrel from the next. Worse, the rest of the world had begun to follow suit – following America's lead just as it always did, allowing itself to be led around by the nose like the mindless puppy dog it consented to being. And that needed to change. *Now.* And the Race Master considered himself just the

man to change it. The shortsighted world could thank him later on for his efforts – if and when it ever smartened up enough to ever thank him at all.

As was their morning custom, he and Bane were enjoying a walk along the babbling creek that ran directly through the heart of the Race Master's twenty thousand acres in rural Massachusetts. Their morning constitutional had always marked the

favorite part of the Race Master's day, providing him with an all-too-rare opportunity to unwind. To clear his mind. To reset his thinking. And to reflect upon the events of the previous twenty-four hours.

Though the day had broken clear and hot across the cloudless blue sky and the temperature outside had already surged past ninety-five degrees on the

mercury, the leafy trees overhead shielded them quite nicely from the intense summer heat as he and Bane made their way deeper into the beautiful woods.

The Race Master took in another deep lungful of air through his nostrils and let out his breath again in a satisfied rush over his perfectly straight white teeth. He *loved* the land here. Unlike most of the rest of the country, the

niggers had yet to gain a strong foothold in Massachusetts. The Jews were a completely different story altogether, of course, but he knew that he needed to approach his sacred mission one step at a time if he wanted to get it done the right way. He'd learned that lesson from none other than Adolf Hitler himself. The *Fuhrer* had badly overextended himself in his quest to purify the world



in the 1930s and 1940s, and that had proved to be the great man's greatest mistake. If Hitler had just taken things one step at a time, the world might have been a very different place today. A *better* place.

The Race Master's two-way Nextel phone suddenly chirped in his pocket, knocking him out of his thoughts. Frowning angrily, he dug it out and lifted the receiver to his mouth. "What is it,

Josef?” he barked. “I’m busy here.”

Sullivan cleared his throat on the other end of the line. “The mission, sir. It was accomplished late last night.”

A hot jolt of adrenaline ripped through the Race Master’s veins at the welcome sound of Sullivan’s words, setting every last nerve-ending in his body on *fire* with excitement. No matter how old or how jaded he got, the news

of a dead mongrel would always exhilarate him. “And the operative, Josef?” he asked quickly.

“Took a header off the Queensboro Bridge about an hour ago, sir. At least, that’s how the news outlets are reporting it.”

The Race Master flipped off his phone and tucked it back into his pocket, letting out a soft sigh of resignation as he did so. As much as he loved purifying

the world, he absolutely *hated* losing good men. Still, he knew that it marked a necessary precaution in his line of work. Though he employed a number of go-betweens to act as shields between himself and the authorities, there was always a slight possibility that one of them would point out the trail that eventually led back to him, and that was a chance he simply couldn't afford to

take. His work here was much too important, his mission too vital. To purify his race, a few of its best members would have to die for the cause. A hard truth, perhaps, but a simple one nonetheless.

At his feet, Bane abruptly froze in his tracks at the sound of something rustling around in the underbrush twenty yards to their right, trembling in place like a living statue, every muscle in its

powerful body tensed and ready for action. Once again – just as had been the case back in the den earlier in the day – long strings of sticky drool dripped down from Bane’s sharp white fangs.

The Race Master looked down at the dog and smiled. “*Angriff*, Bane!” he ordered. *Attack!*

In the blink of an eye, the *Presa*

exploded into the underbrush and emerged a moment later with a small white hare caught between his mighty jaws. The rabbit emitted a tortured, high-pitched scream that filled the woods all around them as it struggled frantically to escape Bane's powerful mouth but it was no use. The dog shook its muscular neck once, violently snapping the other animal's spine. Blood from a severed jugular vein

spurted across the forest floor, a fine red mist of it spraying across the tops of the Race Master's expensive Italian shoes.

The Race Master looked down at his feet, then back at the enormous dog. And then he smiled again.

“Well *done*, Bane,” he said, nodding his head vigorously in approval. “Very well done indeed, my friend.”





## CHAPTER 14

Dana and Bruce Blankenship had the requisite “getting-to-know-you” chat on the hour-and-a-half-long plane ride out to New York City.

Thankfully, their conversation turned out to be the exact opposite of the brutal third-degree to which Dana had been subjected earlier in the day in the oak-paneled confines of Dr. Shelley Margolis’s impeccably maintained

office suite in Parma.

As Dana buckled herself into her seat and adjusted her lap belt, she tried her best to not think about the fact that not only was the DC-10 in which she and Blankenship would be flying today the exact same model of plane as the one in which she and Bradley had been flying when their worlds had changed forever the previous May, but also that

this trip represented just her third time in the air since the horrific crash that had claimed the life of poor Bradley's mother.

“So,” Dana said, letting out a soft sigh relief once the aircraft had finally lifted off safely and they were cruising along at an altitude of thirty thousand feet. “Tell me about yourself, Agent Blankenship. From all reports, you're something of a technological

genius. Is that true?”

Blankenship smiled modestly, and Dana couldn't help but notice the slight chip in one of his front teeth. No doubt it had come courtesy of the balled-up fist of some random bad guy out there, but this minor flaw in his appearance didn't detract in the least little bit from the agent's good looks. Quite the opposite, actually. If Dana had

to compare him to a celebrity, she most likely would have picked Mark Harmon.

“Well, Agent Whitestone,” Blankenship said, shifting in his window seat in order to face her more directly. “I guess you could say that I know my way around a circuit board. I was a computer science major at M.I.T. back in the days when Apple *IIs* were all the rage. I do my best to stay up-to-date on

all the latest developments, though. Try not to get too far behind the times.”

Dana lifted her eyebrows, duly impressed. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology was one of the finest technical schools in the entire country. You didn't need to be a *complete* egghead to get into the place, but it didn't hurt your chances if you were. “A Massachusetts boy, huh?” she asked.

“Connecticut, actually.”

“Same difference.”

Blankenship laughed. “Yeah, but thankfully I didn’t get saddled with the accent. *I nevah pahked my cah in Hahvad Yahd*, if that’s what you want to know.” He paused thoughtfully. “I do like a nice cup of *chowdah* every now and then, *howevah*. Even had a girlfriend named *Heathuh* in high school



who used to get wicked pissed off at me all the time for the smallest things, hey.”

Dana giggled at Blankenship’s dead-on reproduction of a thick Boston accent. His easygoing manner was just what she needed after her very difficult morning. She glanced down at the simple gold wedding band on his left ring finger. “How long have you been married?” she asked.

Blankenship lifted his left hand

and studied his modest jewelry.

“Fourteen years next April. Best eighty years of my life so far.”

Dana smiled. “Fellow insider?”

Blankenship shook his head.

“Hell, no. Madison’s a civilian. I really don’t think I could survive a relationship with someone from the Bureau. I already bring enough work home with me as it is, you know what I

mean? Don't need it crawling into bed with me at the end of the night."

Dana nodded. She knew *exactly* what Blankenship meant. It had been precisely the reason why she and her former partner, Jeremy Brown, had cooled their heels on their own romance prior to Jeremy's horrifying death in the line of duty eighteen months earlier. "Makes sense," Dana said, shifting her thoughts away from Jeremy, at least for

now. Thinking about her former partner's death just still hurt too much for her to deal with right now. Probably *would* hurt too much for her to deal with for a very long time to come – if not forever. “Any kids?” she asked, steering the conversation around to a pleasanter direction.

Blankenship smiled again. Unabashed pride lit up his handsome

face. “Yes, ma’am,” he said. “Twin girls. Sixteen months old.”

“Got a picture?”

Blankenship nodded and leaned forward in his seat. Digging out his wallet from his back pocket, he flipped it open and an accordion-like length of plastic unfurled eight inches, each square slot filled with a different photograph. “Got about ninety million of them,” he said. “Have a look for

yourself. Nothing in this world I like more than bragging about my little girls.”

Dana studied the long row of pictures featuring two of the most adorable little girls she’d ever laid eyes on in her entire life. “Oh my God,” she breathed. “They’re absolutely precious. What are their names?”

“Olivia and Sydney,” Blankenship said, still beaming. He

pointed to the little girl on the left-hand side of one of the photographs. “Olivia’s the older of the two. Beat her little sister into the world by four minutes and six seconds, and I have no doubt that she’ll hold that technicality over Sydney’s head for the rest of their natural-born lives.”

Dana shook her head in wonderment, still admiring her new partner’s children. “Unbelievable,” she

said. “They’re like two little angels.  
Are they in Cleveland yet?”

Blankenship folded up the  
photograph slots and flipped closed his  
wallet again before returning it to his  
back pocket. “Nope, not yet.  
Everybody’s still back in Omaha. I’m  
still looking for a place for us to live.”

He paused and shook his head,  
letting out a frustrated breath over his



teeth. “With the way the Director’s got us running around already, I just hope that’s something I can accomplish before Christmastime rolls around.”

Dana pressed her lips into a sympathetic line, but Blankenship chased away the look of concern on her face with a quick wave of his hand. “Anyway,” he said, “enough about me already. Tell me about yourself, Agent Whitestone. Tell me about your former

partners. I might have to pick their brains regarding the best way to stay on your good side. After all, it's not every day that you get paired up with the female Eliot Ness of the FBI. I need to stay on my *Ps* and *Qs* here and dot all of my *Is* and cross all of my *Ts*. And probably some other stupid alphabet clichés that I can't think of right now."

Dana rolled her eyes at the

mention of her supposed celebrity, but her stomach clenched at Blankenship's inquiry into the status of her former partners.

As for her celebrity, the previous year – much to her chagrin – she'd been featured on the covers of *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report* for her supposedly sterling work in helping bring down the Chessboard Killers and another murderous serial

killer the press had dubbed “the Cleveland Slasher”. The exact same serial killer who’d turned out to have been her own half-brother. Dana was mildly surprised to learn that Blankenship didn’t seem familiar with the cases, because not only had the press driven those stories into the ground right beside all of the dead bodies that had come along with them, during those

investigations she'd lost both of her previous partners – Crawford Bell and Jeremy Brown – in the bloodiest of possible fashions.

Not quite sure how to bring Blankenship up to speed, she just came straight out with it. Her new partner's face blanched while she related all the sickening details. “Jesus Christ,” Blankenship said when she'd finished.

Dana smiled without humor.

“Yep. Not the guy I blame for everything that went down, but I still can’t quite figure out why He didn’t step in at some point during all the madness and put a stop to it.”

Blankenship pursed his lips.

“I’m so sorry to hear that, Dana. That really sucks.”

Dana sighed. “Yeah, it really does suck.”

For a long time after that, neither she nor Blankenship said another word, both of them drifting off into their own thoughts. Twenty minutes later, though, from the corner of her right eye, Dana watched Blankenship remove his wallet from his back pocket again to study the pictures of his two little girls more closely.

She smiled softly, not blaming

Blankenship in the least little bit for his obvious sentimentality. After all, there were some things in this life more important than work, some things in this life more important than doing constant battle with the sick and twisted dregs of society that liked nothing better than to hurt the weak and innocent. As a matter of fact, Dana could think of three of those subjects straight off the top of her head.



Their names were Olivia,  
Sydney and Bradley Thomas Taylor.

          She let out a quiet breath that she hoped Blankenship couldn't hear. If nothing else, she knew that she'd need to be a lot more careful out there from here on out if she wanted to become Bradley's mother. She *owed* it to the boy. Hell, she owed it to *herself*. She couldn't afford to go running off half-

cocked anymore with no absolutely zero regard for her personal safety should she be lucky enough to add Bradley to her life, someone who actually depended on her staying *alive*.

When their plane finally touched down with a bone-jarring bump at La Guardia airport in New York City an hour later, an electric jolt of panic bolted through Dana's heart, her mind flashing back to the horrific plane crash

she and Bradley had been in the previous May. She shook her head briefly at her own jumpiness, but then she immediately decided to cut herself a little slack. And why not? To put it mildly, she hadn't exactly had the best luck in the world when it had come to planes lately, now had she? No, she hadn't. Then again, when had been the last time that she'd been lucky with

*anything* in her life?

It had been a while, to say the least.

Blankenship unbuckled his safety belt and turned in his seat to face her when the aircraft came to a gentle, rolling stop thirty seconds later. “Ready to go nab us some bad guys?” he asked.

Dana unbuckled her own seatbelt and nodded. “Ready as I’ll ever be, I guess. Let’s go do this.”

She paused as she gathered up her things. Almost as an afterthought, she added, “Try not to get us killed out there, OK, Agent Blankenship? I’d like to live long enough to actually see my next birthday, and I just might have somebody out there who’s depending on me to stay alive.”

Blankenship smiled grimly at her. “That’s weird. I was just about to

tell you the same thing myself, Agent  
Whitestone.”



## CHAPTER 15

Angel paid for her coffee and forced herself to not analyze Malachai's parting shot as she left the store.

No matter how much she loved the asshole – or *thought* she loved him – he just wasn't worth her time anymore. Besides, she had other, far more *important* things that she needed to worry about at the moment. One little slip-up and it could be curtains for her.



*Hasta la vista*, baby. Sayonara, sweetheart. All that stupid shit. Razor Diggs and his boys didn't fuck around.

Although Razor Diggs usually had a battalion of murderous gangbangers watching his back at all hours of the night, none of them ever rolled their sorry asses out of bed before noon, so Angel felt reasonably confident about her chances of catching him alone.

She shook her head in confusion while she drove over to the east side of Cleveland. Much as it would have made things easier on her, though, she had trouble believing that even a shitbird like Razor Diggs would stoop low enough to kidnap his own daughter. What would be the point? What *purpose* would it serve? Jelani Diggs had said he didn't even know that Sasha was his.

Still, he represented the most logical place to start.

Razor's turf lay just east of downtown; a hard, threatening area of the city that seemed a million miles away from where she and Granny Bernice lived on the west side. It was also an extremely ugly place; cold and gray even in the middle of yet another record-breaking summer of soaring

temperatures.

The tenement apartment buildings lining both sides of Razor's street pulsed with a malevolence you just couldn't find anywhere else in Cleveland. Nobody ever paid rent in this section of town. The slumlords – all of them white – would've been paid in bullets if they'd ever dared ask. They never did, of course – which probably constituted a smart business move for

them if they were in the business of actually staying alive.

To the untrained eye, Razor's building appeared almost indiscernible from all of the other square gray buildings surrounding it, but his mint-condition, cherry-red 1964 Impala marked his territory every bit as effectively as the "Tara" sign in *Gone With The Wind*.

A pair of dented silver trashcans overflowed with rotting garbage on the curb out front, dozens of fat black flies buzzing around them as they enjoyed an insect version of a Chinese buffet. Shattered windows smiled out from the unattractive face of the structure like a hockey player's broken teeth. The few stray patches of brown grass that remained on the lawn were in the

process of being strangled to death by the aggressive weeds moving in. A case of the environment taking on the personality of its inhabitants, Angel supposed.

One thing that wasn't rundown, however, was Razor's car. Not by a long shot. It looked totally out of place in the midst of all this crippling poverty – all chromed out and equipped with hydraulic shocks to make it bounce up

and down while he weaved his way through the city streets like a conquering king. Angel doubted the vehicle was even locked, though. Everybody knew whom the car belonged to, and that was a bigger deterrent to thieves than any Lo-Jack system ever could have hoped to be. After all, a fresh new ride just wasn't worth having your entire body riddled with bullets, now was it?



Parking the Cabriolet directly behind the Impala in an effort to block the gangster's exit should he try to make a run for it, she exited her own vehicle and walked the few feet across the barren lawn to a front door that was hanging by its last remaining hinge. She opened the door carefully, trying to minimize the creaking as she stuck her head inside, surprised as hell to find that

the door didn't come off in her hand.

More garbage lined the staircase leading up to the second floor where Razor lived: empty bottles of St. Ide's malt liquor; blue condom wrappers; even a few stray bullet casings.

Angel's hand went instinctively around to the back of her skirt. The feel of her .45 tucked snugly against the small of her back made her feel better, but only marginally so.

The stairwell smelled of urine and broken dreams. She would've covered her mouth and nose against the nauseating odor, but she wanted to keep both of her hands free for whatever might be coming next.

The thought had no sooner crossed her mind before rough hands suddenly grabbed her from behind, lifting her sensible, inch-high heels two

feet off the steps. Her kicking feet danced frantically in the air as someone very strong yanked her backward hard by her hair and slammed her skull violently forward again into the cracked concrete wall.

The lights in Angel's world flickered briefly, then blinked completely off.

Cue all the little birdies.



# CHAPTER 16

An hour after his invigorating walk in the beautiful New England woods with Bane, the Race Master kicked back in his comfortable leather office chair and relaxed in his fine den while the huge dog slept peacefully at his feet and the graceful sounds of Tchaikovsky's *Marche Slave* floated out of the antique record player over in the northeast corner of the dignified space

lined with towering bookshelves positively *crammed* with history books. After all, those who didn't study history were simply doomed to repeat it, now weren't they?

Goddamn right, they were. And this time the ending would be quite a bit different than it had been for poor Adolf Hitler. The Race Master had absolutely *zero* doubt in his mind about that much.

A soft knock sounded at the door a moment later and Josef Sullivan entered the room, his face as white as a sheet.

“What is it, Josef?” the Race Master demanded.

“Bad news, sir,” Sullivan said in a shaking voice. “One of our operatives deviated from his instructions.”

The Race Master pushed back



his office chair angrily and rose to his feet. “*Which* operative, Josef?”

Sensing his master’s unease, Bane lifted his huge head and growled.

The Race Master turned around and slammed down his hand violently on the desk, knocking over the ivory ashtray in a shower of gray ashes. “Sit *down*, Bane!”

Whimpering, the dog lowered its head at once and returned its body to its

previous submissive position on the floor.

The Race Master turned back to Sullivan. His voice shook with rage. “You have exactly thirty seconds to explain yourself before I slit your fucking throat, Josef.”

Sullivan’s own voice trembled. “The one assigned to the Rhodes scholar in Cleveland, sir. Seems he took a fancy

to her and has been holding her in his basement five miles outside the city, raping her every day. Said since she's already pregnant he might as well have a bit of fun with her before he completes the job."

With every last ounce of energy in his toned and muscular body, the Race Master fought the overwhelming urge to lunge across the room and throttle the life out of Sullivan with his bare hands.

He took in a deep breath through his nostrils and forced himself to calm down. His emotions were running far too hot right now, and that was a dangerous sign. Angry men made stupid decisions. Angry men *failed* at their missions.

He stretched his powerful neck until a string of vertebrae popped in quick succession. Then he took another

deep breath that expanded his already broad chest another six inches before adjusting the silk necktie at his throat.

“Bring this man to me, Josef,” he said.

“Assign someone else to finish the job on the Cleveland girl. Our best man in the state – Trebblehorn in Cincinnati. But bring this traitor to me *alive*, Josef. I don’t want a single hair on his head harmed. Not yet, anyway.”

Sullivan nodded, looking very

sick. “There’s something else, sir. A private investigator is looking into the Cleveland girl’s disappearance. A *black* woman.”

The Race Master gritted his teeth in irritation and ran his fingers through his short blonde hair. “Then have Treblehorn follow this woman, Josef,” he hissed through clenched teeth. “Have him follow her and report back to me

every hour on the hour with updates on what she's doing."

Sullivan paused. "Shouldn't we just take her out as well, sir?"

If he'd been holding a pistol in his hand at that precise moment, the Race Master would have splattered Josef Sullivan's insolent brains all over the walls of his fine den. "*No*, Josef. But convey the message to her that her intrusion is most unwelcome. Now get

the fuck out of here before I change my mind about killing you. I need some time to think.”





## CHAPTER 17

Dana and Blankenship jumped into a Yellow Cab outside La Guardia and Blankenship gave the driver directions before the elderly Middle Eastern man pulled out into the crazy snarl of traffic plaguing New York City at rush hour.

The cloying smell of incense filled the cab and turned Dana's stomach as they drove, but at least it beat the hell

out of the sour body-odor smell found in most New York City taxis. Seated directly behind the driver, she stared out the grime-streaked window and watched the streets pass by – the same familiar streets that she and Jeremy Brown had traveled while tracking down the Chessboard Killer during their last case together.

Dana shuddered against the

painful memory. Despite the obviously singular moniker, the Chessboard Killer had been a pair of mentally unstable billionaires masquerading as a single murderous entity while transforming the streets of the Big Apple into a gigantic, bloody chessboard just for shits and giggles, taking everyone involved in the investigation – including Dana and Jeremy themselves – completely off-guard. Jeremy had lost his life during

that investigation when Jack Yuntz, the fourteen-year-old protégé of one of the whack-job billionaires, had stabbed a sharp pair of scissors deep into his neck while the final showdown had taken place inside the ritzy Presidential Suite of the Fontainebleau Hotel in downtown Manhattan.

Dana let out a soft breath over her teeth. She still had as macabre

souvenir of that day the bloodstained blouse she'd been wearing while cradling Jeremy's head in her arms and listening to the tortured, gurgling sounds of his last breaths, not knowing then about the diamond engagement ring in his pocket. She still hadn't been able to bring herself to throw away the shirt yet, and she doubted she ever would. That would almost feel like throwing away a piece of *him*. And Dana wanted to hang

onto him forever.

Good God, almighty, did she still want to hang on to him.

When the driver pulled up to the front of the DeVine Office Building at the corner of Broadway and 83<sup>rd</sup> twenty-five minutes later, Dana and Blankenship hopped out of the cab before Dana paid the man with a fifty, telling him to keep the change.

Dana steeled herself for what would come next as she and Blankenship stood on the sidewalk in front of the towering office building and stared up at the massive skyscraper that lifted a hundred and ninety floors into the air. No fancy forensics would be needed here today. No complicated bloodstain analysis or tricky manner-of-death determination required. Because – like



just about everything else that took place in New York City – every last sickening detail of Laura Settle’s brutal murder in the northwest elevator bank of the building had been captured on camera. Finally – *blissfully* – something for which they could all thank Big Brother.

Blankenship pulled open the door and held it for Dana before stepping inside after her. They made their way across the glittering main

lobby and caught an elevator up to the twelfth floor, which housed the building's security offices. Now they were seated in a pair of matching leather chairs in the chief of security's personal office and watching in horror as Laura Settle's unborn baby was savagely cut from her stomach with a long knife wielded by a handsome young man dressed in an expensive-looking suit.

Vomit rushed into Dana's mouth.

Her heartbeat palpitated violently in her neck. Her palms flooded with sweat.

Blankenship rose to his feet and gestured to the television set when the gruesome video had finally finished playing. "This thing have a USB port on it?" he asked.

The chief of security – Charlie Plouff, according to the man's nametag –

noded. “Yes, sir. It’s state-of-the-art all the way.”

Blankenship nodded and reached into the inside pocket of his blazer, extracting a short length of insulated computer wire and hooking up his iPhone to the television set before downloading the security footage to his phone. Then he punched a series of commands into the phone’s keypad.

“What are you doing?” Dana

asked, rising unsteadily to her feet and swallowing back the acrid taste of stomach acid in her mouth. Never before in her life had she witnessed anything even *half* as gruesome as the gut-wrenching events she'd just watched unfold across the television screen – and she'd seen *plenty* of horrible things in her life. Nobody with a single brain cell in his or her skull could possibly debate

that much.

Blankenship hit several more buttons on the keypad of his phone. “I’m emailing the video to a contact of mine over in the Criminal Justice Information Services Division. You familiar with it?”

Dana nodded. The FBI’s “data campus” in Clarksburg, West Virginia stored ninety-six million sets of fingerprints belonging to criminals and

suspects scattered across the United States and around the world. Dana had sought the division's help herself while she'd been in the process of investigating Timothy Preston; the transgendered serial killer the press had dubbed "the Censor" due to his/her habit of targeting B-list celebrities. So Dana knew that CJISD had powerful face-recognition software capable of

matching up suspects' facial features to the fingerprints on file. "You running the guy's face?" Dana asked.

Blankenship nodded and unhooked his phone from the television set, slipping it back into his blazer. "Yep. And I put an A-1 Priority on it for my guy, too, so hopefully we'll be hearing something back soon."

Dana turned to the chief security officer of the building, Plouff. "No



eyewitnesses on the night of the murder?” she asked.

Plouff shook his head and tucked his crisp white uniform shirt tighter into his belt. “No, ma’am. We got the report just six minutes after the murder happened, too, according to the time-stamp on the video. We locked down the place tighter than a virgin on her confirmation day and helped NYPD rule

out everybody in the building within a matter of hours, but no one saw a thing.”

Plouff paused and shook his head – obviously impressed with the fine work that he and his people had put in that night. “Four thousand people we had to go through,” he said. “My crew really busted their asses on that one.”

Dana lifted her eyebrows. She didn’t know what to say. Still, it seemed clear that Plouff was fishing for a

compliment, so she obliged. “The job can be tough sometimes. Thank you for all your hard work, Mr Plouff.”

Though that should have been the end of it, Plouff continued his unsubtle compliment-fishing expedition.

“Yep, we really busted our butts that night,” he went on, clearly intent on engaging in a bit of war-story tale-telling with his fellow law-enforcement types.

“I’ll you what: I don’t know how the hell we...”

Just then, mercifully, Blankenship’s phone sounded from inside his blazer. Digging it out and hitting the speakerphone feature on the keypad, he said, “Jimmy, boy. Tell me something good.”

A man cleared his throat on the other end of the line. “I’ll tell you something better than good, Bruce. I’ve

already got an ID on your perp with the knife. The Nobel Peace Prize candidate who gets his jollies from cutting unborn babies out of pregnant women's stomachs."

Blankenship cut his stare over to Dana. "What's the asshole's name?"

"Lee Maxwell Jarvis. Small-time petty criminal in the past who experienced a 'come-to-Jesus' moment

and subsequently became a youth pastor. One with known ties to several white-supremacist hate groups scattered across the country.”

Blankenship frowned. “Last known address?”

“Hell, would be my guess.”

Blankenship frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

Blankenship’s contact cleared his throat again. “Well, according to the

information I've got here, the neo-Nazi prick took a swan dive off the Queensboro Bridge at ten o'clock this morning. Really made a mess of things, too, if you know what I mean. White, black, brown, purple – I guess we're all blood red deep down on the inside where it really counts, huh?"

Blankenship laughed without humor. "Yeah. But other than hell,

what's Jarvis's last known address,  
Jim?"

“Yonkers. But I'd say they're  
pretty much the same thing, wouldn't  
you?"





## CHAPTER 18

When Angel finally emerged from unconsciousness an hour later, she cringed against the worst headache she'd ever experienced in her entire life

The roots of her hair felt like they were on fire. Her whole body ached. Human skulls and concrete walls had never been designed to meet at sub-G forces like that, and now she was living proof of it.

*At least I'm still living proof,*

she thought groggily. For now, anyway.

“You awake, bitch?”

As her world swam gradually into focus, Angel found herself looking up into the hard green eyes of Razor Diggs. He had a red bandana tied tightly around his shiny bald head, just like Tupac Shakur used to kick it before a carload of assassins hell-bent on

exacting revenge for the murder of rival rapper Biggie Smalls had caught up with the controversial musician and his oversized manager, Suge Knight, outside a Las Vegas casino on the night of September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1996 following Mike Tyson's boxing match against former champion Bruce Seldon. Diggs was cradling an Uzi-Mac 10 hybrid in his huge hands.

Only the finest in weaponry for

Cleveland's king of the streets, right?

“Razor,” Angel mumbled, swallowing back the metallic taste of warm blood she tasted in her mouth. “What a pleasant surprise. What’s it been, ten years now?”

Razor Diggs grinned down at her, his smile as sharp as his name, his teeth perfect and very white. If nothing else, killing people for a living must’ve

come with one hell of a dental plan.

When he spoke again, his voice emerged unnaturally low from his thick throat – the perfect complement to the rippling, tatted-up muscles in his bulging arms that he'd chosen to show off today in a pristine white wife-beater. Ghetto-fabulous, all the way. Dress for success and success would surely follow.

“Angel fuckin’ Monroe,” Razor grunted, sounding like some kind of

sadistic, inner-city version of Barry White while he twisted his full lips into a menacing sneer. “Of all the people in the world, I’d have thought *you*’d have better sense than to come nosin’ around here. Didn’t you learn your lesson the last time I saw you, bitch? Didn’t you *bleed* enough then?”

As she further established her bearings, Angel saw that she was sitting

in an overstuffed armchair in the living room of Razor's tenement apartment – a ridiculously well-decorated affair considering the decidedly shitty exterior of the building. A huge flat-screen TV hung on one wall over a mantle. Drug paraphernalia littered a glass-topped coffee table five feet away. The furniture in the apartment looked new and expensive to her, but Angel highly doubted that Razor subscribed to any



sort of payment plan. He just didn't seem like a Rent-A-Center type of guy to her.

She tested her muscles gingerly, happy to find that everything still seemed to be in good working order. She lifted her eyebrows in surprise when she realized that her hands hadn't been tied, but that only let her know that Razor didn't consider her much of a threat,

which was a good thing. But she also noticed her .45 was gone. Couldn't win them all.

Angel shook her head to clear out the remaining cobwebs cluttering up her woozy mind. “Yeah, Razor,” she said. “I bled *plenty* the last time I saw you. No need for a repeat performance.”

Back when she'd still been a Cleveland cop, Angel had taken part in a

drug raid on this very building that had gone horribly wrong from the start. In the end, most of the targets had gotten away, including Razor Diggs. But not before he'd hit Angel with a crushing left hook that would've made Muhammad Ali proud, knocking her clean out and splitting her upper lip wide open. It had taken twelve stitches to close that especially painful wound,

and Angel still had the nasty scar on her upper lip as a daily reminder of just how much she hadn't missed this man.

Still grinning from ear to ear, Razor finally broke eye contact with her when a kid in his late-teens emerged from a back bedroom.

Angel focused her watery vision across the room and pegged the kid's height at about six-four. Rail-thin and smoking a cigarette, he took a long drag

on his cancer stick before flicking a long line of ashes into a marble ashtray sitting on the mantle, blowing out twin jets of smoke through his wide nostrils.

Angel's vision sharpened further and she recognized the label on the boy's cigarette even from across the room. A Newport – the same brand Granny Bernice smoked. Did black people ever smoke anything else? She wouldn't

know. She never touched the things herself. Nothing more than sharp coffin nails wrapped up in pretty little packages, she knew.

The kid's oversized LeBron James T-shirt looked like it had swallowed him alive. His face appeared handsome enough in a dangerous sort of way, with only a miniature black teardrop tattooed neatly beneath his right eye to mar his smooth

brown skin. From her time working with Cleveland PD's gang unit, Angel knew the tattoo meant he'd already made his bones – always a bad sign. Some killers were born and some were made, and from the look of things this kid was the worst of both worlds.

The kid nodded to Angel. “Cunt finally woke up, eh Razor?”

Razor tightened his face into a

scowl. “Shut the fuck up, Chauncey. This here is between me and this nosy little bitch sittin’ in this chair here, so why don’t you take your monkey ass back in the bedroom and roll me up another spliff, motherfucker?”

The kid’s eyes hardened as he slunk away, and Angel could almost *see* the law of the jungle at work. Wouldn’t be too much longer now before the kid felt strong enough to take Razor on. A



year or two, maybe. Three at the most.

“Yeah, OK,” the boy muttered, tugging at the oversized jeans as he walked away. “Whatever you say, Razor. You’re the boss.”

“Goddamn right, I am. And don’t you ever fuckin’ forget it, faggot.”

Angel looked up at Razor when the kid had left the room. “Better watch out for that one, big guy,” she said. “It’s

not a good idea to embarrass someone who has nothing to lose, you know. Besides, I'm pretty sure he's got his eyes on your job. Won't be much longer now before he comes after you. What is he, anyway? Sixteen, seventeen?"

Razor narrowed his eyes into hard emerald points. He never took them off Angel as he called over his shoulder. "Hey Chauncey? Get the fuck back in here, dude!"

The kid slunk back into the room, the curved bill of his Cleveland Cavaliers baseball cap casting a menacing shadow across his already menacing brown eyes. Razor turned to the boy and smiled his perfect white teeth. “Yo, little Blood. You willing to do whatever it takes to get down?”

The boy widened his eyes briefly in surprise before he suddenly

remembered himself and went back to being cool. “Hell yeah, Razor. You know that. I’m always willin’ to put in work.”

“Good. Kill this bitch.”

Chauncey didn’t hesitate, sliding a .38 from his waistband and pointing it directly at Angel’s head. A split-second later, the ear-shattering report of multiple gunshots filled the apartment.

Angel squeezed shut her eyes and

recoiled against the back of the recliner, bracing for the impending impact of hot lead sizzling through her flesh.

But it never came.

When she finally opened her eyes again – shocked as hell to find she was still *alive* – she saw that Chauncey had been cut nearly in half by bullets. Circles of bright red blood soaked into his T-shirt in half a dozen different

places as he flopped around wildly on the floor and bled out in a sickening wet rush. After several moments of frantic movement, he finally stopped flopping; his eyes fluttering crazily in their sockets before rolling up completely into the back his skull, making it look as though he were trying desperately to gaze at his own hairline.

Razor Diggs turned back to Angel and smiled again, the huge

machine gun still smoking in his hands.

“Think he’s gonna take my job now, bitch? I don’t fuckin’ think so.”

And with that clever statement, the hardcore gang-banger took one quick step forward and smashed the heavy butt of the machine gun hard into Angel’s right temple, sending her off to La-La land once again.

As Angel slipped away into

unconsciousness for the second time already that day, she had just one thought on her woozy mind:

*One of these days I'm really gonna have to start paying that light bill.*

Granny Bernice had been absolutely right when she'd said those things didn't magically pay themselves.

Who knew?





## CHAPTER 19

Gerald Treblehorn smiled as he watched the big nigger dump the private investigator's body into the alleyway alongside the east end of the tenement apartment building.

*Talk about a stroke of luck!* If Treblehorn had tried, he couldn't have written the script any better himself.

When the big nigger had finally gone back inside the decrepit apartment

building, Treblehorn eased his utility van over to the side of the road and hopped out. Adjusting the “Mike’s Plumbing” ball cap on his head, he pulled down the visor low over his eyes to hide his face and looked up and down the street to make sure no one was watching him. The neighborhood was a dump – nothing but niggers and spics running around – but where was the big

surprise in that? After all, you didn't come to the ghetto and expect to *not* see a bunch of hood rats scurrying around doing their *thang*, now did you?

Treblehorn chuckled, remembering the poster he'd had in his bedroom as a kid. Labeled "The Only Sign of Life in Cleveland", the poster pictured a green highway sign informing people that Cincinnati was located three hundred miles away.

Templeton chuckled again.

Nasty as Cleveland might be, however, the five-hour trip up Interstate 71 from The Queen City had been well worth the time and effort involved. Because since he'd be doing double-duty here today, it meant that his paycheck would be doubled, as well. Not a bad gig if you could find the work.

Grunting, Treblehorn threw the

unconscious nigger woman over his powerful shoulder and placed her into the back of the utility van before slamming shut the doors and walking quickly around to the driver's-side of the vehicle. Sliding behind the wheel, he cranked the engine into life, anxious as hell to get the fuck out of this godforsaken shit hole already. Jaded as he might be, the neighborhood gave even *him* the creeps, and he'd never been the

kind of man to experience that particular sensation easily. Again, though, no big surprise there. After all, killing people for a living tended to numb one to such pedestrian emotions.

Looking up into the rearview mirror, Trebblehorn caught sight of his perfect Aryan features and smiled perfect white teeth at himself as he pulled away from the curb, admiring his

short blonde hair and crystal-clear blue eyes as the van picked up speed and whisked him away from the scene of his nifty little crime.

Time to earn his money.

And killing niggers wasn't a bad gig if you could find the work, now was it?

Nope, wasn't a bad gig, at all.





## CHAPTER 20

An hour later after leaving the chief of security's office, Dana and Blankenship made their way up the poorly lit stairwell of Lee Maxwell Jarvis's decrepit apartment building in northwest Yonkers, passing by a young Jamaican man sporting long dreadlocks to go along with a tie-dyed Bob Marley T-shirt and colorful, knitted Rastafarian cap.

Reggae music blasted from the iPod earbuds tucked beneath the young man's hat, and the teen locked his coal-black stare onto Dana's as he passed, freezing her like an ice sculpture in his transfixing gaze.

A sudden, inexplicable jolt of panic bolted through Dana's heart. Her breath caught in her throat. She resisted the urge to reach out and grab

Blankenship by his arm. She just couldn't help herself. Unfair stereotype or not, she could practically *smell* the voodoo wafting off the boy's dark brown skin.

Dana shivered as she and Blankenship came to a stop outside apartment 219 forty-five seconds later, still trying her best to shake off the odd encounter with the boy in the stairwell. Wasn't easy. Thankfully, though,

Blankenship distracted her attention by pulling a set of keys from his pocket and flipping open a lock-picking device attached to the small metal ring. He smiled sheepishly at her. “Better than American Express,” he said, referencing the famous credit-card commercial that implored users to always pack their plastic currency. “I never leave home without it.”

Dana rolled her eyes at Blankenship's lame attempt at humour, still fighting back the odd sense of unease flooding through her veins. Blissfully, though, she didn't have time to further process these strange feelings before Blankenship had manipulated the lock with a few quick flicks of his wrist and pushed open the door.

Dana rounded her eyes in shock

at the unexpected tableau before them. A huge red Nazi flag dominated the north wall of Jarvis's living room, staring back at them like the *N*-word uttered at NAACP rally. She and Blankenship simply stood there dumbstruck for a moment or two out in the sun-dappled hallway while they each tried to process the ugly sight in their lines of vision.

A neatly pressed SS uniform complete with a bejeweled, ceremonial

sword and tucked inside a shiny leather scabbard lay across a rectangular coffee table ten feet in front of a flat-screen television set. A white-power propaganda poster housed in an expensive-looking frame watched over the place from above the television set, screaming out the chilling message, *The Only Good Nigger is a Dead Nigger!* A crude drawing just to the left of the



revolting words featured a black man hanging by the neck from a thick tree branch in an otherwise open field as a group of smiling white faces gathered around and cheered on the disgusting spectacle.

“*Jesus Christ,*” Blankenship breathed as he and Dana stepped inside the apartment. He kicked shut the door behind them. “It’s a regular Third Reich museum in here. I’d say we’ve

definitely got the right address, wouldn't you? This asshole doesn't exactly keep his political views a secret."

Dana's stomach churned as she scanned the interior of the apartment, gritting her teeth at the hateful display of vulgarity. If you didn't count the garbage hanging on the wall and the trash lying across the coffee table, though, the place was as neat as a pin.

Dana motioned to an open MacBook Pro that was sitting on a cheap particleboard desk shoved up against the main window of the living room. “Think you can work your magic on that thing while I check out the rest of the place?” she asked.

Blankenship cracked his knuckles loudly. “Your wish is my command, partner.”

Dana went into the small kitchen and rummaged through the cupboards for several moments. Scratched-up Tupperware and a few chipped porcelain plates peeked back at her from the recently dusted shelves. Shutting the cupboards, she opened the refrigerator next and peered inside. Nothing but the normal stuff inside: half a rotisserie chicken. A white-and-red cardboard

container of leftover Chinese food. The usual condiments: ketchup, mustard, soy sauce, a full bottle of ranch dressing.

Dana shook her head at the overwhelming *normality* of the refrigerator's contents. Seemed that even murdering white-supremacist assholes got hungry every once in a while, and from the looks of things Jarvis had all the makings for a delicious midnight snack. Good for

him. Too bad the racist hate-monger was no longer alive to enjoy it. Served the sadistic piece of shit right, though. Dana only hoped that Jarvis had *died* hungry. Not much of a punishment, she knew, but it wouldn't have been a bad place to start.

Dana exited the kitchen and made her way into the lone bathroom of the apartment next. Like the rest of Jarvis's

living quarters, the bathroom was completely spotless. No prescription medication bottles in the cabinet hanging above the sink.

In the bedroom down a short hallway, another Nazi flag hung lengthwise from the closet door. No big surprise there, however. These white-power jerks had always *loved* their Nazi flags, hadn't they? Damn right, they had. The intimidating standards

connected them to an ugly time in history for which they yearned with all their cold and blackened hearts. The bed itself had been neatly made up, pillows on top fluffed up and waiting invitingly for their owner's expected return, which in this case hadn't ended up taking place. Thank God for small favors. The nightstands flanking Jarvis's sleeping space held nothing more interesting than



a small digital alarm clock and the latest few issues of *Field & Stream* inside.

Dana went over to the closet and opened up the door, her skin crawling as the Nazi flag brushed her left forearm. Jarvis's clothing looked well cared-for but not especially flashy. Nowhere near as nice as the pricy Pierre Cardin ensemble he'd been wearing in the video that showed him gleefully extracting the unborn fetus from Laura Settle's

pregnant stomach with an eight-inch-long carving knife.

Dana bit down hard into her lower lip, trying to puzzle things out. Partial payment for a contracted hit? She didn't know, but she and Blankenship would need to look into that possibility before they ruled it out. Still, it seemed odd to her that *haute couture* would pass for currency in the seedy

world of organized crime. Dirty green paper had always been more to the liking of the foul men who engaged in such horrendously stomach-turning acts.

Blankenship's voice sounded from the living room, giving Dana's heart another jolt. "Hey, Dana? Could you come in here real quick and take a look at this?"

Dana shut the closet door before making her way back into the living

room. She hovered over Blankenship's right shoulder while he sat in front of the computer screen. "What'd you find?" she asked.

Blankenship moved his index finger over the trackpad on the computer and slid the digital pointer down a long directory of white-power hate-group websites. "Look at this shit," he said. "There are a hundred and eighty-two

different white-power groups listed in this directory. So if Laura Settle's murder was ordered by one of them, it's gonna take a hell of a lot more than just the two of us to figure out which one it was. This calls for a fucking *task force*."

Dana ran her gaze down the list. The White Resistance Fighter Group. Council of Conservative Citizens. European Americans United. The

National Alliance. Phineas Priesthood.  
Volksfront. White Aryan Resistance.  
Dozens of others. “Jesus Christ,” she  
said, shaking her head in disgust. “It’s  
worse than looking for a needle in a  
goddamn haystack. Not gonna get a task  
force on this one, though. Too many  
resources diverted to the war on terror,  
as it is. You know we’re second-class  
citizens now, don’t you? If it ain’t taking

place in Iraq or Afghanistan, it just ain't taking place these days. Anyway, what else did you find?"

Blankenship shook his own head in disgust. "Got confirmation that the shithead was a youth pastor. Didn't work for any particular church, though — more of a freelancer. His pay records are kept like the rest of his apartment: organized in a neat little folder right here on the desktop. Made twenty-seven

thousand dollars last year.”

Dana stretched her neck. “Not exactly enough to go around buying four-thousand-dollar suits, is it?”

Blankenship looked up at her over his shoulder. “You thinking his get-up in the security video points to a paid hit?”

Dana shrugged. “I don’t know. But if it does then we’re gonna have a



hell of a time tracking down the source of the money. Can you get into his bank account from here?”

Blankenship shook his head. “Nope. Already tried. It’s Wells Fargo. Locked down tighter than Fort Knox. We’re gonna need a search warrant for that.”

Dana gritted her teeth. “Great. Fat chance of *that* happening anytime soon. A couple years ago I actually had

to wait two weeks to get a search warrant for a *triple murder*. Anyway, technically, the money belongs to Jarvis's next of kin now. Can you get us a name?"

Blankenship opened a new browser window on the computer screen and tapped into an FBI database with his Bureau identification number before entering Jarvis's name into the search

bar. Jarvis's rap sheet and biography popped up, and Blankenship read quickly through the available information. "Well now, whaddya know?" he said after a long moment, rolling his muscular neck on his shoulders while he continued to study the screen. "Seems Jarvis was an orphan, raised by a church group. Explains his chosen profession, I suppose, but doesn't give us much else

to go on. If I'm not mistaken, though, I believe that means the money in his bank account reverts to the government now. In a way, I suppose that means he's paying our salaries."

Dana rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, I'll make sure I thank the murdering asshole the next time I'm paying for my groceries. Hell, maybe I'll even throw a box of baby wipes into

my cart as a way of paying homage.”

Blankenship flipped closed the laptop and rose to his feet, unplugging the computer and tucking it underneath his left arm. “So, what’s next on the agenda?” he asked. “Where do we go from here?”

Dana glanced down at the laptop. “Don’t we need a search warrant for that thing, too?”

Blankenship shrugged. “I won’t

tell if you don't.”

Dana closed her eyes. The illegal search of Jarvis's apartment they'd just conducted and the illegal seizure of the asshole's computer couldn't be used in court against whoever might have paid the jerk for offing Laura Settle, but right now they didn't have anything else to go on. Besides, sometimes you had to bend the

rules a little bit in order to break the bad guys' backs – something she'd learned the hard way for herself during the Cleveland Slasher case. Prior to that blood-soaked nightmare, however, Dana had been so anal-retentive about doing things by the book that a truckload of Ex-Lax couldn't have helped her out. All things considered, though, she considered bending the rules to break the bad guy's back a fair exchange in this

instance. As far as she was concerned, Jarvis didn't *deserve* any rights – Constitutional or otherwise. After all, you needed to be *human* before you could expect any basic human rights, now didn't you? And Jarvis had clearly been an animal. Nothing more and nothing less. His horrific murder of Laura Settle had proved that much.

“Let's go talk to Jarvis's



landlord and see if he had any regular visitors around here,” Dana said. “Maybe the landlord will give us another lead we can follow up on.”

Blankenship nodded. “Sounds good to me. A mixture of new-fangled technology and good old-fashioned police work. Sort of makes me feel like a twenty first-century version of Sherlock Holmes.”

Dana rolled her eyes again.

“Yeah, me too. Anyway, let’s get the hell out of here already. We’ve got our work cut out for us and this place is giving me the creeps.”

Blankenship smiled. “As it is I, my dear Watson.”

Dana blew out a quick upward breath that fluttered her short blonde bangs. “Uh-uh, buddy. *I*’m Sherlock Holmes here, not you. And don’t you

ever forget it.”

Blankenship widened the smile on his face, showing off his endearingly chipped front tooth. He bowed slightly and swept his right arm theatrically in front of his body. “Like I said before: as it is I, my dear Holmes. Please lead the way, Inspector.”



# CHAPTER 21

Angel woke up gagging on blood. A huge weight was pressing down hard on her chest and making it impossible for her to breathe. She shoved the weight off herself frantically and gasped for a cool lungful of air as she rolled to one side, shocked as hell to see that she was inside her own living room.

Angel's vision swam wildly in

and out of focus. The room melted away into a crazy swirl of jumbled colors before suddenly clearing up again.

She shook her head hard in an effort to clear away the blinding fog, but that only made things worse.

Then, the worst shock of her entire life.

The huge weight she'd just pushed off herself was grandmother's

enormous body, the old woman's flowered housedress riding halfway up her massive thighs.

Granny Bernice had been shot once between the eyes. Her unseeing hazel eyes stared up at Angel, seeming to ask one simple question:

*Why?*

In an instant, Angel's entire world collapsed. Everything around her came to a screeching halt. There existed

no sound in this strange new world of hers, no smells, no sense of touch. Nothing. Just the very real sensation of her heart breaking into a million tiny pieces inside her badly constricted chest.

She started screaming then.





## PART II

“The power of the White world is threatened whenever a Black man refuses to accept the White world’s definitions.” – James A. Baldwin, author.



## CHAPTER 22

The Race Master slid a sharp knife through a delicate piece of filet mignon and slipped the tender meat into his mouth.

*Delicious.*

Wiping at his mouth with a heavy linen napkin, he put down the fine china on the floor after just one bite. Bane could finish off the rest. Hell, the dog had *earned* that much with his fearsome

display in the woods.

Josef Sullivan was seated across the huge oaken table from him in the well-appointed dining room, a huge crystal chandelier sparkling over their heads. Imported from Austria, the chandelier had cost twenty-five thousand dollars. The solid-sterling place settings had all come from Spain bearing price tags of four thousand dollars a set.

The Italian suits both men wore had been cut from whole cloth by one of the finest tailors in all of Rome.

These fine things had all cost a small fortune, of course, but the Race Master had expensive tastes and enough filthy *lucre* to indulge his refined tastes whenever he damn well pleased. He could thank his father for that much. The old man had been a highly valued member of the SS during World War II –

one of Hitler's personal favorites, or so the story went – and the stolen paintings he'd appropriated from the Jewish hordes had fetched the family quite a handsome sum, indeed, ensuring that none of the man's offspring would ever have to work a single day in their lives should that so be their choosing.

The Race Master sighed, missing his father badly. A true Aryan if ever

there'd been one. Raising his glass of fine French champagne to his lips, he drank a silent toast to the old man's memory, swishing around the expensive liquid in his mouth and relishing the way the exquisite flavors danced across his tongue.

Ten feet away, Josef Sullivan raised his own glass, still not having spoken a word yet. Excellent. Perhaps the idiot had finally learned that it was



far better to be seen than it was to be heard. Seemed that even the hardest taught among their number possessed the capacity to learn, which represented a comforting thought to the Race Master.

The Race Master cleared his throat and finally acknowledged Sullivan's presence. "Well then, Josef," he said. "What have you got for me today?"

Sullivan fidgeted with the perfect Windsor knot in the silk necktie at his throat. “Our man from Cincinnati conveyed your message to the private investigator in Cleveland, sir. He also handed the traitor over to some of our people from Pennsylvania. They should be here any moment now.”

“And the Rhodes scholar, Josef?” the Race Master asked. “What

of her?”

“Treblehorn is taking care of her as we speak, sir.”

The Race Master nodded. “Very well, Josef. Have we acquired another target yet?”

“Yes, sir. Betsy Campbell; a professional musician from Washington.”

“DC or the state?”

“The state, sir.”

“Has the seeding been confirmed?”

“Yes, sir.”

The Race Master rose from his chair just as the crunch of gravel under tires sounded out in the driveway in front of the house. Favoring his most faithful sycophant with a bright smile, he nodded again.

“Very well, Josef. You may

proceed with the next execution.”



## CHAPTER 23

Dana and Blankenship left Jarvis's apartment and made their way back down the narrow stairwell to the first floor.

Mercifully, the mysterious boy and his coal-black stare stayed out of sight this time. Thank God for the little things in this life. Because Dana honestly didn't know if she could stand looking into the boy's soulless eyes

again. Not this soon, at least. She already felt jumpy enough as it was.

When they'd reached their destination forty-five seconds later, Blankenship lifted his right hand and knocked firmly on the door to apartment 1, which sat conveniently located right next to the entrance to the street. The door opened up almost at once in response to his knocking – and Dana's



heart immediately stopped beating dead in her chest.

In her mind's eye, the boy dressed in the Bob Marley T-shirt and colorful Rastafarian cap vaulted at her in a sudden rush of movement without ever moving his feet on the floor – like those trick Internet videos showing a deathly pale woman with glowing green eyes who vaulted at the unsuspecting watcher and gave their hearts a terrible start

while their “friends” fell all over themselves laughing their asses off at the debatably funny spectacle.

In the real world, though, the boy that had passed them in the narrow stairwell twenty minutes earlier simply removed one of his earbuds and said, “Yeah? What do you guys want?”

Blankenship flipped open his FBI shield, and Dana felt infinitely

grateful that her new partner took the lead. At least *one* of them still retained the ability to function normally. “Agent Blankenship, Agent Whitestone,” he said. “FBI. We need to talk to the landlord. Is he or she around?”

The boy tucked his earbud back beneath his knitted Rastafarian cap and looked directly at Dana. “Ma!” he yelled.

A woman’s voice sounded from

a back room. “What?”

The boy shook his head and finally released Dana from his hypnotic stare. Dana shook her own head in disbelief as he did so. She couldn't *believe* she'd been intimidated so goddamn easily. What the fuck was *wrong* with her? The kid couldn't have been any more than fourteen or fifteen years old. Maybe it had been some trick

of lighting in the dim stairwell. Maybe it had been some deeper psychological malfunction that Dana really didn't feel like dealing with right now. Whatever it was, though, she felt like a complete jackass for her snap judgment about the boy's voodoo leanings.

As she knew she should.

“Some cops are here to see you,” the boy shouted, even louder this time. “Say they’re FBI.”

“What?”

The boy rolled his eyes and released a disgusted breath. “Cops. FBI. Just come in here, would ya?”

A moment later, a white woman in her mid-fifties shocked Dana even further by coming to the door, wiping her soapy palms against the front of an apron. Dana fought back a physical wave of surprise in her chest as the

woman shooed the boy out of the way.

“Go do your homework, Marcus. Quit hanging around the house all day doing nothing.”

The boy gave the woman an irritated look well known to mothers of teenaged boys all around the world. “I don’t *have* any homework. It’s summertime.”

The woman pushed the boy gently in the back. “Fine, then go do

something else. Get a head start on next year's homework. Read a book. Take a walk. Volunteer at a soup kitchen. I really don't care. Just get out of my way."

When the boy had finally stomped off – presumably into his bedroom to listen to some more of his trance-like music while reflecting on the countless injustices foisted upon the



teenaged world – the woman turned back to Dana and Blankenship and shook her head. “Sorry about that. That kid, I swear. He’s just like his father. Always trying to be something he’s not. For God’s sake, he was born right here in Yonkers, not Kingston. Not that you’d know it just by looking at the way he dresses, right?”

Dana shook her head. *She* sure as hell hadn’t known it. More guilt

flooded through her system for the sin of jumping to conclusions about the boy's lineage. Seemed that even people who weren't out-and-out racists had their own fair share of preconceived notions floating around inside their minds when it came to dealing with those of different skin colors than their own.

She just wished like hell that she hadn't been one of them.

Dana locked away her guilty feelings – at least for now – and introduced herself and Blankenship. She could deal with her sensitivity issues later on. Right now, though, they had a murdering white-supremacist asshole they needed to learn a little more about. And the clock on finding out just which white-supremacist group the sadistic prick might've been working for had

already been ticking for quite some time now. Most cases that didn't develop solid leads in the first forty-eight hours went cold, something known to even the most casual viewer of the late-night television crime dramas. Shows such as *CSI* and *Investigative Reports with Bill Kurtis* and the aptly named *48 Hours* had set the bar higher for law enforcement, keeping them accountable to a more-educated populace. But Dana

didn't mind. Hell, she *relished* the challenge. Always had and always would. The challenge is what made her tick. "We've got some questions about one of your tenants, ma'am," Dana said, happy to find that her voice emerged somewhat normally from her constricted throat despite the uneasiness she'd been feeling all day. "A Lee Maxwell Jarvis. You know him?"

The woman nodded. “Yep. Sure I do. One of the nicest people who live here, as a matter of fact. Always pays his rent on time, never causes a problem at all. No noise complaints, no loud parties; no *nothing*. I just wish all my tenants were even *half* as considerate as he is. Is he in trouble for something?”

Blankenship answered the woman. “Worse than that, ma’am. He’s

dead.”

The woman pulled back her head in undisguised shock, widening her clear blue eyes into the size of fifty-cent pieces. It was the sort of look that guilty murder suspects could never pull off, no matter how desperately they tried. “Oh my God,” the woman breathed. “How absolutely dreadful. How did it happen?”

“Suicide,” Dana answered.

“Jumped off the Queensboro Bridge at ten o’clock this morning.”

Jarvis’s landlord closed her eyes. For a long moment, Dana thought that she saw the woman’s lips moving silently in prayer. When the woman finally opened her eyes again, she asked, “So if Lee didn’t do anything to hurt anyone else, what’s this all about then?”

Dana ignored the question. She



just didn't think that it would be helpful to inform the woman that Jarvis had cut out an unborn fetus from a young lawyer's stomach fewer than twenty-four hours earlier. She could read about it in the newspaper when all the gory details came trickling out, just like everybody else. No doubt the story would be splashed all over the front pages of both the *New York Times* and the *New York Post* by tomorrow morning, at the very

latest. And it was *already* on the Internet. Much like the rest of the country – and whether they wanted to admit it or not – New Yorkers *loved* a good murder story. Especially when it involved a victim and suspect of different races. The bloodier the better. Dana had learned *that* much firsthand while she and Jeremy Brown had been investigating the Chessboard Killer

murders the previous year.

Dana asked, “Did Jarvis have any regular visitors around here at the apartment complex, ma’am?”

The landlord shook her head. “No, nobody ever came to see Lee. That was another great thing about him, another thing that made him such a wonderful tenant. Poor boy grew up in an orphanage, you know. Probably made him thankful to even *have* a home

at all.”

Blankenship cut his stare over to Dana before sliding his eyes back to the landlord. From the restless look in her new partner’s eye, Dana could tell that he didn’t think this line of questioning worth pursuing – and she didn’t blame him. Great minds and all that. The well-intentioned woman obviously didn’t have anything useful to offer them,

so that made talking with her any longer a complete waste of time. And wasting time – completely or otherwise – wasn't something they could afford right now. Like Dana had already noted – the clock was still ticking.

“Thank you very much for your time, ma'am,” Blankenship said, flipping closed his ID and tucking it back inside his blazer. “We'll be in contact with you if we need anything else.”

The landlord nodded. “Yes, of course.”

The woman paused and let out a deep breath. “Well, I guess I’ll have to go clean out Lee’s apartment now. Seems terribly cold and insensitive considering what just happened, but I really can’t afford to let the place stay empty, you know what I mean? The economy and all.”

When the woman had closed the door and Dana and Blankenship were back out on the busy street, Dana wondered if the landlord's generous assessment of Lee Maxwell Jarvis's character would be affected by what she'd soon see in apartment 219 — especially considering the mixed-race heritage of her son. Nice as the woman seemed to be, Dana wouldn't be

surprised if the landlord dug out Jarvis's dead body from the ground just so that she could kill the murdering bastard all over again. And if that turned out to be the case, Dana wouldn't have blamed her at all. Hell, Dana felt the *exact* same way. Much like the traffic-court judge who'd whipped poor little Bradley with a thick belt for the sin of simply being *alive*, just one death seemed far too easy on some people – and Lee Maxwell



Jarvis had definitely been among that heartless number.

Dana turned to Blankenship. “You don’t like to fuck around very much, do you?”

Blankenship pressed his full lips into a tight line. “Not when it comes to these white-power assholes. Do you?”

Dana shook her head. “Nope. The quicker we can nail these pricks to

the nearest available cross, the better, as far as I'm concerned."

Just then, Dana's cellphone sounded in her purse. Digging it out, she flipped it open and held up a finger to Blankenship, motioning for him to wait.

She placed the phone to her ear.

"Hello?"

Thirty seconds later, she flipped closed the phone again, feeling all the blood drain from her face.

“What is it?” Blankenship demanded, searching Dana’s eyes with his own. “Another murder? Another white-power hit?”

Dana shook her head. For several long moments, she couldn’t even *speak*. She simply lacked the breath for it. Finally managing to move her lips again, she said, “No. That was Shelley Margolis. I’ve got a play-date with

Bradley coming up in two weeks.”

Blankenship lifted his eyebrows, confused. “Who in the hell is Shelley Margolis? And who’s Bradley?”

Dana took a deep breath through her nostrils and brought her new partner up to speed about the possibility that she’d soon become a mother to the handsomest little guy she’d ever laid eyes on in her entire life. A regular *GQ* model, if ever there’d been one.

A smile crossed played across  
her lips while she filled in Blankenship  
on all the particulars. And why not?

Wasn't that what *all* mothers got  
when they talked about their kids?



## CHAPTER 24

Angel spent the next five hours answering questions from Cleveland PD's Major Crimes Unit.

No, her grandmother didn't have any connection to Razor Diggs. Yes, Granny Bernice had heard of him. No, her grandmother had never met him before. Yes, Granny Bernice knew where Angel had been headed today. No, Angel didn't know why Razor Diggs

had left her alive.

The medical examiner had left the scene an hour earlier, taking Granny Bernice's bloodsoaked body with him. They'd be conducting an autopsy, he'd told her, though Angel thought the cause of death rather fucking obvious in this case.

Ten minutes later, she was seated in the swing on the front porch of



their house, wrapped up in a heavy blanket even though the mercury had reached ninety-two degrees. She was shaking like a leaf, unable to get warm for the life of her despite the oppressive heat wave baking the city. She recognized the weird body-chill as shock, but she also knew there wasn't a goddamn thing she could do about it other than to let the shock run its course. Lieutenant Stosh Meyers, an old friend

from the force, was seated next to her on the swing.

“I know what you’re thinking, Angel,” Stosh said softly, “but don’t go flushing your life down the toilet over a murdering piece of crap like Razor Diggs. He’s just not worth it.”

Angel had always liked Stosh Meyers. He’d always been one of the good eggs on the force. A damn fine

cop, too. But right now Angel really didn't feel like being talked down off the ledge she was on. "I'm sorry, Stosh, but he's gonna have to pay for this," she said, her voice wavering in her throat and threatening to shatter like a fumbled dinner plate. "That woman was my entire *world* and now she's gone. Murdered by a piece of human trash."

The Cleveland cop reached out a hand and touched her right knee. A look

of genuine concern filled his soft blue eyes. “Leave that part up to us, Angel. I’m going to take care of this shit personally.”

Angel looked up at her former law-enforcement colleague from her days on the Cleveland police force and held his stare. “Better hurry Stosh, because by the time I’m done with him, there isn’t going to be anything left of

Razor Diggs to take care of.”

Just then, a young uniformed officer stepped out onto the porch and cleared his throat. “Hey, LT? I think you’d better come in here and take a look at this.”

Angel rose to her feet and followed the Cleveland cops back into her living room. A sheet of paper lay across the mahogany coffee table, ten feet in front of the cabinet-style

television upon which sat family portraits of Angel and Granny Bernice throughout the years: Angel's first day of kindergarten, tears slipping down Granny Bernice's plump cheeks as she dropped her off at the doorway to St Ann's. Angel learning how to ride a bike, Granny Bernice's running behind her the entire way; her arms outstretched and ready to catch Angel should she

happen to fall. The two women outside Progressive Field right before they'd gone inside and watched the Indians get their butts kicked again by those despised Yankees.

Despite all of the frantic activity going on in the house while harried crime-scene techs processed every last square inch of the scene, Angel felt completely and utterly *alone*. She knew that it was a feeling that would stay with

her for a very long time to come – if not forever.

The young cop cleared his throat again and nodded down to the sheet of paper on the coffee table. “We found this underneath the couch, right next to the...”

He paused and looked over at Angel.

“Go ahead, officer,” Angel said.



“You found it underneath the couch right next to the body.”

The young man nodded but still looked uncomfortable. He rubbed the muscles alongside his throat with the palm of his right hand and ran his tongue across his perfect white teeth. “Yes, ma’am. We found it underneath the couch right next to the body.”

Stosh Meyers reached into the breast pocket of his neatly pressed

uniform shirt and extracted a small pair of rubber-tipped tweezers. Unwrapping the tweezers from their sterile plastic packaging, he adjusted the note on the table so that both he and Angel could read at the same time.

The entire page consisted of three neatly typed sentences:

WHAT WE MUST FIGHT FOR

IS TO SAFEGUARD THE EXISTENCE  
AND REPRODUCTION OF OUR  
RACE AND OUR PEOPLE, THE  
SUSTENANCE OF OUR CHILDREN  
AND THE PURITY OF OUR BLOOD,  
THE FREEDOM AND  
INDEPENDENCE OF THE  
FATHERLAND, SO THAT OUR  
PEOPLE MAY MATURE FOR THE  
FULFILLMENT OF THE MISSION  
ALLOTTED IT BY THE CREATOR

OF THE UNIVERSE.

EVERY THOUGHT AND  
EVERY IDEA, EVERY DOCTRINE  
AND ALL KNOWLEDGE, MUST  
SERVE THIS PURPOSE.

AND EVERYTHING MUST BE  
EXAMINED FROM THIS POINT OF  
VIEW AND USED OR REJECTED

ACCORDING TO ITS UTILITY.



## CHAPTER 25

Thunderous applause rained down on Betsy Campbell's ears as she rose to her feet on the massive stage and took a graceful bow in the ten-thousand-seat auditorium located in downtown Seattle. Fifteen minutes later they announced the winner of the competition.

*She'd won!*

The next hour seemed a blur as time simultaneously stood still and raced

forward. *Great job, Betsy!* someone shouted. *Way to go, girl!* someone else called out.

Still grinning ear-to-ear from her unexpected win, Betsy packed her prize-winning flute into its hard plastic case and snapped shut the metal fasteners. She couldn't *wait* to get home and tell Brian the good news! He would have been there himself, of course, but



leaving the house presented just too big an obstacle for him these days. The cancer in his brain had entered the advanced stages now, and the invasive chemotherapy had taken its horrible toll on him a little more with each passing day.

Betsy felt a sharp twinge in her heart that momentarily dulled her pleasure of winning the competition. Brian had fought with her tooth-and-nail

over having a baby, saying that he didn't want to saddle her with raising a child on her own after he'd passed away. After all, being an interracial couple in Washington had never been especially easy on them in even the best of times, and Brian hadn't wanted the few ignorant people who still remained in their neighborhood to take it out on their baby once he'd gone.

But, as always, Betsy had eventually prevailed. And now she was entering her sixth month of pregnancy – though you certainly wouldn't have known it just by looking at her.

Betsy smiled to herself with the secret knowledge as she pushed open the doors to the auditorium and stepped outside into the bright sunshine that was streaming down from the cloudless blue

sky above. On her walk through the parking lot, she mentally picked out baby names. Brian Jr. if it was a boy, of course; but what about for a girl? Betsy frowned. Maybe Grace, maybe Stephanie. She just couldn't decide. They were both extremely beautiful names, and she and Brian were going to have an *extremely* beautiful baby – she had absolutely zero doubt in her mind about that. Mixing Brian's Caucasian

features with her own more-ethnic features created a can't-miss proposition for breathtaking good looks. Hell, the kid would probably wind up being so attractive that he or she would grace the cover of *Vogue* one day. And if *that* turned out to be the case, Betsy wouldn't be in the least bit surprised. God knew the child would possess the looks for it.

Then again, wasn't that the way

*all* mothers felt about their children?

Still smiling to herself, Betsy reached her green Subaru hatchback a moment later and slid the silver key into the door lock, twisting her right wrist until the locking mechanism disengaged. Hopping inside the late-model vehicle, she cranked the engine into life and put the car into reverse; far too preoccupied with her happy thoughts to notice the huge blonde man who was huddled

down in the back seat of the Subaru and gripping an enormous, glittering butcher's knife in the palm of his huge right hand.





## CHAPTER 26

Dana and Blankenship were sipping coffees in a small deli located on Tipton Avenue in Yonkers ten hours later. Dana had just dumped a second packet of sugar into her steaming drink when her phone rang in her pursed. She dug it out and flipped it open before placing it to her ear. “Whitestone.”

Bill Krugman’s voice came across the line, strong and clear.

“Dana,” he said, “how’s it going with your new partner out there in New York City?”

Dana glanced across the table at Blankenship. “Sitting here having coffee with him now, sir,” she said, lifting her eyebrows at Blankenship to let him know she was talking about him. “By the way, thanks for the head’s up on that one. I really appreciate it.”

Krugman chuckled. “Hey, I told you that I was bringing Blankenship in from Nebraska to work with you. I just didn’t tell you when. Anyway, is he as good as advertised?”

“Better,” Dana said. And she meant it, too. Blankenship was a class act all the way, no two ways about it. His sterling reputation throughout the FBI had obviously been well deserved.

Krugman asked, “Any progress on the Jarvis case?”

Dana fiddled with the swizzle stick in her coffee cup while she brought the Director up to speed. When she’d finished relating all the details, Krugman said, “What about the father of Laura Settle’s baby? You guys question him?”

Dana blew a wavering cloud of steam from her coffee and took a

tentative sip. “Didn’t need to. NYPD ruled him out for us. Michael Timmons was at a restaurant on Broadway when the murder happened. Airtight alibi. The restaurant owner himself vouched for the guy. And the New York cops ran a full background check on Timmons, too. No connection whatsoever to Lee Maxwell Jarvis or any white-supremacist groups at any time during his life.”

Krugman paused for a long moment. Then he cleared his throat and said, “Well, since the trail out there already seems to have gone more or less cold, why don’t you pass along the investigation to Mulvey and Kendall in the New York City field office? I’ve got a fresh trail that I want you and Blankenship to follow, anyway.”

Dana frowned. “Another

murder, sir?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Where?”

“Seattle, Washington,” Krugman said. “Another pregnant black woman with a fetus cut from her stomach with a knife. Can you and Blankenship get out there tonight?”

Dana’s insides clenched. She rose to her feet and motioned for Blankenship to do the same, pulling back

the sleeve on her blazer and checking her watch. Almost ten p.m. already. They'd really need to hustle if they wanted to catch the last red-eye out of town. "Headed out to the airport now, sir," she said. "With any luck we'll be on the West Coast in five hours."





## CHAPTER 27

Stosh Meyers held up the typewritten note between the tips of the tweezers and looked over at Angel. “What the fuck is this shit?” he asked.

Angel’s pulse pounded in her wrists. Her palms flooded with sweat. Nausea gripped her stomach and squeezed hard. She knew *exactly* what that shit was. What’s more, she’d actually learned it in its original

German, which had been her minor at Walsh University during her college days down in Canton, Ohio.

“It’s from *Mein Kampf*,” Angel said, her voice sounding robotic to her own ears, like it was coming from somewhere far outside her body. “Literal translation: *My Struggle*. It’s from Adolf Hitler’s autobiography. His fucking *manifesto*.”

Stosh raised a blonde eyebrow into a question mark on his forehead and turned back to the young cop. “Great job, Deputy Ludwick.”

It was a dismissal the young officer understood immediately.

When Ludwick had cleared out, Stosh turned back to Angel. “Say that again?”

Angel took a deep breath and let

it out again in a soft hiss over her teeth.

“It’s from *Mein Kampf*,” she repeated, her entire body numb, save for the intense tingling sensation electrifying her fingers and toes. “We studied it in college. If you count the number of words in those three sentences, I think you’ll find they add up to eighty-eight.”

Stosh looked confused, and Angel didn’t blame him. If she hadn’t been forced to, she never would’ve

studied that shit either.

“What’s the significance of the eighty-eight words?” Stosh finally asked.

Angel gritted her teeth. “It’s a stupid fucking code. ‘H’ is the eighth letter in the alphabet. If you put two of them together you’ve got ‘HH’, which stands for ‘Heil Hitler’. It’s underground shit. If you’ve ever seen

the white kids wearing football jerseys with the number eighty-eight on them, that's their way of saying 'fuck you' to the brothers without the homeboys realizing it."

Stosh blew out a slow lungful of air, looking uncomfortable with the conversation. White people who weren't racists themselves always hated it when the subject came up. The issue was just too sensitive, a powder keg

ready to explode simply by twisting the word “nigga” into the word “nigger”.

It was the eight-hundred-pound gorilla in the room no one ever wanted to acknowledge.

“Why the fuck would Razor Diggs plant some shit like this at a murder scene, Angel?” Stosh asked.

“No idea. You got him in custody yet?”



“Yeah.”

“Can I talk to him?”

“No.”

Angel nodded, understanding the Cleveland cop's reasoning. She knew that she'd kill the murdering bastard if she were able to get within even fifty feet of him. Stosh knew it, too.

“But you'll look into this for me?” she asked.

“Headed over there now.”

Angel looked Stosh directly in the eye and held his stare to let him know just how deadly serious she was about this. “Keep me in the loop on this one, OK, Stosh? That woman was my entire life.”

Angel’s old friend reached out a hand and touched her shoulder lightly. “You know I will, Angel.”



## CHAPTER 28

The Race Master stood on his outdoor firing range in Southbridge, Massachusetts and aimed his antique pistol at the head of Christopher Johansen, the wayward operative who'd disobeyed direct orders regarding the girl in Cleveland and who was now strapped to a wooden post thirty yards away.

By no coincidence whatsoever

was the gun balanced in the Race Master's right hand at the moment a 7.65 mm Walther pistol – the same make of weapon that a fifty-six-year-old Adolf Hitler had used to splatter his own brains all over the walls of his underground Berlin bunker as the Russians had closed in on him on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1945. As a matter of fact, the gun had been chosen for *precisely* that

reason. An unsubtle tribute to the greatest man who'd ever walked the face of the earth.

The Race Master shook his head, remembering the *Fuhrer's* life fondly. Still, while death before dishonor might have been a noble sentiment, it certainly wasn't one he intended to emulate for himself. No, *his* end would come quite naturally, and not for another thirty years or so, if he had any say in the matter.

The Race Master gripped the pistol at his side and called out to the traitor in a cheerful voice. “Hey there, Christopher! Are you ready to meet your Maker?”

The badly beaten man’s eyes flooded with terror. Pitiful little grunts emerged from the silver masking tape covering his mouth. Rivers of bright red blood streamed down his face from a

nasty-looking wound on his head.

The Race Master lifted the pistol high above his head and fired it off once, startling a massive flock of birds from the branches of the trees all around them. On cue, Josef Sullivan stepped forward and ripped away the masking tape from the traitor's mouth.

Christopher Johansen sucked a ragged breath into his lungs, looking very sick. "I'm sorry, sir!" he yelled.



“Please don’t kill me!”

The Race Master held a hand to his ear and cocked his head to one side.

“What was that, Christopher? I can’t hear you. You’re sniveling like a little bitch over there. Just calm down, man.”

Johansen’s bright blue eyes bulged wildly from their sockets. “I said I want to live, sir! Please don’t kill me! I’ll do anything you want!”

The Race Master considered this for a long moment, then leaned over and stroked Bane's massive head. "You'll do anything I want, Christopher?" he asked. "Anything at all?"

Johansen nodded frantically, looking for all the world like a bobblehead doll stationed on the dashboard of a moving car. "Yes, sir! Anything! Just please let me live! I'll

never fuck up again, I promise!”

“Will you pay me, Christopher?”

“Yes, sir! I swear it!”

The Race Master nodded himself, a bit more calmly than Johansen. Then again, *he* was the one holding the gun, now wasn't he? Sort of took the guesswork out of figuring out who was in charge here. “How much money will you pay me in exchange for your life, Christopher?” the Race Master

asked. “How much is it *worth* to you, exactly? Ten thousand dollars? Twenty? Fifty? What’s the going rate these days for defying me?”

Johansen swallowed hard. “I’ve got almost a million dollars stashed away, sir. You can have all of it.”

The Race Master lifted an eyebrow at the mention of this unexpected windfall. A fresh influx of

cash certainly couldn't *hurt* the cause.

Because paying nearly two hundred men from his own pocket often tended to make balancing the books a somewhat tricky proposition at times. “Where is this money, Christopher?” the Race Master asked.

“Buried behind my house, sir. Right next to the shed. Four paces west as you're facing the door. It's in a lockbox five feet down. No one else

knows it's there. I've never told anyone about it."

"And I can have all of this money, Christopher?"

"Yes, sir. Every last cent."

"As long as I don't kill you? That's the deal, right?"

Johansen nodded again, even *more* vigorously this time. Hope flooded into his eyes and replaced the

terror that had been residing there just a moment earlier. He blew out a slow breath that deflated his already thin chest another six inches. “Yes, sir. That’s the deal. As long as you don’t kill me.”

The Race Master pressed his lips together and holstered his weapon at his side. “Very well, Christopher. I guess today’s your lucky day then. I won’t kill you.”

Turning to the huge dog at his

feet, he then cut short the grateful sigh of relief in the other man's throat by pointing in Johansen's direction. "*Angriff*, Bane!" he ordered.

Five seconds later, Bane finally got his first taste of human blood.

From all appearances, it was a treat that had been well worth the wait.

When all the dust had finally settled on the gory scene thirty seconds



later — Johansen's traitorous throat shredded to ribbons now and his high-pitched screams of agony still echoing in the deep woods all around them — Sullivan approached, his face green with nausea.

The Race Master laughed and reached out a large hand, clasping it onto the younger man's shoulder. "Buck up now, Josef," he said. "It wasn't *that* bad, was it? Anyway, who's our next

target?”

Sullivan swallowed away a huge lump from his throat while his employer's dog busied itself by licking Johansen's bright red blood hungrily off its thick black lips. “Janice Wiley, sir,” Sullivan said. “A college professor in New Mexico.”

The Race Master waved a hand in the air, enjoying the feeling of

absolute *power* rippling through his muscles.

He was a *god*.

“Very well, Josef,” the Race Master said, “you may proceed with the next execution.”



## CHAPTER 29

Blankenship slept on the plane ride out to Seattle, but Dana couldn't stop her mind from buzzing. The adrenalin rush flooding through her veins right now made her feel like she'd just downed fifteen cups of espresso in the space of ten minutes.

Her heartbeat palpitated irregularly in her chest. Her stomach swam with nausea. Her head throbbed.

And why the hell not? The murders of Laura Settle and Betsy Campbell were among the most repugnant she'd ever investigated in her entire career, rivaling even the disgusting bloodbath in which both her parents had died at the sadistic hand of Nathan Stiedowe way back in 1976.

Dana glanced over at Blankenship. He had two adorable little

girls that he needed to worry about. Two adorable little girls who might not have made it into this blink-and-you-missed-it, sometimes-beautiful world had Lee Maxwell Jarvis encountered Blankenship's wife during her pregnancy.

Her stomach went even more sour at the thought. Because being a parent meant more than just the fun stuff, she knew, more than just long days

strolling along sandy beaches with the waves rolling in over your bare feet. More than just giggle-filled nights spent over endless bowls of popcorn while you your most comfy sets of pajamas and watched the latest sequel to *Ice Age* or *The Little Mermaid* or *The Lion King*, giggling uproariously the entire time. And she'd do damn well to remember that if she were lucky enough to become



Bradley's mother.

Dana sighed, missing him more than she thought she could ever miss *anyone*. And even though the little boy wouldn't be her natural child, the love she felt for him sure as hell *felt* natural enough to her. And who knew? Maybe she and Bradley could forge an even *stronger* since they'd actually *chosen* one another.

One thing was for sure: Dana

couldn't wait to find out.

She smiled at the thought of their upcoming play-date despite the uneasiness still boiling away in her stomach. Shelley Margolis would accompany them to the Cleveland Zoo for a fun-filled day of animal-watching, and Dana had very little doubt that the child psychologist would take notes the entire time regarding the way she and

Bradley interacted with one another, so she'd really need to bring her "A" game that day.

Dana blew out a slow breath over her teeth and stretched her neck in a futile effort to relieve some of the tension knotting up her aching muscles. Flying economy was worse than wearing a straitjacket sometimes, but it had been all that she and Blankenship could get on such short notice – not to mention all the

government would spring for. If she'd been able to, though, Dana would've paid for at least business class from her own pocket and would've considered it money well spent.

She let out another soft breath. Cramped flying quarters aside, she knew that if she never accomplished another thing in her entire life that she couldn't afford to let down her new partner or his

two little girls. Bradley, either. And to guard against that possibility, she'd need to dig down deep right into her very *soul* and gut it out even when the going got tough. Even when the going got impossible.

And even if it meant that she'd miss out on sleep for the next forty-eight hours.

Small price to pay, all things considered.

Dana shook her head. Hell, she'd stay up for a *hundred* hours if it meant that she and Blankenship could wrap up this horrific case and put away the heartless perpetrators behind it. Even for a seasoned investigator like her – someone who'd watched her own parents brutally butchered in front of her shocked and horrified eyes when she'd been just four years old – the vicious

murders of the pregnant women had proven almost too much for to bear. Once again, death would have been too *good* for the monsters who'd carved out those unborn babies from their mother's pregnant stomachs.

Then again, death wouldn't have been a bad place to start.

Besides, Dana wasn't really that tired right now, anyway. Far from it, actually. Frustrated? Yeah. Pissed

off? Hell, yeah. Feeling like she might lose her mind and murder someone herself if another pregnant woman died another horrible death? You'd better fucking believe it. But not *tired*. Not even close. Her rage kept her awake; *fueled* her. After all, how *could* she feel tired after what had happened to those poor women?

She shuddered as the terrible



reality of the situation chilled her all the way down to her bone marrow. Two pregnant black women and their unborn children had already died gruesome deaths, and no doubt there'd be more to come — and *soon* — if she and Blankenship didn't start making some serious headway on this case. With any luck at all, though, they'd find the next bloody piece of the puzzle somewhere in the backseat of Betsy Campbell's green

Subaru hatchback, where the prize-winning musician had died on a deserted stretch of highway at the hands of some murdering white-supremacist asshole out there who'd thought it a perfectly reasonable proposition to cut an unborn baby from the distended stomach of an expecting woman.

Dana shook her head again and tried to reset her brain's wiring. Try as

she might, she just couldn't shake the abrupt and extremely *troubling* suspicion that they'd *missed* something back in New York City.

But what the hell had they missed?

She ran through the day's events in her mind again. She and Blankenship had done their due diligence on Jarvis's apartment, questioning the man's landlord before handing off the case to

the very capable hands of another pair of federal agents from the NYC field office. And Jarvis had ruled *himself* out as a suspect in Betsy Campbell's horrific death, doing everyone a huge favor by hurling himself off the Queensboro Bridge at ten a.m. that morning.

Dana tapped the side of her head in an effort to get her brain working

more efficiently. It didn't work at first, but then the bone-chilling realization suddenly dawned on her with all the subtlety of an aluminum baseball bat cracking hard across her forehead.

She sucked in a sharp breath through her nostrils that stabbed her lungs like a switchblade knife. Not only did it *seem* odd that someone capable of slicing unborn babies from pregnant women's stomachs would feel such a

high level of remorse so soon after committing his heartless crime, it was absolutely *unthinkable*.

She widened her pale blue eyes as the idea wormed its way even deeper into the center of her brain, her heartbeat skipping several beats in her chest.

She reached over and shook Blankenship awake.

Dana's new partner emerged

bleary-eyed from whatever dream he'd been having, obviously not pleased about having been roused from his slumber. "What is it?" Blankenship asked irritably, shaking his head in annoyance and blinking rapidly to clear the sleep from his tired brain.

Dana held his drowsy stare and gripped his right wrist forcefully enough to bring him back into the present. She needed him here for this. "Jarvis didn't

commit suicide,” she said, feeling her heartbeat notch up another fifty levels in her chest. “The son of a bitch was *murdered.*”





## CHAPTER 30

When the last of the cops had finally cleared out an hour later, Angel found herself alone in the same house that she and Granny Bernice had shared since Angel had been a baby.

Her grandmother's *Baseball Weekly* lay open across the kitchen table, the statistics that had caught Granny Bernice's eye circled in red marker. In the upper-left margin of the

open page, Granny Bernice had scrawled, *Hafner's gotta stop swinging at that first pitch! They're always throwing him junk!*

Going back out onto the porch, Angel held her kitten, Tinkerbelle, in her lap for the next hour, much too numb to cry. Much too numb to do anything, really, but sit there.

There were arrangements she'd

have to make now, of course, and she wasn't looking forward to any of them. The funeral Mass over at St Anthony's... the burial at Edgewater Cemetery... dealing with her grandmother's bank accounts and other financial concerns... dealing with the undertaker.

When the utter *emptiness* inside her chest finally threatened to swallow her alive twenty minutes later, she went back into the house and made her way

across the kitchen before picking up the phone.

She paused and considered what she was about to do. *Was she really ready to open this door again?* she wondered.

She took a deep breath through her nostrils and let out the air again in a slow exhale over her bottom teeth. Before she could change her mind about

what she was doing, she dialed a familiar number on the old-fashioned rotary phone hanging on the kitchen wall.

*Was she really ready to open this door again?*

Only one way to find out.



# CHAPTER 31

Janice Wiley stood in front of her freshman Creative Writing class at New Mexico State University and went over the bullet-points of her lecture again.

“OK, everyone. So, we want to start out our stories with action, right? Grab the reader straight from the first page and they’re more likely to continue reading. Avoid passive voice whenever



possible. Use strong verbs and always avoid adverbs like the plague.”

A blonde girl in the back of the class raised her hand.

“Yes, Jessica?”

“What’s the key to finding a literary agent, Dr. Wiley?”

Janice cleared her throat. “Wish I knew, honey. I’m just a frustrated novelist like the rest of you. Hell, my

muse left me way before any of you kids were even born.”

“What’d she go and do a heartless thing like that for?” a boy in front asked.

Janice smiled. “Because she’s a heartless bitch, Justin. A mean, heartless bitch.”

The entire class laughed.

Twenty minutes later, Janice dismissed the last class of the day on a

Friday afternoon to go celebrate the weekend. Frat-house keggers awaited the less-inventive among her students while the more daring of their number would no doubt experiment with some clumsy same-sex romance in the back of the library stacks. And why not? Wasn't that what college was all about? Trying out new things? In any event, Jackson Hall had been largely emptied

out now as Janice crafted her lesson plan for the following week.

A moment later, a soft knock sounded at the door.

Janice looked up from her lesson plan to see a huge blonde man standing in her doorway. “May I help you, sir?” she asked.

The man smiled a set of perfectly straight white teeth at her. “I’ve got a creative writing question for you there,

if you don't mind, professor.”

Janice sighed. Though her office hours had been clearly posted on her door, it never failed that some random student would show up to pick her brain at five o'clock on a Friday afternoon.

“What's your question, sir?” she asked, trying her best to hide the impatience in her voice but no doubt falling far short.

“I'll see what I can do but it needs to be

quick. I've got a doctor's appointment that I need to keep in exactly forty-five minutes. I've been waiting two weeks for this appointment now and I really can't afford to reschedule. These people make it *very* difficult to do so."

The blonde man shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, still looming in the doorway and stretching his powerful-looking neck. "I'll make it quick, I promise, professor. Anyway,

what does it mean when they say you have to murder all your little darlings?”

Janice waved a hand in the air.

“It’s nowhere near as dramatic as it sounds, I assure you. It’s a reference to purple prose, flowery writing. It means you have to cut out all the fat from your story, no matter how badly it hurts.”

The blonde man nodded and stepped inside the classroom, pulling

shut the door behind him and producing a switchblade knife from the back pocket of his designer blue jeans before taking a menacing step in her direction. “Well, now, you’ve got a little darling in your stomach there right now, don’t you, nigger? Should I cut that out too? No matter how badly it hurts?”

A split-second later, Janice Wiley’s terrified screams echoed throughout the marble-tiled hallways of



the largely deserted academic building. A hundred yards away – on the far side of the structure and shielded by a long table lined with Bunson burners – English major Joe Blanton and philosophy minor Kenneth Hammond broke their frantic embrace in the back of the chemistry lab and raised their eyebrows quizzically at one another.

Then the boys simply shrugged

their shoulders and went back to what they'd been doing. After all, they'd waited a *very* long time for this day to finally arrive and whatever the screaming was about would just have to wait. This had to happen *now* or it was at risk of never happening at all.

And in the state each boy found himself currently, that simply wasn't a realistic option at this point.

Wasn't a realistic option, at all.





## CHAPTER 32

Blankenship's tired brown eyes as Dana's words filtered through the fog in his brain and slammed hard into his cerebral cortex.

He sat up straighter in his seat and blew out a short, hard breath. "Well, I'll be goddamned," he said. "Didn't even occur to me that whoever outfitted Jarvis with his fancy new suit would want to make good and goddamn

sure that they didn't leave any open ends behind. Make good and goddamn sure that the asshole didn't sing out his poor little orphan heart if you and I got to him in time to demand a private concert. Fucking rookie mistake on my part.”

“ O n *both* our parts,” Dana corrected. “I was every bit as blinded as you. Didn't occur to me either until just now.”

“Yeah, but *you* finally figured it out,” Blankenship said. He paused while his mind cleared further and his brain went to work more efficiently inside his skull. “Anyway, I’ll update Kendall and Mulvey when we touch down in Washington. But the question now is: what the fuck are we going to *do* about it?”

Dana shrugged. “I don’t know.

I'll touch base with Krugman when we land in Seattle and see what he thinks about the whole thing. Other than that, though, I have no idea."

Blankenship shook his head. "I was dreaming about my little girls, you know," he said, almost wistfully.

Dana smiled gently. "I don't blame you. Those two little angels are certainly worth dreaming about. You're a very lucky man, Bruce. Don't ever



forget that.”

Blankenship shook his head again. “Never do, sister.” He pulled back the sleeve on his navy-blue blazer and glanced down at his watch.

“Anyway, we’ve still got another two hours before we touch down in Washington, so what do you say you and I put our time to good use instead of me sleeping it all away in La-La Land?”

Dana lifted her eyebrows.

“What did you have in mind?”

Blankenship leaned forward in his seat and retrieved his briefcase from underneath the seat in front of him. Sliding out Lee Jarvis's Macbook Pro, he flipped down his tray table and powered on the computer.

When the Macbook had cycled through all its start-up processes, he

cracked his knuckles loudly and ran his fingertips deftly over the keypad. “Watch and learn, my dear Holmes,” he said. “I’m about to show you how I’m not *entirely* useless. I didn’t go to M.I.T. just for the chicks, you know.”

Dana gave him a look.

Blankenship pulled back his head in mock offence. “What? That was *part* of it, sure, but not the *only* thing.”

Dana rolled her eyes.

“Whatever you say, Watson.” She  
nodded down at Jarvis’s computer.  
“Anyway, I don’t want to hear about  
how you broke the hearts of all the nerdy  
girls out in Massachusetts right now.  
Just hurry up and show me what you can  
do with that thing already.”



## CHAPTER 33

“Oh my God, Angel. Just, oh my God.”

Malachai’s glistening brown eyes brimmed over with tears. He’d loved Angel’s grandmother, too – no matter how much good-natured ribbing the old woman had subjected him to.

Sitting close together on a bench at Edgewater Park with their knees touching, Angel and Malachai stared out

at the massive merchant marine ships that were floating by on Lake Erie. A beautiful evening – still sunny and warm – bathed their skin like bathwater. Seagulls filled the blue sky above, calling out to each other noisily in their piercing voices as they rode the wind effortlessly on their outstretched wings.

“What are you going to do?”

Malachai asked finally. “Are you going

to stay in the house, or is that going to be too hard for you?”

He paused and looked down at the ground. “You can always stay with me, you know. I can always sleep on the couch.”

Angel brushed aside the subtle reference to his infidelity with a weak wave of her left hand. She knew that he wasn't trying to add to her grief right now. He was trying to take *away* her



pain, just like he'd always tried to do ever since they'd been seventeen years old. No matter what his other faults might be – and there were a hell of a lot of them, she knew – Malachai Grimes was still an extremely sensitive man. An extremely *loving* man. It was what had drawn her to the jerk in the first place.

Angel smiled gently at him.

“Thank you, Malachai. We'll see, but I

think that I want to stay in the house for now, stay around her things. I don't know if that makes any sense to you, but I really think it's something I need to do at this point. For now, anyway."

Malachai nodded. "It makes perfect sense, Angel. But if it ever gets to be too much for you, my offer stands. I know I haven't always been the best boyfriend in the world but..."

She cut him off with a look

before he could finish. She didn't want to hear the rest right now. *Couldn't* hear the rest right now, really. It was just too painful.

Looking deep into his soft brown eyes, Angel suddenly realized with her whole heart and mind and body and soul that Malachai would take away all her pain if only he somehow could, and that would need to be enough for her.

For now, anyway.

That was when the tears finally came.

Malachai didn't say anything else after that, just held Angel close on that park bench while she let all the sadness come spilling out through her eyes.

There was an awful lot of it.



## CHAPTER 34

The sharp knife glanced off the copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses* that Janice Wiley jerked up in front of her face just as the huge blonde man came lunging across the empty classroom at her.

Janice had never liked the book before – had always found it rather dry and almost impossible to understand in certain places – but now she absolutely

*loved* the goddamn thing. From here on out, Joyce would always be her No. 1, go-to guy, no matter what. Come hell or high water, he'd be her favorite author for the rest of her life – however long or short that might turn out to be right now.

Her chair clattered down noisily to the floor as she scrambled to her feet and scurried around the desk, trying to keep some distance between herself and

the huge blonde man as they went around in circles staring at each other like predator and prey. The blond man's breathing sounded excited, like an animal that had smelled blood on its mortally wounded quarry and now sensed the presence of a long-overdue meal.

His piercing blue eyes glittered with undisguised hatred as Janice kicked off her high-heeled shoes in order to



give her feet better traction on the slippery floor. Her heartbeat slammed violently against her ribcage, pumping blood furiously to all parts of her body and doing whatever the hell it could do to keep her alive. “What do you want from me?” Janice sobbed. “What did I *do* to you? Please leave me alone. I’m *pregnant*, for Christ’s sake!”

The blonde man sneered and

whipped the sharp knife back and forth through the air. “I *know* that, bitch,” he hissed. “That’s exactly why I’m here. You and your race-traitor husband are fucking up my country with that mutant inside your stomach and now you’re going to die for it. You *a n d* that goddamn virus.”

Before Janice knew what was happening, the blonde man was suddenly on top of the desk and launching his huge

body through the air.

Her entire world slammed into slow motion, her terrified eyes widening in abject horror as the sharp silver knife came flashing down like a lightning strike on her exposed throat. Fumbling for the steel letter opener on her desk, she whipped it up in front of her face and squeezed shut her eyes tight just as the huge blonde man came crashing

down on top of her.

A moment later, she was gasping for breath beneath the man's heavy weight as his muscular body pinned her hard to the floor. Janice's entire *soul* trembled as warm liquid spurted over her face from the open wound at the man's throat. Only the handle of the letter opener remained visible now; the rest of it had been jammed deep into the blonde man's throbbing jugular vein.

Janice started screaming again then, drowning out the watery gurgling sounds the huge blonde man made as he choked to death on his own blood. In the chemistry lab across Jackson Hall, Joe Blanton and Kenneth Hammond finally zipped up their pants and used Joe's Motorola Razr cellphone to call the police. And why not? They'd just finished up with what they'd been doing,

anyway.

Besides, each boy had a girlfriend who he needed to get back to right away. And considering the girls' *own* adventurous natures, no doubt the kinky little bitches had been up to the *exact* same thing with one another while Joe and Kenneth had been away.

Then again, college was completely awesome like that, wasn't it?

Goddamn right, it was.







## CHAPTER 35

Blankenship extracted his iPhone from the inside pocket of his blazer and connected it to Jarvis's computer with the same USB wire that he'd used to connect to the television set back at the Devine Office Building in New York City earlier in the day.

Dana shuddered, trying her best to erase from her brain the horrifying memory of Laura Settle's brutal murder

in the elevator car. Didn't work. She had very little doubt that the sickening images would remain seared into her memory forever. And like it or not, there wasn't a goddamn thing she could do about it now. After all, she couldn't very well *un*-see what she'd already seen, now could she? Of course she couldn't. And at least the gruesome images from the elevator car would have

plenty of company inside her horror-show mind, right?

Dana shook her head to chase away the images. “What’re you doing?” she asked, looking on over Blankenship’s shoulder and trying desperately to move along her thoughts to somewhere else. *Anywhere* other than the elevator car back in New York City and the nauseating events that had transpired within the confines of its

cramped and blood-spattered walls.

Blankenship tapped a few commands into the iPhone's keypad. "Running a program that'll search Jarvis's computer for hidden files," he said. "Documents, photographs, videos – that kind of stuff."

Dana lifted her eyebrows, confused. "Didn't you do that already?"

Blankenship shook his head.

“Not really. Nothing hardcore, at least. I performed a quick manual sweep back at Jarvis’s apartment, but now I’m basically using a Hoover in place of a broom.”

“Paints quite the abstract picture.”

Blankenship laughed distractedly, already lost in his work on the computer and not reading Dana’s meaning between the lines. “Doesn’t it

just, though? I guess you could call me the Jackson Pollock of computers if you couldn't think of anything else to call me.”

Though she easily could have thought of far more colorful endearments to call him at the moment, Dana bit her tongue. “Fine, Jackson Pollock,” she said. “I guess what I’m trying to tell you here is that nothing of what you just said

made any sense to me.” Dana had tried her best for years, but she’d never been able to understand computers much beyond the basics of knowing how to surf the Internet and check her email. Unfortunately for her, though, Blankenship didn’t seem to be much of a teacher. Quite the opposite, actually.

Blankenship finally glanced up from his iPhone. “Right, sorry about that, Dana. I guess sometimes I forget

just how big of a geek I am.” He shook his head. “Anyway, if you want to hide files from the prying eyes of others – and if you know what you’re doing – it’s a fairly simple proposition to throw off the casual snoop. Unfortunately for whomever Jarvis was working, though, I’m not a casual snoop. I’m a *professional* one.”

And with that thoroughly



mystifying explanation, he hit another key on his iPhone and sat back in his seat without really having explained anything at all. Dana pressed her lips together in irritation and looked on over Blankenship's shoulder again while an indecipherable jumble of numbers, letters and symbols flashed across the MacBook Pro's screen. After several interminable moments of the disorienting visual hodge-podge, the electronic

madness finally came to an abrupt stop.

Blankenship leaned forward in his seat and ran his stare across the screen. “Bingo,” he said. “That didn’t take very long, now did it?”

Dana frowned “What did you find?”

Blankenship shifted the computer on his tray table in order to afford her a better angle at the screen. “Jarvis tried

to mask this particular file in a misleading directory. Third grade-level shit, really. He didn't do a very good job of it. In any event, it's a video."

Dana leaned in closer to the screen. "A video of what?"

Blankenship shrugged. "No idea. Wanna find out?"

"Of course. Let's see what we've got here."

Blankenship enlarged the screen

and moved the digital pointer over the PLAY button before tapping the trackpad once. Movement sprang to life on the screen.

In the video, Lee Maxwell Jarvis had obviously dressed in his Sunday best. The white-supremacist murderer was stomping frantically back and forth across a large stage located in what appeared to be the front of a huge

auditorium. From all appearances, he'd been filled right up to his murdering eyeballs with the oh-so-energizing presence of the Holy Spirit.

The stage across which Jarvis stomped was decked out with elaborate candelabras, burning candles of varying heights illuminating the religious spectacle. A humongous banner provided the backdrop for the holy-roller scene, emblazoned with the

inspirational message, *Jesus is the Way and the Light!* Clever juxtaposition with the candles, Dana supposed. Or at least a juxtaposition of *some* sort, anyway.

Perspiring heavily, Jarvis was shouting into a wireless microphone and whipping up his audience into a frenzied pitch through the dramatic use of his voice, his tone rising and falling

theatrically in a well-worn public-speaking technique known to televangelists all around the world. His lilting cadences hypnotized his listeners, filled them with euphoria – and most likely loosened up their wallets and purse strings too, Dana guessed.

“The heathen expresses Black roots!” Jarvis wailed, a statement that drew orgasmic cheers from the assembled faithful. “Of the hell

everyone rues, here oscillates our destiny! Today's harbinger envelops blatant racial overtones. Therefore, He expects rabid hate of ordinary disciples! To honor evolutionary black radicalism over the highly exalted ruler has obviously only destroyed the Heavenly expressions brought raining over the helpers employed."

Dana reached over and tapped



the pause button. “What the fuck is this shit?” she snapped. “It doesn’t even make any sense.”

Blankenship shrugged. “Don’t know. Shall we watch a bit more of it, though? I was just getting into it. I don’t think I’ve ever seen this movie before.”

Dana shook her head in exasperation, then leaned forward and tapped the play button again. “I guess we don’t have much choice.”

On the screen, Jarvis went on with his over-the-top delivery. “Reality has offered overwhelming damnation to he engaged – brokenhearted – raiding our time here, effectively reducing Heaven’s own omnipresent deity to...”

Three minutes later, the annoying video blissfully came to an end. “It’s complete fucking gibberish,” Dana said when Jarvis had completed his

nonsensical ranting in the auditorium.

“What the fuck is this asshole *talking* about?”

Blankenship shook his head.

“Not a clue, partner. But did you get a load of the crowd shots?”

Dana nodded. Even though Jarvis’s words might as well have been Chinese to her and Blankenship, those in attendance had glowed with all the religious zeal and fervor of Heaven’s

Gate cult members listening to Marshall Applewhite proselytize about the Hale-Bopp comet, right before the UFO enthusiasts had committed mass suicide in San Diego, California back in 1997.

Dana blew out a frustrated breath that sagged her chest. “I’m going to have someone back at Quantico transcribe that crap just as soon as we touch down in Washington,” she said. “I want to read

it, but I really don't think I can stomach listening to it again."

Blankenship lifted his eyebrows at her. "Why are you going to do that?"

Dana shifted in her seat. A weird feeling buzzed in her veins. "I don't know. Something about Jarvis's words just bugs the shit out of me for some reason. I can't quite put my finger on *what* it is – I just know that it bugs me."

Blankenship shook his head.

“No, what I mean is: why are you going to have somebody back in Quantico transcribe the thing? You’re looking at one of the fastest speed-typists in the world sitting right here next to you.”

Dana pulled back her head in surprise. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Blankenship pressed his lips

together into a grim line. “I’d never kid about something that serious. A hundred and ninety-two words per minute when I’m really in zone. Four-time intramural champ at M.I.T.”

Dana lifted her eyebrows and swept a hand over the keyboard. “By all means, sir.”

Blankenship smiled and stretched his fingers. Plugging a pair of earbuds into a small hole located on the

left-hand side of the Macbook Pro, he placed the buds into his ears and restarted the video on the computer before getting down to work.

“Watch and learn, sister,” he said. “Watch. And. Learn.”





## CHAPTER 36

Granny Bernice's funeral at St Anthony's Catholic Church three days later marked the saddest, most beautiful event Angel had ever attended. Moving and poignant at times, happy and joyful at others as they all remembered her grandmother's remarkable life.

They didn't have a lot of family, she and Granny Bernice, but what they had came flying in from all around the

country to be with them that day. One distant cousin had even flown in all the way from California. That's how much people had loved her grandmother, and Angel only hoped that her own funeral would be as well attended one day. From start to finish, the funeral Mass proved a fitting tribute to a woman who'd always been there for everyone else her entire life.

The priest had made everyone laugh when he'd told the assembled congregation about the first time he'd ever met Granny Bernice.

“She came up to me after Mass one Sunday morning and looked me square in the eye,” the man recounted. “She said, ‘Father Peter, if our God is such a loving God, why the heck does He always let the Yankees win the

pennant every year? Wouldn't you think He'd let the Indians win one every once in a while, too? I mean, I'm a patient woman and all, but this is starting to get ridiculous. I've been waiting around since 1948 for another World Series title, and to tell you the truth, it's starting to get on my nerves a little bit.'"

After services, they'd all driven in a long caravan to Edgewater Cemetery with little magnetic funeral

flags planted on their cars. Granny Bernice would be facing the rising sun out over the water for the rest of eternity now, and Angel knew she would've been happy about that. Her grandmother had always loved the sunrise so very much.

By the time Angel finally made it back to their house on the west side of Cleveland that night, it was almost nine-

thirty and she was exhausted in every possible sense of the word. Physically. Mentally. Emotionally. Spiritually.

Curling up on the couch with Tinkerbelle in her lap, she held the kitten close and gently stroked Tinkerbelle's soft black fur, letting the tears come again.

But Tinkerbelle wasn't the *only* security blanket Angel had with her that night. Not even close. She also had one

of her grandmother's old T-shirts, holding it close to her face every few minutes and breathing in the old woman's scent. It was the most comforting smell she'd ever known.

Right before she drifted off to sleep – alone for the first time in her life since she'd been a baby – Angel whispered softly into the darkness.

“Nothing's changed, you know. I



still love you with all my heart, Granny  
Bernice.

“We’re always going to be best  
friends forever.”



## CHAPTER 37

Perspiring heavily and his face pale, Josef Sullivan entered the Race Master's den, which was currently filled with the frenetic sounds of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*.

Sullivan swallowed hard. To say that his employer was not the kind of man who suffered bad news lightly would have been the understatement of the century. Maybe even the millennium.

The twelve-inch Beethoven disc revolving on the antique record player over in the corner of the room marked just one of the *many* priceless records in the Race Master's extensive collection; a collection the man's family had acquired in the late 1930s and early 1940s from the sniveling Jewish hordes – sub-humans who'd been rightfully sent off to be burned alive in such places as

Auschwitz, Treblinka and Dachau.

News of the failed mission in New Mexico turned the Race Master's own face red with fury. Seething, he paced the room, muttering to himself.

The Race Master finally stopped pacing and looked back up at Sullivan. "Not your fault, Josef," he said. "Not your fault at all. The operative simply fucked up. We never should have sent him in the first place. He obviously

wasn't ready for an assignment of this magnitude."

Sullivan breathed out a grateful sigh of relief, badly needing to go to the bathroom. Not knowing what else to say, he simply offered a weak, "Thank you, sir."

The Race Master stared at him coldly. "Don't thank me just yet, Josef. You're still going to have to pay for

this. This is twice now that you've failed me and I need to make an example out of you. I can't have the other men thinking that this sort of thing is acceptable. You fail me and you pay the price. It's as simple as that. It's *always* been as simple as that. You know that. Goodbye, old friend."

At the Race Master's signal, Bane leapt at Sullivan's throat. Snarling angrily, the dog bit down deep into the

man's throbbing jugular vein, opening up the fleshy tube of like a burst water line in a flash of bright white teeth.

A powerful jet of blood spurted across the room while Bane pulled the screaming man down to the floor and went to work.

Forty-five seconds later, it was all over.

As three men in blue overalls



cleaned up the mess in his den, the Race Master selected the youngest of the trio as his new assistant. The young man appeared strong in the shoulders, and in the past had shown a desire to take a more active role in their mission.

“You’re my Number Two now, Richard,” the Race Master said, patting the young man on the shoulder and handing him the dossier on Marjorie Trimble out in Sacramento, California.

“Make this happen for me.”

Richard Patton swallowed nervously. “Yes, sir. I’ll certainly do my very best.”

The Race Master nodded and cut his stare down to Josef Sullivan’s mangled corpse on the floor three feet away. From all appearances, Bane seemed to be eating the man’s *Adam’s apple* at the moment.

“You do that, Richard. Just  
make sure your best is good enough.”



## CHAPTER 38

True to his word, Bruce Blankenship sped through the transcription of the Jarvis video in no time flat, his fingers flying over the keyboard so quickly that it made Liberace tickling the ivories on center stage at Madison Square Garden look almost *slow* by comparison. Thankfully, though, Blankenship eschewed the flair and ridiculous outfits that had marked

the flamboyant virtuoso pianist's time in the spotlight. Dana didn't think she could handle seeing him in anything other than a conservative ensemble.

When their plane finally touched down at Seattle-Tacoma airport a couple hours later, Dana's watch told her that it was nearly four a.m. – but that wasn't figuring in the three-hour time-zone shift out on the West Coast. She just hoped

that her body would adjust well enough to the time difference to keep her at the top of her game. She knew she needed to keep her mind clear and her body fresh if she wanted to get the drop on her quarry – whomever in the hell *that* might be, exactly – and like it or not, to do that she'd require a few hours' sleep.

As she and Blankenship gathered up their belongings and waited with all the other passengers to get off the plane,

Dana made a mental note to call her landlord back home in Cleveland and ask the woman to feed Oreo in the morning. Too late for that now, though.

Dana sighed heavily. Once again – as had so often been the case in the past – she felt the profound loss of Eric Carlton, who'd taken care of Oreo whenever Dana had been called out of town on business. She and Eric had



even called Oreo their “son” when Eric had been alive, and Eric had always taken his responsibilities as a father *very* seriously. To the point of actually providing Oreo with his own bedroom in apartment D13 and feeding the cat the exact same foods he ate himself during mealtimes.

The supremely ridiculous thought of them enjoying dinner together made Dana smile. Then again, that was

*exactly* the kind of man Eric had been.

The kind of person who always treated others equally – if not even *better* than himself – whether they came in human form or the feline equivalent.

Dana pursed her lips, missing her best friend badly as she and Blankenship finally disembarked the aircraft and stepped out into the bustling main concourse at Sea-Tac. Finding the

security office hidden down a long hallway on the way out, Blankenship asked a TSA guard stationed there if he could use a printer. Getting the go-ahead, he plugged in Jarvis's computer and printed off the transcript of the former youth pastor's nonsensical ranting.

“Here ya go,” Blankenship said, handing over the pages to Dana. “Let me know if you find any typos in there.”

Dana lifted her eyebrows at him.

“Is that even possible?”

Blankenship shrugged. “First time for everything, I suppose.”

Stepping outside the airport and into the chill night air, they caught a crowded shuttle over to the airport Hilton. Twenty minutes later, Dana let herself inside her room and took a quick shower before climbing into bed with

Blankenship's transcript of the Jarvis video.

Hair still wet, she slipped under the covers and puzzled over the words in the transcript for a solid hour, reading and rereading the words again until she'd go blind. No use. After sixty minutes, the words still looked just as indecipherable to her as they'd sounded in the video.

Dana shook her head in

confusion and refocused her attention on the first six sentences of the transcript, even though sleep was beckoning her now like the ceaseless ocean tides rolling in:

*The heathen expresses Black roots! Of the hell everyone rues, here oscillates our destiny! Today's harbinger envelops blatant racial overtones. Therefore, He expects rabid*

*hate of ordinary disciples! To honor evolutionary black radicalism over the highly exalted ruler has obviously only destroyed the Heavenly expressions brought raining over the helpers employed. Reality has offered overwhelming damnation to he engaged – brokenhearted – raiding our time here, effectively reducing Heaven's own omnipresent deity to His ecclesiastical base.*

Dana shook her head again and stared at the jumble of words some more. Still looked like complete fucking gibberish to her. Then again, where was the big surprise in that? Lee Maxwell Jarvis had seemed like *exactly* the sort of pretentious asshole who'd somehow think his verbal diarrhea profound.

Leaning over and plucking a



pencil and some hotel stationary off the nightstand, Dana listed the sentences in order:

*The heathen expresses Black roots!*

*Of the hell everyone rues, here  
oscillates our destiny!*

*Today's harbinger envelops blatant  
racial overtones.*

*Therefore, He expects rabid hate of  
ordinary disciples!*

*To honor evolutionary black radicalism over the highly exalted ruler has obviously only destroyed the Heavenly expressions brought raining over the helpers employed.*

*Reality has offered overwhelming damnation to he engaged – brokenhearted – raiding our time here, effectively reducing Heaven's own omnipresent deity to His*

*ecclesiastical base.*

Dana stretched her aching neck and began to rearrange the words on the hotel stationary. She didn't know what *else* to do. She was stumped. And that would have been putting it *extremely* mildly.

She wrote out the sentences backward, then forward again, then played around with the order in which

the sentences appeared. Didn't help at all. It was clear that Jarvis's words had blatant racist overtones to them, but it seemed peculiar to her that he'd beat around the bush like that with a bunch of fifty-cent words crammed so uncomfortably together – making sense without *really* making sense at all. Sort of like Blankenship's teaching technique. Still, *nobody* talked like that

– not even murdering white-supremacist assholes who were filled clear up to their racist eyeballs with the Holy Spirit.

Dana sat up straighter in bed and furrowed her eyebrows. *Of course* nobody talked like that. Not off the top of their heads, at least. So that could mean only one thing.

Jarvis had written out the words in advance.

She ripped off the top page of the

stationary and crumpled it up before tossing the resulting ball in the general direction of a small metal garbage can in the corner of her hotel room, feeling her heartbeat rev up in her chest.

Poising her pencil over the fresh page now on top, she began writing again.

*The heathen expresses black*

roots! Of the hell everyone rues, here  
oscillates our destiny! Today's  
harbinger envelops blatant racial  
overtones. Therefore, He expects rabid  
hate of ordinary disciples! To honor  
evolutionary black radicalism over the  
highly exalted ruler has obviously only  
destroyed the Heavenly expressions  
brought raining over the helpers  
employed. Reality has offered  
overwhelming damnation to he engaged

*– brokenhearted – raiding our time here, effectively reducing Heaven's own omnipresent deity to His ecclesiastical base.*

Dana stared at the maddening words for another ten minutes, feeling ridiculous, like she'd somehow switched places with Professor Robert Langdon in Dan Brown's bestselling



novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, almost as though she were currently engaged in some sort of overwhelmingly complicated puzzle or code cracking.

She sucked in a sharp breath through her nostrils.

Widening her pale blue eyes, she went back over the sentences and darkened in the first letter of each word:

Th e **h**eathen expresses **b**lack

roots! Of the hell everyone rues, here  
oscillates our destiny! Today's  
harbinger envelops blatant racial  
overtones. Therefore He expects rabid  
hate of ordinary disciples! To honor  
evolutionary black radicalism over the  
highly exalted ruler has obviously only  
destroyed the Heavenly expressions  
brought raining over the helpers  
employed. Reality has offered

overwhelming damnation to he engaged  
– brokenhearted – raiding our time here,  
effectively reducing Heaven's own  
omnipresent deity to His ecclesiastical  
base.

Dana almost threw up. In the  
first six sentences, the same two words  
had been spelled out five times, with the  
beginning of a sixth repetition bringing  
up the rear on the sixth and final

sentence:

*The Brotherhood.*



## CHAPTER 39

Angel woke at six o'clock the next morning to take her daily jog along the Lake Erie shoreline. She wanted to keep some kind of routine going, wanted to keep her mind and body active. It was the only way she knew how to deal with the overwhelming grief.

It was another beautiful day out over Lake Erie, the sun shining brightly on the water and reflecting off the

whitecaps like a million tiny diamonds.

*Hey There Delilah* by the Plain White T's played softly on her iPod, and her pace matched the slow, heartbroken tempo of the song.

It was the right speed for her that day.

Returning home an hour later after jogging a full six miles – twice what she normally did – Angel hopped

into the shower and tried desperately to scrub away the grief. Didn't work. Not even a little bit. As the hot shower water poured down over her body and kept the tears streaming down her face company, Angel felt a hollow sensation deep inside the pit of her stomach, missing the feeling of knowing that her grandmother would be waiting for her out in the kitchen with a fresh pot of coffee when Angel had finished



preparing for the day.

After drying off, she dressed in one of her favorite outfits: a knee-length white skirt and a bright, lightweight, flower-patterned blouse. Her heart still felt heavy in her chest, of course, but her cheerful outfit helped pick up her mood a notch. The ensemble in which she'd chosen to face the day had always been one of Granny Bernice's favorite outfits,

too, and that made Angel feel just a little bit closer to her grandmother.

*Besides, Angel thought as she locked the front door of their house behind herself and descended the rickety steps out front, I may be in mourning right now, but I'm still a lady, damn it.*



## CHAPTER 40

Marjorie Trimble glared at the nervous young teller seated across the desk from her in Marjorie's well-appointed office at First National Bank of Sacramento.

“This is completely unacceptable, Allison,” Marjorie said, shaking her head in exasperation while going over the thick sheaf of spreadsheets in her hands for the third

time already that morning. Marjorie flipped through the incriminating stack of papers some more and deepened the sharp frown already carved onto her face. “This is the fourth time your drawer has come up short and you’ve only been here a month. I’m very sorry, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to terminate your employment immediately.”

Allison Trent's soft blue eyes brimmed over with tears. "Please, ma'am," said the twenty-two-year-old former head cheerleader for the South Braxton Regional High School Pep Squad (*Go Wildcats!*), shifting uneasily in her seat and clearly on the verge of full-blown hysterics now. "It's only thirty dollars total and I'll gladly reimburse the difference out of my

paycheck. I didn't *steal* it. It's just that sometimes I don't calculate the transactions correctly, especially when things get really busy around here. It won't ever happen again, I swear it. Please, ma'am, just give me one more chance. I *really* need this job."

Marjorie pursed her lips and shook her head. "No. I'm very sorry, Allison, but you're going to have to leave now. One penny short is one too

many, much less thirty dollars.”

Disbelieving anger replaced the tears blurring Allison Trent’s vision as she realized that her heartfelt pleas had fallen upon stone-deaf ears. Her voice trembled with incredulity, threatening to crack clean in half in her throat. “But I’m *pregnant*, you fucking bitch!”

Marjorie rose calmly from her chair and pressed the button for security



hidden beneath the lip of her desk. “You and me both, Allison. Goodbye to you and good luck.”

When the young girl had been escorted out of her office two minutes later by two husky security guards in matching blue uniforms, Marjorie leaned back in her comfortable leather executive’s chair and sighed. Much like Allison Trent, most people at the bank probably thought her a royal bitch, but

the truth of the matter was that she really didn't give a shit. After all, you didn't become president of a major institution like hers without first displaying that particular character trait, now did you? Especially not when you were a woman.

Not to mention a *black* woman.

Six hours later, Marjorie had forgotten all about the unpleasantness

with Allison Trent back in her office as she pulled her brand-new Mercedes into her exclusive, gated housing complex thirty miles outside Sacramento. Exiting the car, Marjorie walked quickly up the driveway and slid her key into the front door lock of her beautiful home, knowing as she did so that no one would be waiting for her inside. Some things in this life just never changed, no matter how much time had passed or how much

money you'd made.

No matter how incredibly successful you'd become.

Marjorie sighed and stepped inside the elaborate marble-tiled foyer.

Whatever. Being alone was just *fine* with her. Hell, she'd been alone her entire *life*, so why should that change now? And no matter what anyone expected from her — including the

overbearing Reginald Craft III, the president of a competing bank across town and a man with whom Marjorie had made a *very* unfortunate decision following too many glasses of wine nine weeks earlier – the fruits of her labor wouldn't be compromised in the least little bit by the fruit of her *other* labor, the one that was coming up in exactly seven months and three days now, according to her doctor. Marjorie

wouldn't get an abortion, but neither would she let the child sidetrack her career, as Reginald had so pompously suggested she should let happen.

Marjorie shook her head again, even harder this time. No friggin' way. Not in *this* lifetime, at least. She'd worked way too goddamn long and way too goddamn hard to get to where she'd made it to today, and the kid would have

the very best childcare that money could buy. If nothing else, it certainly marked a hell of a lot more than she could say for her *own* miserable upbringing.

Tossing her keys onto the highly polished mahogany table underneath a huge mirror in the foyer, Marjorie checked out her reflection. No glow yet, and she really didn't expect to see one, either. She just wasn't that kind of woman who *glowed*. Never had been

and most likely never would be. It just wasn't in her nature.

She tried to smile at herself in the mirror, but it was a smile that never quite reached her enormous hazel eyes. Shaking her head again, she turned around and her enormous hazel eyes immediately widened in shock and agony as she was met at once with a huge butcher's knife plunging directly



into her newly pregnant stomach.

“I’m here to make a withdrawal of that baby in your belly, nigger,” a huge blonde man panted, wrenching the sharp knife violently upward and spilling Marjorie’s guts all over the marble-tiled floor of her beautiful home. “Next time only spread your legs for your *own* kind, bitch.”



# CHAPTER 41

Dana brought Blankenship up to speed on her previous night's discovery while the two agents partook of the free continental breakfast offered up by the Hilton in the hotel's leafy courtyard, munching on crunchy English muffins and washing them down with tall, cold glasses of orange juice as the bright morning sunlight streamed down from the cloudless blue sky above and

illuminated the pleasant scene.

Blankenship lifted his eyebrows at her when Dana had finished relating all the details of what she'd found in the Jarvis video the previous night, clearly impressed. "Nice work, Agent Whitestone," he said, shaking his head in undisguised admiration. "*Damn* nice work, as a matter of fact. I can see why you finished at the top of your class at

the Academy. I only came in twelfth out of a hundred and thirty-six, myself.”

Dana cocked her head modestly to one side, fighting back a smile. “Hey, what can I say? I just got lucky.” She lifted up her gaze to the brilliant blue skies above. “Like they say, the sun shines down on even a dog’s ass every once in a while, right?”

Blankenship shook his head and leaned down to extract Jarvis’s

computer from his leather briefcase, flipping it open on the glass-topped table between them. “Nothing lucky about it at all,” he said. “Don’t sell yourself short like that. It might have been a simple code to break, but I wouldn’t have even thought to look for it in the first place. Takes a special mind to work like that.”

Dana nodded at Jarvis’s

computer, feeling uncomfortable with the praise and wanting to shift the conversation away from it. Pride came before a fall and she'd fallen way too many times in her life – not to mention way too goddamn *hard* – to give into it again now. At thirty-nine years old, she was *plenty* old enough to know better, plenty old enough to have learned from her many, *many* past mistakes. Besides, tempting fate had never worked out

especially well for her, had it? No. As a matter of fact, from all indications, fate liked nothing better than to kick her squarely in the teeth each and every time that she felt like she might actually be getting a handle on the colossal train wreck of her life. “What’re you doing now?” she asked, stretching her neck and wishing like hell that the kink living there would find somewhere else to



reside already. The pillow back in her hotel room had been better than the one they'd provided on the plane ride out to Seattle, but not by much.

Blankenship reached into his briefcase again and extracted a small plug-in device, sliding the device into the USB port on Jarvis's computer.

“Gonna use this air-card here to get online, see if I can't hack into the Brotherhood's website and see who's

running the show and paying all the bills.”

Dana took a sip of her orange juice and cringed against the sharp taste so soon after brushing her teeth. “Good idea,” she said, taking another quick swallow of her juice in an effort to drown out the last of the toothpaste. Didn’t work. Aim stuck around for a while. Always had.

Three long minutes passed before Blankenship finally looked up from Jarvis's computer again. He shook his head in disappointment. "No good," he said. "The Brotherhood's server is located in Nigeria, of all places. It's also shielded by at least fourteen proxy servers that I can see from here. Basically impossible to crack with the shitty equipment I've got with me."

Dana didn't bother asking her new partner to explain himself. She didn't see the point. She'd experienced Blankenship's teaching technique on the plane ride out to Seattle, and she didn't especially care to be subjected to it again. Not this early in the morning.

Blankenship flipped closed the computer and returned it to his briefcase before glancing down at his watch. "So,

when are these guys supposed to be picking us up, anyway?" he asked. "It's almost eight-thirty."

Dana looked up. Across the courtyard, two men dressed in dark blue suits scanned the breakfast crowd. The taller of the pair caught her eye and lifted his eyebrows. Dana nodded back. "Right now," she said, rising to her feet. "C'mon, partner. Let's go catch us some white-supremacist bad guys."

Maybe fuck up their white-bread worlds  
a little bit while we're at it."

Blankenship rose to his own feet,  
slinging the nylon strap of his briefcase  
over his left shoulder. "Right behind  
you. Let's go nail these fuckers to a  
burning cross."

Dana elbowed Blankenship  
lightly in the ribs as they made their way  
across the courtyard. This time it was

*her* turn to be impressed. “Nice imagery there, Bruce,” she said. “Very nice imagery, indeed.”

Blankenship smiled. “Wasn’t it just?”

Dana smiled back, enjoying the sense of peace that had settled over her. Without ever having realized it, she’d somehow found herself back in the place in the world where she’d always felt the most comfortable: kicking ass at work.

She widened her smile.

It had certainly taken a while for her to get there, but if nothing else, it was *extremely* nice to finally be home again.





## CHAPTER 42

Jelani Diggs lived in Westlake, a quiet suburb ten miles west of Cleveland featuring huge oak trees lining both sides of the tranquil streets. The A-frame structure that the old woman lived in on Woodward Avenue seemed typical of the area – old with bags of charm. Sort of like the woman herself.

The old woman eyed Angel suspiciously through the screen when

Angel knocked on her door at exactly eight forty-five a.m.

“You got an axe to grind with me, missy?” Jelani Diggs asked. “I’m really sorry about your grandma and all – honestly, I am – but I’m too damn old to be gettin’ into any silly fistfights in the street.”

Angel tried her best to smile at the woman. Wasn’t easy. “No, ma’am,”

she said. “I don’t have an axe to grind.  
Not with you, at least.”

Jelani Diggs still looked  
suspicious. She narrowed her eyes into  
tight slits. “You absolutely *sure* about  
that, missy?”

Angel kept the smile on her face  
until her jaw began to ache, feeling  
ridiculous, like someone who was  
smiling for a picture they didn’t want to  
take.

Fake it until you make it, right?

“I know that you didn’t have anything to do with what Razor did to my grandmother, ma’am,” Angel said. “I just want to talk to you about Sasha, that’s all. I’m in way too deep to just walk away now. Please try to understand that.”

“That’s all you want?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Jelani Diggs finally opened the door and stepped aside to let her in. “Well, come on in then. You want some coffee?”

“I’d love some.”

Three minutes later they were seated at Jelani Diggs’s kitchen table with two steaming mugs stationed on tattered placemats in front of them, and Angel took a quick inventory of her

surroundings. Jelani Diggs's kitchen didn't appear all that much different from her and Granny Bernice's own kitchen back home. On one wall hung a picture of Jesus Christ, positioned right next to a photograph of John F. Kennedy. A framed copy of the religious poem "Footprints" hung next to the sink.

*It was then that I carried you...*

Angel swallowed the emotion in

her throat and forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand. No time for sentimentality now. She could deal with all of her jumbled emotions later – if and when she ever felt strong enough to actually get around to them at all.

Angel asked, “Ma’am, is there anything else you can think of that might be a clue as to what happened to Sasha? Anything you even *think* might be a



clue?”

The old woman stirred her coffee slowly with a spoon. Her soft brown eyes were filled with an apology when she looked back up.

“No, Miss Monroe. I’m really sorry, but there ain’t nothin’ I can think of at all. Nothin’ for the life of me. We lived such a boring life most of the time, me and Sasha. She was always so busy with school and workin’ and I was

always so busy just tryin' to enjoy what little time I got left and thankin' sweet Jesus above that He's given me as long as He has."

Jelani Diggs retreated into her own thoughts for a long moment then before her face suddenly brightened, giving Angel a pretty good idea of what she'd probably looked like as a young girl. Angel felt a sharp twinge in her

heart, remembering how Granny Bernice's smiles had possessed the ability to rewind time like that.

“Why don't you go on up to Sasha's room and take a look around there?” Jelani Diggs suggested. “Maybe you can find one of your clues up there.”

Thinking it was a damn good idea as well, Angel immediately took her up on the offer.

Leaving their coffee mugs

steaming on the kitchen table, the old woman led Angel through the living room – past more pictures of Jesus and Kennedy – and all the way up the carpeted staircase to the second floor.

Sasha's bedroom sat just off the hallway, right next to the bathroom. The old woman opened up the door and stepped to one side. “I’ll just go on down and finish up my coffee, missy,”

she said. “You feel free to look at anything you want in there. I don’t care what it takes – I just want my baby back home with me.”

Jelani Diggs’s voice cracked a little with that and her wounded brown eyes filled up with tears. “That girl is my whole life, Miss Monroe. Please bring my baby back home to me.”

Angel reached out a comforting hand and placed it lightly on the old

woman's bony shoulder. "I'll do my very best, ma'am. That much I promise you."

When the old woman had finally gone back downstairs, Angel stepped inside the bedroom and took a look around. A lacy white comforter covered a single bed that was stationed in the middle of the space. A rack of stylish clothes stared out at her from an open

closet door ten feet away. Angel walked over to the closet and inspected the labels on the clothing inside, lifting up her eyebrows in surprise. All designer brands: Gucci. Prada. DKNY. Burberry. Chanel.

Sasha Diggs's taste in pictures ran more along the lines of Jay-Z and Barack Obama than Jesus and Kennedy, but her room still looked every bit as neat as the rest of the house. As neat as

a pin. Angel had a feeling that Jelani Diggs made sure of that. Much like Granny Bernice had been, Sasha Diggs's grandmother didn't seem like the sort of woman who took a lot of guff. It was Jelani's way and Jelani's way *only* – no proverbial highway as an alternative.

In one corner of the room, a desktop computer sat on top of a cheap, pre-fab desk – the kind you buy at Wal-



Mart and spend all day putting together before realizing that you have an entire handful of screws left over and not the faintest goddamn clue of what to do with any of them.

The computer itself was an old Apple iMac, the kind with a translucent green cover on back. Cool back in the day but pretty much useless now. Two hundred and thirty-three megahertz, thirty-two megabytes of RAM, a four-gig

hard drive. Hopelessly out of date when compared to the newest MacBook Pros that had just come out and an absolute *dinosaur* for a Rhodes scholar to be working on.

Despite the fact that Angel would like nothing better in the world right now than to brutally murder Sasha Diggs's father in cold blood – and *slowly* at that – she couldn't help feeling a renewed

measure of respect for the girl. It was obvious that the kid had made the most out of what she had, which didn't seem all that much – closet-full of fancy designer clothes notwithstanding.

Angel snooped around the dresser drawers for a moment or two but found only neatly folded clothes inside.

Until she got to the bottom-left one.

As she slid open *that* drawer,

she was shocked to see a black-leather riding crop sitting on top of what *appeared* to be a miniature sex-toy shop.

There were vibrators in every color of the rainbow. Double-sided dildos. Sex creams that made your skin tingle when you rubbed them in. Anal beads. A strap-on.

Angel opened the drawer to the right of the sex toys. Lingerie of every

possible configuration stared back at her. Thongs and G-strings; camisoles and bustiers; bras with holes where the nipples had been cut out.

Not what she'd expected to find at all.

She slid closed the drawers and went back to the desk. More drawers there revealed notebooks and folders, pens and pencils, a stapler. Nothing even *remotely* close to as shocking as

the sex emporium she'd found across the room.

The edge of a business card was peeking out from the corner of a sociology textbook on top, mostly hidden by the cover. Plucking out the card, Angel read the elaborate, raised lettering on front.

Her heart skipped three beats in a row as she scanned the words:

*ELITE ESCORTS OF*

*CLEVELAND*

*CANDY DUBOIS*

*(216) 542-0928*

*RATES: \$300 AN HOUR –*

*\$1,500 OVERNIGHT*





## CHAPTER 43

Gerald Trebblehorn smiled down at the young Rhodes scholar who was huddled in fear over in the far corner of the decrepit basement on the outskirts of Cleveland.

The poor girl seemed to jump right out of her smooth black skin each and every time he opened up his mouth. Then again, where was the big surprise in that? After all, Gerald Trebblehorn

was *exactly* the kind of man people should be afraid of. Thirty-three kills under his belt already and counting. And he was still only thirty-four years old, for Christ's sake. He still had a *lot* of years left ahead of him yet. “You’re a fucking *whore*?” he asked in a disbelieving voice.

Naked and shivering, Sasha Diggs cowered against the cracked and

yellowing basement wall. She'd been in the basement for a week now and she felt hopelessly weak with hunger. The little water she'd managed to drink had come from the leaky ceiling above her head. Her wrists and ankles ached from the police-issue handcuffs that were attached to heavy steel chains and secured to a circular brass tether sticking out of the floor. A plastic bucket five feet away overflowed with

her own waste. Every last muscle in her body screamed out in pure *agony* from having slept on the unyielding surface of the basement floor for so long. Worst of all, the lining of her vagina had been rubbed completely raw; her anus scabbed over from the previous huge blonde man who'd violated her every single day for the past week.

Treblehorn took a step

backward and looked over the nigger girl again, feeling a stirring in his jeans. The jigaboo was one fine piece of ass, no debating that much. No wonder Johansen hadn't been able to keep his dick in his pants.

He stepped forward again and unbuckled his jeans, sticking his throbbing manhood in the girl's face. "I'll tell you what, nigger: Do a good job and maybe I'll let you live."

He closed his eyes and groaned as the whore took him into her mouth.

Closing her own eyes, Sasha Diggs fought back the overpowering urge to gag, trying desperately to ignore the little voice inside her head that was telling her to bite down with her sharp white teeth just as hard as she possibly could.

No good. The voice inside her

head wouldn't shut the hell up. She opened her tear-filled eyes again. This was it. Do or die time. No turning back now. Like it or not, she needed to do what she needed to do. It was as simple as that.

Not to mention her only chance of actually staying *alive*.

Sasha took a deep breath through her nostrils to steady herself, then did the unspeakable thing she knew she

needed to do.





## CHAPTER 44

Dana and Blankenship spoke with the Seattle agents – both black men and highly respected members of the Bureau – as the West Coast feds drove them over to the FBI garage housing Betsy Campbell’s green Subaru hatchback.

“Man,” said Agent Terrance Jones – the Seattle fed who’d caught Dana’s eye back in the courtyard of the

Hilton and who caught her eye again now in the rearview mirror. “Whaddya say we switch cases with you guys? I don’t think I’d mind giving old whitey the what-for right about now, considering what they did to that poor woman. Present company excluded, of course.”

Blankenship cracked his backseat window next to Dana to let

some fresh air into the car without disturbing the conversation while Jones wheeled his 2006 Beemer out into traffic and pressed down his foot gently against the accelerator, picking up speed and pulling the vehicle onto the southbound freeway. “What’re you guys working on right now?” he asked.

Jones’s partner – Agent John Olokawandi, a twenty-two-year veteran of the Bureau who’d been born in

Tanzania, Africa and subsequently raised in Tarzana, California – answered from the passenger seat of the BMW up front. “Outlaw motorcycle club running meth over the border from Canada. We’d go undercover – try to infiltrate the club and all that good stuff – but for some reason or another I don’t think they’d take us. From all reports, they don’t care very much for men of our

color.”

Dana lifted her eyebrows in interest. She and her former mentor/partner Crawford Bell had once helped bring down an outlaw motorcycle club in Pennsylvania that had been running ice up the east coast of the United States from Florida. “Which MC?” Dana asked.

Olokawandi blew out a disgusted breath. “The Pagan’s,” he

said. “The rocket scientists who think their name needs an apostrophe in it.”

Dana suppressed a small smile, remembering all too well the low IQs that had been associated with the members of the Pennsylvania motorcycle club she and Crawford had helped bring down. “Yeah,” she said, “it’s not exactly a Mensa meeting when you’re dealing with outlaw MCs, is it?”

Olokawandi shook his head.

“Nope. Not even close, sister. As a matter of fact, I’d say it barely qualifies as a kindergarten class.”

Ten minutes later, Jones wheeled the BMW up a long driveway and brought the vehicle to a stop in front of an FBI garage fifteen miles south of downtown Seattle. All four agents hopped out, and Olokawandi unlocked



the garage before pulling up the ribbed metal door.

Dana almost threw up when she got her first look at the blood-drenched Subaru inside.

Blood spatter covered the passenger window of the car in the backseat, as well as the fabric of the back seat itself, right in front of the driver's seat. The pure *volume* of blood made it look as though an abstract artist

had simply dipped his brush into a bucket filled with bright red paint before flinging it in random directions with several quick flicks of his wrist.

Blankenship blew out a slow breath through his nostrils and turned to Jones. “Yikes. Looks like a fucking slaughterhouse. You guys got PPE?”

Jones nodded and went over to the corner of the garage. Reaching into a

cardboard box, he tossed personal-protection equipment to each of them and kept a set for himself. Paper masks and paper body suits; thin rubber gloves and paper shoe-covers for their feet. Walking back over to them, Jones held a small metal toolkit in his right hand and swept his left toward the Subaru. “Ready to do this shit or what?” he asked.

Dana took in a lungful of air and

let it out again over her teeth. “Ready as we’ll ever be, I guess,” she said. “Let’s do this.”

After dressing quickly in their PPE, Dana led the way, climbing into the backseat of the Subaru while Blankenship climbed into the front. The Seattle agents waited just outside the car on either side, ready to provide assistance should it be needed.

Kneeling on the back seat, Dana paused and looked around, wrinkling up her nose against the sharp scent of blood in her nostrils. The metallic odor of blood was one you could never quite remove from your hair and skin and fingernails, no matter how hard you scrubbed or what new soap you tried. Because once you'd smelled blood it seemed to stay in your nostrils *forever*,

tricking your brain into *thinking* that you were still smelling it even when it wasn't present. Hell, even after all of these years had passed, Dana could *still* smell the blood of her parents. Worse, their blood still smelled *fresh* to her.

She shuddered and scanned the backseat of the car, studying the blood spatter carefully and shifting her thoughts away from the brutal murders of her parents. No time for that now. And no

trick of the brain was required here right now. This *was* fresh blood she was smelling. *Very* fresh.

Dana narrowed her eyes into tight slits as she recreated the scene in her mind, the resulting mental footage playing across her brain like a low-budget direct-to-DVD horror movie.

“The killer was left handed,” she said after a moment of concentrated

focus, trying to ignore just how ridiculous she sounded, even to herself.

Blankenship turned in the front seat of the Subaru and stared back at her. “How the hell could you possibly know that? I mean, I know you’re good and all, but how the fuck...”

Dana cut off Blankenship with an irritated look. Lifting an imaginary knife in her left hand, she brought down the invisible prop again in a slow stabbing



motion while she extended her other hand outward toward the window to mimic the path of the blood spatter. “I know because whoever did this was kneeling right where I’m kneeling now,” she said, trying to ignore the intense rush of annoyance in her chest. “The blood spatter is projecting toward the front of the car. If whoever did this were right-handed, the blood spatter would have

projected toward the rear.”

Blankenship pursed his lips.

“Well, I suppose that’s helpful to know.

Still, I’m not exactly sure how.”

Dana ran her eyes over the blood spatter some more. Left-handedness – or sinistrality – presented in just ten to eleven percent of the American population, with females ringing in at about twelve and a half percent while males averaged about seven and a half

percent. Statistics showed that left-handers were more likely to be schizophrenic, alcoholic, delinquent and dyslexic – and lefties also showed higher instances of Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis and mental disabilities. Still, percentages and statistics aside, Dana knew that this hadn't been the work of a woman, though she had absolutely *zero* doubt in her

mind that a serious mental disability had come into play here. After all, only an animal with a very sick brain could've pulled off something like this. And the force that it would have taken to produce blood spatter of this magnitude *had* to have come from a man. Very few women in the world possessed the physical strength needed to generate spray like this. "It's helpful to know because it cuts down on the pool of

suspects,” Dana said, pointing out the obvious. “Not that we *have* any suspects right now, of course, other than assuming that whoever did this was male, left-handed and a member of the Brotherhood.”

“Well, what good...”

Dana lifted a hand to cut Blankenship off again when her stare suddenly fell upon something encrusted

in the dark, dried blood caking the floorboard on the left-hand side of the back seat. She turned to Jones. “Tweezers.”

The Seattle agent unsnapped the toolkit in his hands and passed over a small rubber-tipped pair after first unwrapping them from their sterile plastic packaging. Taking the tweezers with a shaking hand, Dana leaned down to pluck something from the dried

blood.

She lifted her hand again and brought the tweezers closer to her face for a better look. Her breath caught in her throat, making her think that she might be *imagining* the evidence in her hand.

She shook her head hard and refocused her vision. The evidence was still there. Hadn't just disappeared into

thin air in a quick puff of smoke.

She paused and shook her head again, this time in disbelief.

For its part, a single blonde hair simply stared right back at her, not saying a single word.

Out loud, at least.





## CHAPTER 45

Angel took the business card with her as she left Jelani Diggs's house in Westlake, not bothering to tell the old woman what she'd just found in her granddaughter's bedroom. Angel just didn't think it would accomplish anything useful at this point. All it would do was embarrass the poor girl when Angel finally found her.

Angel shook her head and

corrected herself mentally. *If* she ever found the girl, that is.

Fifteen minutes later, she located Elite Escorts of Cleveland, sandwiched between a tanning salon and an H&R Block accounting office in a surprisingly upscale strip mall. The girl sitting behind the front desk showed fresh-faced good looks and an unmistakable youthful glow. Angel guessed her age at

about nineteen.

The young girl smiled at her as she entered the front door, displaying perfect teeth in the most natural sense of the word. No masterful dentist had sculpted those pearly whites. They'd been a gift straight from God Himself.

*Lucky girl.*

“Good morning, ma’am,” the girl said, still smiling brightly as Angel approached the front desk. “Have you

come to apply for the open position?”

Angel didn't detect any irony in the girl's voice, and she couldn't help feeling embarrassed. Also, flattered as hell.

“No, no,” she said quickly, flipping open one of her old badges from her days on the Cleveland police force and showing it to the girl. “My name is Angel Monroe and I'm looking for

information on someone who may have worked here recently.”

Angel shifted a little as she waited for the girl's reply. Passing herself off as a current member of the Cleveland PD probably didn't constitute the most *honest* thing she'd ever done in her life, but she hoped it would grease the wheels a hell of a lot faster than showing her private investigator's license would. *Cracker Jack cop.*

*Rent-a-cop. Meter maid.* She'd heard them all before and she really wasn't in the mood to hear any more of them right now.

The young girl widened her clear blue eyes in astonishment while she stared at the burnished-copper star cupped in Angel's right palm, her bright smile faltering like a loose light bulb in a passing train. Her lips moved, but no

sound came out.

Angel could tell that the poor thing didn't have the faintest goddamn clue of what to say or do next, so she gave the girl a smile of her own, tried to make it a strong and reassuring one. "Don't worry, honey," she said. "You're not in trouble for anything. I just need to talk to your boss for a quick minute, that's all. No big deal."

The young girl still didn't look



so sure as she rose from her seat on long legs that were encased in a jet-black leather mini-skirt. Not only were the girl's teeth perfect, the chick had a great pair of gams too. *Really* lucky girl.

“That would be Mr. Hathaway,” the girl said uncertainly, finally finding her voice again and knocking a pencil off her desk before leaning down to pick it up, which afforded Angel a clear view

down her blouse of *extremely* taut cleavage. *Those*, Angel felt pretty certain, hadn't been a gift from The Man Upstairs. More likely a gift from the mysterious Mr. Hathaway himself. Or at least somebody like him. The very best that money could buy.

“Is there any way I could talk to him for a minute?” Angel asked.

“I'll go get him right away, ma'am,” the girl said, knocking the

pencil to the floor again but leaving it there this time. Who should I tell him is here to see him? Officer... deputy..."

Her voice trailed off, her face reddening, then turning an alarming shade of purple.

Angel let the girl off the hook as quickly as she possibly could, resisting the urge to come around the desk to give her a reassuring hug. "Just tell him

Angel Monroe wants to talk to him, sweetie. Please tell him it's a very urgent matter."

The young girl turned and disappeared quickly down the hall on her beautiful legs, which Angel saw were attached to an equally beautiful butt. Angel pursed her lips as she watched the girl walk away. Some chicks really did have things just too goddamn *easy* in this life.

A moment later, a tall, distinguished-looking man in his mid-forties, dressed in a flawlessly cut suit and wearing a pair of wire-framed designer eyeglasses, poked his head into the reception area. “Officer Monroe?” he asked. “I’m Stephen Hathaway, owner of the agency. If you’ll please follow me.”

Angel followed Hathaway down

a long hallway and into a comfortable-looking office paneled in heavy wood. The escort-agency maven closed the door behind them as Angel stepped inside.

Angel paused and looked around. A potted fern. Decent art hanging on the walls. A heavy brass paperweight that was sitting in the middle of a desk blotter in the center of a massive mahogany desk. A hell of a

lot nicer than Angel's *own* office over at The Caxton Building – and no doubt a hell of a lot more costly. Angel guessed what they said was true. Sex really *did* sell.

Somebody alert marketing.

In addition to its plush amenities, Hathaway's office had been set up in such a way as to imbue the aura of authority. His high-backed office chair

had been strategically placed a couple inches higher than the one on the other side of the massive desk in which he motioned for Angel to sit.

Hathaway turned sideways in his own chair and raised a delicate-looking hand, gesturing to a long row of cut-glass decanters that were filled with an amber liquid on the shelf above his head. Brandy, Angel guessed. Probably the good stuff.



“Would you care for a drink, officer?” Hathaway asked. “No? How may I help you then?”

Angel leaned forward in her chair and flipped onto his desk the business card she'd taken from Sasha Diggs's bedroom. “I'm looking for information on a girl named Sasha Diggs,” she said. “You probably know her better as Candy, but I'm pretty sure

you also know her as Sasha. Tax purposes and all that.”

Hathaway leaned back in his enormous leather chair and studied the card. After a moment or two, he slid it back and leaned back in his chair again, templing his fingers in front of his face. The move was meant to project power, Angel knew, coming straight out of the *Insincere Corporate Fat Cats* guidebook. “Ah, yes, Candy... Sasha.

One of my best girls. Certainly one of the brightest.”

Angel slipped the business card back into her purse. “Let’s see the roster book,” she said, her tone letting Hathaway know that she wasn’t here today in order to listen to any of his false protests about what he *really* did for a living. Richly paneled office or not, the man was a pimp, plain and simple. And

they both knew it.

Hathaway didn't flinch, leaning forward to pull a leather-bound volume from a desk drawer. Angel lifted her eyebrows in surprise, getting the distinct impression that Hathaway had been shaken down before, knew how to play the game. If she played her cards right here, that could work in her favor.

She rose from her chair and came around to Hathaway's side of the

desk as he opened up the book, finally leveling the playing field between them and hovering just a few inches over his left shoulder.

Hathaway flipped through a few pages in the book before he stopped at Sasha Diggs's smiling face. Angel narrowed her eyes and studied the photograph. Same gorgeous girl from the picture in the newspaper article.

Same smooth, caramel skin. Same huge, hazel eyes. Same shiny black hair. Same beautiful body that stuck out in all the right places.

All in all, an embarrassment of riches.

Hathaway's expensive cologne floated up into her nostrils and tickled the tiny hairs lining the inside of her nose, making her want to sneeze as she adjusted the book on his desk and read

quickly through the short bio printed beside Sasha's picture:

*Candy is a young African-American woman who's always up for a good time! Her basic rate is \$300 an hour, but she can be all yours for the night for the low, low price of just \$1,500.*

*Barely out of her teens, Candy*

*doesn't believe in taboos. Greek, threesomes, role-playing – nothing's out of the question when it comes to this delicious piece of milk chocolate. So why not give this sweet little bon-bon a call and get a taste of "Candy" for yourself? You won't be disappointed. As a matter of fact, we're pretty sure you'll develop a sweet tooth for Candy after just one night!*



Angel slid out the eight-by-ten photo from the plastic cover directly to the left of the bio without asking Hathaway's permission. "Cute," she said. "You write this all by yourself, Hemingway?"

Hathaway didn't answer.

"I'll be taking this with me, of course," Angel said.

“Of course,” Hathaway agreed, waving a manicured hand in the air as though her statement represented a foregone conclusion that required no further discussion.

“Now, where’s the logbook?” Angel asked.

Again Hathaway didn’t hesitate, sliding open another drawer and pulling out a ledger book. Sasha Diggs’s

appointments had been noted in pencil about a third of the way through the book.

Angel tore out the appropriate sheet neatly at the binding and folded it up lengthwise before slipping it into her purse next to the business card. “I’ll be taking this with me, too,” she said.

“Of course,” Hathaway agreed again. “Is there anything else I can do to be of assistance, officer?”

Angel resisted the urge to flip him the bird as she walked back around his desk and made her way to the door.

“No, I think that will be all for now, Mr. Hathaway. I’ll be in touch with you if and when I need anything else. Good day.”

“Good day, officer.”

On her way out of the escort agency, Angel found the pretty little

receptionist seated at the front desk again. The young girl still looked shaken up, like she'd been crying the entire time that Angel had been in the back with Hathaway.

The girl lifted her enormous blue eyes to meet Angel's. They were brimming over with tears.

*Such a pretty little thing,* Angel thought. It really was a pity that she'd gotten mixed up in this ugly world so

early on in life.

“Am I in trouble?” the girl asked weakly.

Angel smiled. “Of course not, sweetie.” She slipped out a business card from her purse and slid it across the desk. “As a matter of fact, if Mr. Hathaway back there gives you any trouble with anything at all, just give me a call at the number on this card. Any

time, honey. Day or night.”

The girl nodded and plucked the card off the desk before delicately wiping away a single tear from her left eye with a freshly manicured pinkie finger, obviously not wanting to smear her mascara any further than she already had with her crying. “Thank you, ma’am,” the girl sniffled. “I’ll do that.”

Angel left Elite Escorts of Cleveland before the girl could figure

out that she no longer rode with the Cleveland police force in any official capacity. And – as Angel would soon find out – she'd left the office just in time.

Still, her exit had only delayed the inevitable, hadn't it?

And the inevitable would soon find her tied to a sturdy wooden cross constructed of I-beams that was



cemented into a barbecue pit behind The Brotherhood's white-supremacist compound deep in the woods of Creek Run, Mississippi.



## CHAPTER 46

Gerald Trebblehorn's entire body trembled in electric ecstasy as his penis exploded inside the nigger girl's mouth, every last nerve-ending in his body shaking and shimmying with the nearly indescribable pleasure of a mind-blowing orgasm. It seemed *almost* too much to take.

Thoroughly drained, Templeton pushed the girl roughly off him. As he

withdrew, her teeth scraped the sensitive skin on the underside of his manhood, but he didn't mind. Hell, it marked the first time he could tell the girl even *had* any teeth in her mouth at all. A true sign of a professional, if ever there'd been one.

He buckled up his jeans and took a step back. "I'll tell you what, nigger," he said, shaking his head in admiration.

“That’s one fantastic mouth you’ve got there. Tell me something: How much would something like that cost me out on the street?”

Sasha Diggs fought the incessant waves of nausea that were wracking her body like powerful ocean tides crashing up against a rocky shore, trying her best to not throw up. Doing what she’d just done disgusted her, of course, made her want to vomit up her guts all over the

filthy basement floor, just like it had every time she'd performed a similar act on one of her clients at the escort agency. But sickening as the realization might be for her to get to grips with, Sasha knew that she needed whatever little nourishment the semen could provide.

*You should have bitten off his fucking dick, dumb ass. That would*

*have kept you eating for an entire week.*

Sasha shook off the horrible thought, feeling ashamed of herself despite the circumstances. She hadn't been raised to think like that, though. She'd been raised to think and act like a *good* girl, to always live right in the eyes of Jesus. Still, those days seemed long gone now, and from the look of things they were never coming back

again.

Sasha closed her eyes and fought back the fresh wellspring of tears that was threatening to burst from her face in a frantic rush. It was truly pathetic how low a human being could sink when his or her life hung in the balance, but with her body eating away at itself a little more with each passing day, the hunger clawing at her insides outweighed even



what little pride she had left.

She almost laughed out loud at the ridiculous thought.

*Pride? Is that what you called it when you'd just sucked off some white supremacist's cock? Your pride died a long time ago, honey. Crushed like a baby bird's skull beneath a monster's heavy boot the first time you ever spread your legs for money in the hopes that it would lead you and your*

*family to a better life.*

Bitter tears finally burst from her eyes, blurring her vision badly while her jumbled thoughts flashed to her grandmother. The old woman was undoubtedly beside herself with worry by now, and as Sasha marked her grandmother's sole source of income, Jelani Diggs would need to turn to the government for a handout soon to get by,

if she hadn't done so already. And doing that would kill the old woman just as surely as a bullet right between the eyes.

“I asked you a question, nigger.”

Sasha lifted up her stare to meet the enormous blonde man's. In her mind's eye, she was leaping across the room and clawing out his eyeballs with her broken fingernails. But in the *real* world – the only world that actually

counted right now – she simply huddled over in the corner of the basement like a badly beaten puppy. “Three hundred dollars,” she said weakly.

The blonde man nodded thoughtfully. “Worth every goddamn cent of it, if you ask me.”

Sasha lowered her stare. When she lifted up her gaze again, she took in a deep breath through her nostrils and

asked the one question she didn't know if she wanted to hear the answer to. The answer that would decide whether she lived or died today here in this decrepit basement on the outskirts of Cleveland, Ohio.

“But was it... good *enough*?”



## CHAPTER 47

Dana narrowed her eyes as she stared at the thin blonde strand pressed lightly between the tips of the tweezers.

She let out a deep breath and felt her heart sink in her chest, all the way down to the pit of her stomach. The tickle of hope that had been residing there dissipated at once. “*Goddamn* it,” she muttered harshly underneath her breath.

Blankenship leaned over the Subaru's divider. "What is it?" he asked.

Dana shifted her arm in order to afford him a better viewing angle of the hair. "No root," she said. "Can't be tested for DNA. That means it's basically useless to us, other than telling us the perp's hair color, of course."

She turned and placed the hair



into a plastic evidence bag that Agent Terrance Jones was holding out. When he'd zipped shut the bag again, the Seattle agent went to work marking the evidence — however flimsy that particular evidence might be.

Dana turned back to Blankenship and shook her head. “As much as it would make things easier on us, Bruce, I highly doubt they’re gonna let us bring in every blonde-haired guy in the greater

Seattle metropolitan area for questioning because of this. Not even the PATRIOT Act would cover something like that.”

“Of course that would be the one thing it *doesn't* cover.”

Dana shook off the political thoughts and resumed her work scanning the backseat of the car for any additional evidence. Twenty minutes later, she finally pulled off her gloves with a loud

elastic snapping noise and lowered the paper mask from her mouth, satisfied she'd covered every last square inch of the backseat. She asked Blankenship, "Find anything interesting up front?"

Blankenship turned around and shook his head. "Not a damn thing. The front seat looks like it was vacuumed recently, maybe a week or so ago. Definitely before the murder happened, though. Enough dirt and lint on the floor

to tell me that much.”

Dana exited the Subaru and closed the door behind her. She turned to Olokawandi. “Anything discovered on Betsy Campbell’s body during the autopsy?”

The Seattle fed held her stare. “Other than the forty-four knife wounds, you mean?”

Dana nodded. “Yeah. Other

than the forty-four knife wounds, I mean.”

Olokawandi shook his head.

“Not a damn thing there, either. No trace evidence underneath her fingernails, no DNA on her body at all other than her own. The asshole whitewashed her pretty good.”

The veteran Seattle agent pressed his full lips into an angry line.

“I suppose that was his intention, though,

don't you? What I wouldn't give right now to turn in my shield and gun and return the favor in a back room somewhere. Just the two of us. Two men enter, one man leaves."

Dana pressed her own lips together. She knew *exactly* how Olokawandi felt right now. Once again, death would have been too *good* for whoever had done this despicable act.

Clearing her throat, she was about to tell Olokawandi as much when the ringing of her phone inside her purse cut her off. She held up a finger to her fellow agents and motioned for them to wait while she dug out the phone, flipped it open and placed it to her ear. “Whitestone.”

Ninety seconds later – after she’d filled in Bill Krugman on the

discovery of the hair they'd found inside the Subaru and had listened to what the Director had to say in return – Dana snapped shut her phone again. To Jones and Olokawandi, she said, “Looks like you guys are going to get your wish, fellas.”

Jones knitted his thick black eyebrows on his broad forehead. “What do you mean by that?”

Dana stretched her neck to the



left. The kink that had settled in on the plane ride out to Washington still hadn't gone away yet, and at this rate she highly doubted it would any time soon. "Bill Krugman wants you two to take over this part of the investigation out on the West Coast," she said. "You'll report directly back to Agent Blankenship and me if and when you find out anything additional. It's the beginnings of a task force, boys.

Might be getting some more help soon, too. Krugman said he'll get back to me about that."

Olokawandi frowned. "Where are you guys going?"

"Yeah," Blankenship cut in. "Where *are* we going?"

Dana blew out a slow breath. "Sacramento. Murder of another pregnant black woman out there."

"Jesus Christ," Olokawandi said.

Dana looked over at him.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “Jesus Christ is right.”



## CHAPTER 48

Angel was in a corner booth at Dunkin' Donuts twenty minutes later, sipping on a large coffee and studying the ledger sheet that she'd taken from Hathaway's office at Elite Escorts of Cleveland.

Sasha Diggs had been a busy girl over the past couple months, that much seemed clear. Her appointment sheet had been filled two-thirds of the way

down the page with all of the “dates” she’d gone out on recently.

As she scanned the entries, Angel felt foolish for her earlier *naiveté*. She should’ve known better than to think the girl had been making enough money working nights at a downtown Denny’s to pay her own way through college. Angel felt saddened to come to this realization, of course, but in

a way she also couldn't blame the girl. It was a rough world out there and sometimes a girl just had to do what a girl had to do.

Like one of the characters had said in Stephen King's *Dolores Claiborne*, "Sometimes being a bitch is all a woman has got to hang onto."

Angel knew that it was all she had to hang onto sometimes.

Sasha Diggs had been on five

overnight visits since May, pocketing a cool seventy-five hundred dollars in the process. More than Angel made in two months. All five slumber parties listed the exact same address, with the last appointment dated just a night before her grandmother had said she'd gone missing.

The name penciled in next to the address of the overnights was located in



one of the ritziest sections of east Cleveland. When Angel finally connected the name to the handsome face that she saw on television nearly every single day, her jaw almost hit the table.

*Randall Jonathan McMichael.*



## CHAPTER 49

Bane snored peacefully at his feet and the exquisite sounds of Mozart's *La Finta Giradineria* poured forth from the antique record player over in the corner of his fine den as the Race Master inquired about the young girl in Cleveland. "What's the story with our lovely little Rhodes scholar, Richard?" he asked.

Richard Patton cleared his throat

nervously, reluctant to make his report. The Race Master had never been the kind of man to suffer bad news lightly – Josef Sullivan had been proof positive of that much. Not to mention poor Christopher Johansen.

Patton shuddered, remembering the way his employer's vicious dog had torn open Johansen's throat in nauseating pink sprays. If nothing else, he knew the

nightmarish image would remain seared into his memory forever. “No word from Treblehorn yet, sir,” he said.

The Race Master frowned darkly. “And Marjorie Trimble out in California? What of her?”

Patton shifted in his chair, hoping this bit of good news might offset the bad. “That one’s taken care of, sir.”

“And purification of the body?”

“To your specifications, sir.”

The Race Master nodded. “Send some men after Trebblehorn in Cleveland, Richard. Perhaps he’s fallen prey to the same lust that cost our dear friend Johansen his life.”

Patton nodded. “Yes, sir. I’ll go do that right away.”

Patton rose to his feet and turned on his heel before heading quickly for the door, anxious to leave the room with

his life. But the Race Master held up one large hand to stop him.

“One moment there, Richard. I’m not done with you quite yet.”

Patton froze in his tracks, his heartbeat thundering so loudly in his ears that it threatened to deafen him permanently. The great man’s great impatience with failure had been demonstrated quite clearly already, and Patton didn’t relish the prospect of

finding *himself* on the receiving end of the Race Master's displeasure. "Yes, sir?" he asked, turning to his employer.

The Race Master rose to his own feet and handed Patton a sealed letter across the massive desk. "Have our people deliver this to the local newspaper once job is done. The time has finally come for us to step from the shadows."



Patton's heart shifted from his ears to his throat as he tucked the file beneath his left arm and finally exited the room; thanking God almighty in heaven above that he was still alive.

At least for now.

It certainly marked a hell of a lot more than he could say for his predecessors at the moment – may the poor men's eternal souls rest in peace

forever.



## CHAPTER 50

On the plane ride out to Sacramento an hour later, Dana dozed while Blankenship researched the Brotherhood's origins.

Bad idea. Because sleep invited into her brain the recurring nightmare that she'd been having almost every single night since she'd been four years old.

Lately, with one notable,

horrifying alteration.

\*\*\*

Fast asleep now, the overwhelming blackness of Dana's nightmare morphed first into a hazy gray, then pure white, then finally a blinding flash of vibrant colors that hurt her brain so badly that it threatened to bring on a seizure.

Dana squinted hard against the

disorienting visual onslaught, feeling more confused than she'd ever felt in her entire life. Nothing made sense to her. Nothing had *ever* made sense to her. Nothing would ever make sense to her again.

As she gradually established her bearings, a soul-freezing chill passed through her body, directly through her heart. Shocked, she watched as the colors in her world transformed again

into a grainy black-and-white, like an old-time newsreel where everything jumped around and flickered as though the footage was being played on an antique film projector set to the wrong speed.

Dana sucked in a sharp breath that sent a vicious stab of pain slicing hard through her lungs. A man had just walked right *through* her. A small

silver pistol peeked out from the rear waistband of his dirty jeans. The man's walk was confident, completely sure of itself, almost a *swagger*.

She blinked rapidly and tried desperately to make sense of the mind-bending scene in front of her. No use. Suddenly, though, her brain almost collapsed on itself when she realized *exactly* what this was, *exactly where* she was.



The home of her childhood.

3330 Eastlawn Street; West Park-section of Cleveland. The place where her parents had been brutally murdered thirty-five years earlier. The place where *she*'d barely escaped bloody murder at the hands of the same deranged madman when she'd been just four years old – saved only by a concerned neighbor who'd heard

screaming in the night.

Dana's breath hitched in her throat. Her heart stopped beating dead in her chest. A cold shiver skittered down the entire length of her spine, as though some unseen ghost were using its bony fingers to lovingly trace a feathery path along the vertebrae.

Dana shook her head in bewilderment and again tried to process the baffling imagery before her. No

good. Didn't work. But then a second, more powerful wave of shivers wracked her body as the next chilling realization dawned on her. Since she now understood exactly *where* she was, it could mean only one thing. She also knew the identity of the man who'd just passed through her in the darkened hallway, knew his lifeless eyes as well as she knew her own.

And now he was headed for her bedroom.

Dana willed her legs to move but it wasn't easy. Her limbs felt like cast-iron weights chained to her body right now. Marshalling all of her strength, she struggled forward to the doorway of her bedroom and peered in to witness a horror movie she didn't want to see. Not again.

A Superman nightlight

illuminated a child's sleeping face in the darkness. Nathan Stiedowe – a name Dana would one day learn had been nothing more than a twisted anagram of her own – loomed over the child's bed. A huge butcher's knife dangled casually from the long fingers of his enormous right hand.

Beams of moonlight streamed in

through the window next to the bed and bounced off the razor-sharp blade. Dana almost threw up when the child shifted in his sleep and afforded her a clear view of his unlined face.

It was Bradley, the little boy from the plane who'd promised to marry her one day and who she was now trying to adopt.

Stunned stupid, she watched in horror as Nathan Stiedowe lifted the

gleaming knife over his head, ready to plunge the unforgiving steel deep into the boy's tender throat. She tried to scream out a warning but no sound would emerge. Shifting her gaze to the mirror above the bureau in her childhood bedroom, she abruptly caught sight of her own face. Her mouth had been sewn shut. Tight stitches fastened her lips together, rendered her mute.

Dana tried to hurtle herself into the room to stop the monster before he could kill the little boy, but she looked down in horror to see that her feet had been nailed to the floor by six-inch railroad spikes bleeding rust. All she could do was look on helplessly while Nathan Stiedowe brought down the sharp knife in a blinding flash of silver that would soon be joined by a sickening



explosion of red as the boy's jugular vein severed cleanly and he bled out in a nauseating wet rush all over the matching Superman sheets.

But the knife never came down. Instead, Nathan Stiedowe simply lowered the glimmering blade to his side and reached down to softly stroke the boy's silky blonde hair. "I'll be back for you in just a minute, little boy," he whispered. "That much you can count

on.”

Bradley only mumbled dreamily in response.

Turning on his heel, Nathan Stiedowe then exited the room, passing through Dana’s body again. In a flash of jumbled images, her mind sped through the police reports of the devastating night in 1976 that she knew by heart. Her father, James Whitestone, would be

the first to die, gunned down by his wife's illegitimate child – the product of a brutal rape over a church altar when Sara Whitestone had been just sixteen years old. As he relieved himself in the bathroom following a tender lovemaking session with his beloved wife, a .22-caliber slug would shatter his skull from behind, sending chunks of his destroyed brain matter sliding down the tiled wall above the toilet in a disgusting rainbow

of gray and white and red.

Dana strained her eyes through the darkness and watched Nathan Stiedowe enter the bathroom. The soft scratch of plastic shower rings sliding across a steel rod filled her ears as her half-brother concealed himself inside the tub. Right on cue, her father emerged from the master bedroom and closed the bathroom door behind him.

The gunshot that rang out ten seconds later was loud enough to rattle all of the pictures hanging on the wall, followed almost at once by the muted thump of a heavy weight collapsing to the floor.

Horried tears streaked down Dana's face and blurred her vision. Through the veil of blinding tears, she watched numbly as her mother emerged

quickly from the master bedroom, alerted by the commotion in the bathroom. Dana's heart shattered into a million tiny pieces inside her chest when she got her first glimpse of the beautiful face that she hadn't seen for more than thirty-five years. Same short blonde hair as her own. Same pale blue eyes. Same diminutive figure.

Sara Whitestone knocked lightly on the bathroom door, a pattern of worry

lines etching a series of deep wrinkles into her smooth forehead. “James, honey? Are you OK? What was that noise?”

The monster cleared his throat inside the bathroom. “I’m fine,” he coughed. “I’ll be out in just a minute.”

Sadly, Sara Whitestone was completely fooled by the mimicry, just as she’d been on the devastating night of

July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1976. Without knowing it, Dana's mother had just made the same horrible mistake that would lead to her same horrible death. The same horrible death that Dana couldn't do a goddamn thing to stop. Once again – just as had been the case when she'd been four years old – she found herself completely powerless to wake up from this awful nightmare.

“Jesus Christ,” Sara Whitestone



breathed, laughing nervously. “You scared the shit out of me, babe. I thought you broke your neck in there or something. Hurry up and come back to bed already, would you?”

With that, Sara Whitestone turned on her heel and walked back to the master bedroom with her satin night robe flowing behind her in the narrow hallway like the embroidered train of an

elaborate wedding dress. Fifteen seconds later, the monster followed Dana's mother out into the darkness and loomed in the doorway of her bedroom, just another seemingly harmless shadow in the night.

Without warning, Dana's body suddenly vaulted down the hallway at great speed; moved by an unseen force that positioned her just as easily as a chess player positions a pawn. In the

blink of an eye, Dana found herself standing directly *behind* the monster, close enough to reach out and touch him had she been able to control her arms. From this distance, she could actually *smell* the murdering bastard. Smell the pure *evil* wafting off his body. A sickening combination of vinegar and battery acid and rotting meat that turned her stomach inside-out.

Inside the bedroom, Sara

Whitestone lay on her side in the king-sized bed, dressed in only a flimsy off-white negligee, the night robe she'd been wearing a moment earlier now dripping from the doorknob of the closet like strands of shimmering silver garland dripping down from the branches of a beautifully decorated Christmas tree.

Her pretty head was propped up

coquettishly on one small hand.

Sara smiled at the monster through the darkness. “You just gonna stay out there all night, or are you gonna come keep me company in this big old bed, lover boy?”

When the monster crossed the threshold of the master bedroom, Sara Whitestone bolted upright in abject horror as she suddenly realized he wasn't her husband. Not even close. A

tiny squeak escaped her lips, but she was much too stunned to immediately scream.

Taking in a deep breath through her mouth that expanded her birdlike chest nearly to the point of bursting, Sara finally let out a loud, earsplitting wail that caused the monster to race across the room and clamp a large, gloved hand over her mouth. “Shut the fuck up,

bitch,” he hissed, spraying hot saliva all over Sara’s smooth cheek. “One more sound and I’ll chop up your precious goddamn son into so many pieces they won’t be able to put him back together again for the funeral.”

Sara Whitestone squirmed in the monster’s strong grasp, an impotent field mouse struggling to escape the eagle’s powerful talons. The monster smiled and leaned down into her face, his teeth

sparkling brightly in the darkness and emitting an eerie, almost *phosphorescent* light. “Tell me something,” he sneered. “Do you even know who I *am*?”

A brief look of confusion colored in Sara Whitestone’s beautiful face, followed at once by a horrified jolt of recognition that Dana could feel inside her *own* chest. “Jeremiah,” Sara



whispered.

The monster reared back and slapped Dana's mother so hard across the face that Dana could hear Sara Whitestone's teeth rattle in her mouth. "That's not my name anymore, slut," the monster spat. "You made good and goddamn sure of that a long time ago and now I'm going to kill you for it. For your information, my name's Nathan Stiedowe now – not that you give a

flying fuck. Stupid little cunts like you *never* give a fuck who you hurt, do you? Only worried about yourselves and your precious goddamn families. But before I kill you, tell me something first, *Mom*. How could you do it, anyway?

“How could you give away your own fucking *baby*?”



# CHAPTER 51

Randy McMichael – “R-Mac” to his many legions of fans – was a Cleveland boy all the way, born and bred right there in The Renaissance City. He’d die there too, Angel felt certain. One of the most – if not *the* most – popular guys in town.

Randy McMichael had honed his considerable baseball skills on the sandlots all around Cleveland – east,

west, north and south – breaking just about every notable record that existed for a high school player to break during his time at St. Ignatius High School in Lakewood, where he'd somehow also found the time to star on the football field and basketball court, as well.

Six-five and devastatingly handsome, every Division I college in the nation had drooled over McMichael

when he'd graduated from high school in 1990. Wooed him, bribed him, did whatever the hell it took to entice the blonde-haired, blue-eyed phenom to their respective schools. But Randy McMichael had turned them all down flat, instead choosing the relatively obscure Cleveland State University as the place where he'd be breaking records for the next four years of his life.

And break records he did. Most

home runs. Most hits. Most runs batted in. Highest batting average. National Collegiate Player of the Year as both a junior and senior. A slick-fielding shortstop who moonlighted every five days as the most-dominant pitcher on the staff. A fastball that topped out in the upper-nineties and a curveball that broke from twelve to six smoother than the second hand on a Rolex watch.

Just as he'd done at St. Ignatius, Randy McMichael quickly got down to the business of making the CSU record book his bitch, as well.

After college, it had been more of the same from all of the Major League teams, each of them beating a path to his door like a pack of lovesick teenagers hell-bent upon landing the prettiest girl in town for themselves.



Taken by the New York Yankees with the No. 1 overall pick in the 1994 amateur draft, Randy McMichael had endeared himself to Cleveland fans for all time when he'd told Yankees' owner and fellow Cleveland boy George Steinbrenner to go fuck himself, that he'd never play for his shitbird team in a million years. Instead, McMichael had sat out the entire season so that his

beloved Indians could select him with the first pick the following spring.

For the next seven years, Randy McMichael had continued his charmed life on the baseball diamond. Rookie of the Year in 1995. Most Valuable Player in 1997 and 1999. Winner of the Indians' "Good Guy" award seven years running. Fifteen hundred hits quicker than anyone else in the history of baseball.

He did all this, of course, while at the same time dating a string of the most eligible starlets around the country. Pop singers and actresses. A classically trained pianist. Even a porn star, once.

Hardworking      Clevelanders loved the guy. And who could blame them? He was theirs and they were his. *Completely.* He was their rock star,

their astronaut and their war hero all wrapped up into one glorious, mythical figure. He'd been *everything* to them, and the sense of pride in the city had never been stronger.

But it had all come to a screeching halt in late September of 2002. A fall match-up with the Yankees and a hard play at the plate that had seen Randy McMichael blow out his right knee while trying to score from second

base on a sharply hit single to right field.

To this day, there still existed plenty of Tribe fans around the city who maintained that the Yankees' catcher that day – Quilvio Hernandez – had intentionally stuck out his leg in a deliberate attempt to injure Randy McMichael. There'd been death threats against Hernandez and his family after

that, of course; batteries and racial epithets slung at his head with equal ferocity every time the Yankees came back to town.

That sad day in the history of Indians baseball had marked the end of an era in Cleveland. Randy McMichael would never again return to the field, would never again dazzle them with his athletic prowess that seemed a gift straight from God Himself. His surefire

Hall of Fame career had been cut tragically short, and it had all been because of those goddamn Yankees.

He'd been Cleveland's Babe Ruth, its Lou Gehrig and its Joe DiMaggio all rolled into one. The best any of them had ever seen. Better than Bob Feller. Better than Lou Boudreau. Even better than Omar Vizquel.

And cuter than Grady Sizemore,

to boot.

“The very best of all time,”

Granny Bernice had told Angel one night back in 2001, proudly wearing his name stitched into the back of her extra-large jersey while they sat together on their front porch listening in awe to McMichael’s heroic exploits over the radio.

“This is it, Angel!” Granny

Bernice had squealed happily, clapping



her chubby hands together in delicious anticipation. “R-Mac’s really gonna give them goddamn Yankees the what-for tonight! Yes, ma’am! Just you wait and see, girly!”



## CHAPTER 52

On a completely breezeless day, Brotherhood operatives Miles O'Reilly and Seth Collins pulled their huge pickup truck with a giant Confederate flag hanging limply from a steel post in the back into the driveway of a tidy little bungalow house five miles outside Cleveland.

Monster tires lifted the vehicle twelve feet into the air, only adding to

its already imposing appearance.

Whenever O'Reilly and Collins were on the road, people *got the fuck out of their way*.

Americans by birth and Southerners by the grace of God, both men had served in the armed forces and considered themselves dyed-in-the-wool white supremacists. O'Reilly's Navy Seal training and Collins' time spent as

an Army Ranger had prepared them very well for their careers as hired guns following their military service – no debating that simple fact. Both still killed people for a living, of course, but now they got paid a hell of a lot more for it. Uncle Sam – tightwad motherfucker that he'd always been – had always compensated his soldiers a lot more like his name was Uncle Scrooge, and the time had finally come to even up the

score. Maybe even pick up a little bit of extra pocket change along the way while they were at it.

Hell, they'd *earned* that much.

O'Reilly was tall and blonde, Collins short and dark. Both were in their mid-thirties now, and each had been around the block more than a few times apiece. By no stretch of the imagination did *this* mark their first

rodeo.

O'Reilly holstered his Beretta at his side and turned to face the smaller man standing next to him in the cracked driveway. "You go ahead and dig up the money next to the shed in the backyard while I'll go after Trebblehorn," he said. "If I'm not out of there in five minutes, come in after me with guns blazing. Terminate any hostiles you encounter with extreme prejudice."

Collins nodded. “We still taking twenty percent off the top, Miles?”

O'Reilly grinned at his partner. “Goddamn right we are. Baby needs a new pair of shoes.”

Collins nodded again and popped the lock on the tailgate of the huge pickup truck before emerging with a shovel a moment later. “He’ll kill us for sure if he finds out, you know.”



O'Reilly widened his grin into an ax blade. “Fuck *him*, Seth,” he snapped. “Who the fuck calls himself *the Race Master*, anyway? Give me a fucking break. Full of yourself much? Anyway, even if that’s the case, at least we’ll die doing something we love, right? Still, I won’t tell if you don’t. That should improve our odds of staying alive quite a bit, wouldn’t you say?”

“Whatever you say, Seth.

You’re the boss.”

O’Reilly held the other man’s stare. “Goddamn right I am. And don’t you ever fucking forget it.”

As Collins made his way around to the back of the house to get the money, O’Reilly jimmied the lock on the front door and slipped quietly inside, pausing in the tiny kitchen for a moment to let his

ears tune in to their new surroundings.

Then he smiled.

Being very careful to not make even the *slightest* noise, he followed the sounds of moaning that were coming from the basement. He stopped halfway down the stairs and widened his clear blue eyes in surprise when he saw Treblehorn pumping his cock in and out of the nigger girl's mouth less than twenty feet away.

O'Reilly hissed a soft epitaph under his breath. Stupid motherfucker. It was the same shit that had gotten Christopher Johansen torn to shreds by their boss's vicious dog.

*Bane*, O'Reilly thought disgustedly. If he ever got even *half* the chance he'd shoot the fucking mutt right between the eyes and feed the pieces to the chickens on his farm down in

Jacksonville for dinner. Frank Perdue he was not. *His* chickens got whatever the fuck he gave them.

O'Reilly waited until the traitor had finished off in the nigger girl's mouth and they'd finished their pillow-talk before pulling back his index finger on the trigger from the stairwell. The Beretta coughed once, spraying Treblehorn's idiotic brains all over the basement wall.

Surprisingly, there were quite a lot of them.

Stepping from the shadows, he lifted the gun again, pointing it directly at the nigger girl's head this time. Naked and shivering like a leaf over in the corner, the trembling little slut used a shaking hand to wipe away Treblehorn's milky white seed from her quivering lips.

“Word on the street is that you’re pregnant, Sasha,” O’Reilly said, advancing even closer and positioning her forehead dead-center in the Beretta’s crosshairs. “Time for a little back-alley abortion to take care of that problem for you. Only problem is, I don’t quite have my medical license just yet.”

He holstered his gun and slid out a long knife from the leather sheath

attached to his belt. “So I guess that means we’ll have to take care of *your* baby the old-fashioned way.”

Ten feet away, Sasha Diggs forced a smile onto her lips and tried to make her voice sound throaty and seductive. The ugly words tasted like battery acid on her tongue. “I’ll suck that thing so good for you, daddy,” she cooed. “Before you do anything drastic, why don’t you come over here and let



me do what I do best? Everyone else seems to enjoy it.”

Miles O'Reilly paused while he considered the offer.

*How long would it take Collins to dig up that fucking money, anyway?*



## CHAPTER 53

The heartbreaking story of Sara Whitestone's brutal rape over an altar at St. Anthony's Catholic Church in the late-1950s – as told to Nathan Stiedowe while he held a sharp knife pressed against Dana's mother's throat – crushed Dana's spirit. For his part, however, Nathan Stiedowe didn't seem quite so moved. Quite the contrary, as a matter of fact.

Crushing      Sara's      slender

shoulders beneath his knees with all his weight, he stared down hard into her eyes, freezing her in his swirling cobra gaze. “That’s a real touching story, Mom. Really it is. Still, I’m afraid it’s not quite good enough. Time to pay the piper, cunt. But before I kill you, I think I’ll give you a taste of what it was like for *me* growing up. How does that

sound to you?”

Roughly flipping Sara onto her stomach, he yanked down her satin panties around her knees and slapped her hard on her bare buttocks, a stinging blow that turned her backside red. ““For this you know – no fornicator, unclean person nor covetous man who is an idolater has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God!’  
*Ephesians, chapter 5, verse 5.*”

The monster slapped Sara again,  
even harder this time.

““Let the people turn from their  
wicked deeds! Let them banish from  
their minds the very thought of doing  
wrong! Let them turn to the Lord that He  
may have mercy on them! Yes, turn to  
our God, for He will abundantly  
pardon!’ *Book of Isaiah, chapter 55,  
verse 7.*”

Nathan Stiedowe flipped Dana's mother back over and pinned her shoulders beneath his weight again. Running the sharp knife lightly over her throat left a superficial but very painful cut in its wake. Even in the darkness, Dana could easily make out the stark contrast between the bright red blood and the pale white skin at her mother's throat.

Just then, Sara Whitestone's panicked blue eyes suddenly widened in horror at the sight of something over Nathan Stiedowe's left shoulder. The monster turned and followed her gaze to the doorway of the bedroom. Dana did the same. Two feet away and dressed in his pajamas, Bradley held a teddy bear in one tiny hand and shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other



as though he needed to go to the bathroom.

“Mommy, what’s happening?” the little boy asked, his small voice quiet and shy. “You’re scaring me. Who’s that man on top of you? Where’s my daddy?”

Nathan Stiedowe locked gazes with the little boy, paralyzing Bradley in his stare. The monster never took his eyes off the boy as he whipped the sharp

blade across Sara Whitestone's slender neck again, this time cutting all the way to the bone.

Jolted out of his stupor, the little boy screamed so loudly that it nearly drowned out the watery gurgling sounds Sara Whitestone was making as she choked to death on her own blood. Springing off the bed in a black flash of movement, the monster leapt toward the

doorway, passing directly through Dana's body again.

The little boy's enormous blue eyes widened in terror as Nathan Stiedowe yanked the sharp knife overhead and wet droplets of Sara Whitestone's freshly drawn blood slid down the blade before plopping onto the boy's tiny, upturned face.

That was when the front door slammed open with a violent bang.

“Sara? James? What the hell’s going on in here? It’s Ralph Wilson from next door. Nancy and I heard screaming and called the police. Is everything all right?”

Undisguised hatred flashed across Nathan Stiedowe’s handsome face as he bolted past the now-catatonic little boy and dashed into Dana’s bedroom before pulling himself up

through the window, streaking across the backyard and disappearing into the pitch-black night. From the corner of her eye, Dana watched a dark circle of urine soak into the front of the little boy's pajama bottoms. The accusing glare in his wounded eyes was impossible to misinterpret.

*How could you let this happen to me again?* the little boy's look asked her. *You were supposed to protect me.*

*Now because of you I have to die in  
that plane crash.*



## CHAPTER 54

Randy McMichael's house – or, more accurately, his *mansion* – was located a twenty-five minute drive from the Dunkin' Donuts downtown. The security guard at the front gate waved Angel through without a second look when she flashed the old Cleveland PD badge at him. Worked like a charm every time.

Weaving her way through a few



streets lined with million-dollar homes with the windows rolled down, Angel breathed in the smell of money that was hanging in the air right next to the smell of freshly cut grass. Pulling into Randy McMichael's long, winding driveway three minutes later, she lifted her eyebrows halfway up her forehead, duly impressed. She put the vehicle into park mode and hopped out before looking

around a little more, taking in the sights.

So *this* was how the other half lived.

Not a bad gig if you could find the work.

McMichael's place was impressive even when compared to the other luxurious residences surrounding it. It loomed up higher, more magnificent than the rest. A huge arched entranceway lined with blood red roses pointed out the front door to visitors.

Angel walked past a Bentley and Rolls Royce that were parked in the driveway, painfully aware of just how badly her old beater stuck out like a sore thumb around here. Twelve years old and more than a hundred thousand miles on the odometer.

She sighed, cursing her often small and always irregular paychecks since leaving the police force. Maybe in

her next lifetime she'd drive a set of wheels that she didn't need to constantly feel embarrassed of.

One could always hope.

Angel shook her head to chase away the self-pitying thought. Making an honest living certainly wasn't anything to be *ashamed about*. Besides, she knew there were a hell of a lot of people out there who had things a lot worse than she did.

Properly chastised in her own mind, she took a deep breath through her nostrils and made her way past the intricate landscaping lining both sides of the stone walkway and all the way up to the front door of her grandmother's No. 1 hero.

Taking in another deep breath and letting out the air again forcefully enough to deflate her chest like a leaky

balloon, she lifted a shaking hand and knocked on the door before she had a chance to change her mind.

This was it. Do or die time. No turning back now.

After all, Granny Bernice wouldn't have expected anything less from her.



## CHAPTER 55

The Race Master swiveled in his comfortable leather chair and snipped off the tip from an enormous Cuban cigar while the energizing sounds of Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 1* filled his den.

He looked across the massive desk at the young man seated on the other side and lit up the cigar before snapping shut the gold Zippo again with a loud



metallic *click!* that made the young man jump. Blowing out a huge cloud of fragrant smoke and waving the cigar in his left hand, he said, “Recite ‘The Fourteen Words’ for me, Richard.”

Dressed in an exquisite Italian suit, Richard Patton cleared his throat nervously and did as instructed.

“We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White

children.”

The Race Master blew out a second huge cloud of smoke and nodded. “Very good, Richard. Now, who first spoke these vital words?”

Patton adjusted the cuffs on his crisp white dress shirt, pleased with himself for knowing the answer. “David Lane, sir.”

“And what happened to David Lane, Richard?”

“He was unfairly jailed, sir.”

“On what charges?”

Patton shifted uneasily in his chair, then looked down at his expensive leather shoes. The shoes had probably cost a thousand dollars, if not more. He wouldn't know. He hadn't paid for them. Not in any monetary sense, at least.

After a moment or two of

uncomfortable silence, he lifted up his gaze and admitted, “I don’t know, sir.”

The Race Master stubbed out his huge cigar in the ivory ashtray on his enormous desk and rose to his feet. He paced the room as he spoke. “He was jailed for resisting the genocide of his people, Richard. David Lane was sentenced to a hundred and ninety years in prison for his so-called ‘crimes’. He died in prison for those crimes – crimes

that the United States government commits every single day. Tell me, Richard, do you find that fair?”

Patton shook his head emphatically. “No, sir. I sure as hell don’t.”

“Do you find it fair that my only brother is locked away in a cold German prison cell for much the same thing?”

Patton shook his head again.

“No, sir. I most certainly don’t.”

The Race Master crouched down and ran a hand across the top of Bane’s massive head before looking back up at Patton. “Are you willing to die for our cause, Richard? Are you willing to give up your own life in service of the greater good?”

Patton didn’t hesitate with his answer. He knew it marked the only acceptable one. “Yes, sir. I am.”

The Race Master nodded and rose to his feet. Sliding open a drawer, he handed Patton the Walther 7.65 mm pistol across the desk. “Good. That’s exactly what I wanted to hear, Richard. Now put the gun to your head and pull the trigger.”

Rising to his own feet and taking the gun, Patton froze dead in his tracks as his confused brain tried desperately

to process the Race Master's instructions. "Sir?"

"I said put the gun to your head and pull the trigger, Richard. Just like Adolf Hitler did in 1945. Do it now."

Patton swallowed dryly. He'd had his suspicions before, but now he was absolutely *convinced* of it. The Race Master was truly *mad*.

Patton's jumbled thoughts went briefly to his predecessor and to the



gruesome fate that had befallen poor Christopher Johansen. Both Sullivan and Johansen had served the cause faithfully for more than twenty years, and look what had become of *them*.

His pulse quickened in his wrists. *What to do?* He could kill the crazy bastard right now, but then the enormous dog would surely attack. He doubted he'd have enough time to

squeeze off a second shot before the filthy cur tore open his throat with its powerful jaws.

Either way, he was a fucking dead man.

Richard Patton's hand trembled uncontrollably as he lifted the gun, the soft swish of his expensive clothing thundering in his ears like an avalanche of snow sliding down an icy mountaintop before burying him alive in

a suffocating tomb.

Then he took a deep breath through his nostrils and pulled the trigger.



## CHAPTER 56

In Dana's dream, Nathan Stiedowe was straddling her body and throttling her neck with his huge hands, pinning her down hard beneath his heavy weight and slamming her head viciously and repeatedly against a concrete floor, collapsing her windpipe and making it impossible to breathe.

Blood leaked out of her bashed-in skull and soaked into her short blonde

hair, tangling it in a disgusting, sticky mess of congealed curls before pooling in an ever-expanding puddle of crimson in the area around the back of her head.

Dana bolted upright in her seat on the plane and gasped. A cool rush of oxygen exploded into her lungs. Blankenship's hands were resting lightly on her shoulders. He gripped firmly with his fingertips and shook gently to

bring her back into the present. “Dana,” he said in a worried voice. “Dana, honey, wake up. You’re having a nightmare.”

Dana’s hazy world swam into sharp focus, hurting her eyeballs and slicing deep into the center of her brain with all the efficiency of a glittering razor blade coated with freshly drawn blood. A foot away, a sincere look of concern colored in Blankenship’s

handsome face while he knitted his eyebrows on his forehead.

She sat up straighter in her seat and rubbed at her throat. She could still *feel* the monster's hands there. She touched the back of her head and brought her hand around to the front of her eyes again. No blood.

“I... I’m sorry,” she breathed, trying desperately to control the



incessant pounding of badly laboring heart, which was still slamming away against her ribcage like the war drums of a long-ago Native American tribe that was hell-bent on extracting a little revenge from the white man for all his many egregious sins.

She sucked in another sharp breath through her mouth that shot some more oxygen rushing through her body. Thankfully, it helped. “I’m sorry,” she

repeated, even though the apology sounded forced and out of place even to her own ears. Still, she didn't know what the hell *else* she could say right now. She knew that she was acting like a complete lunatic right now, but she just couldn't seem to stop herself.

Blankenship waved away her awkward apology. "Don't be ridiculous, Dana," he said, settling back

into his seat. “You’ve got absolutely nothing to feel sorry about. Comes with the job. Lord knows I’ve experienced more than my fair share of night terrors. Only shows that you care. Mine got so bad that at one point that Madison wanted me to see a professional about them. But you know what they say about men and doctors.”

Dana blinked away the remaining cobwebs in her woozy mind and glanced

down at her watch. Confusion flooded through her brain. “I’ve only been asleep for ten minutes,” she said, looking back up at Blankenship for confirmation. “I feel like I was out of it for *hours*.”

Blankenship smiled gently at her. “Sucks that you didn’t get to miss out on the rest of the plane ride in dreamland,” he said. “I can’t *stand*

plane rides, myself. I always feel like I'm in the air and never have my feet on the ground.”

Dana shook her head. “Uh-uh, buddy. Sucky plane ride or not, believe me, I'd much rather be up here with you than in the place where I just came from.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Worse.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

Dana pursed her lips. The simple fact of the matter was she *did* want to talk about it. But she didn't feel like she knew Blankenship well enough yet.

“No, thanks,” she said. “I’m OK now.”

Blankenship frowned and put up his tray table, shifting in his seat to face her more directly. Then he sneered.

“You’re a real stupid bitch, you know that, Dana?”

Dana stared at him, horrified.

*“What?”*

Blankenship’s face melted away. When his voice filled Dana’s ears again, it sounded different – yet chillingly familiar. “I said, you’re a real stupid bitch, Dana. ‘Wah, wah, wah. I hurt. The bad man killed my parents and I don’t know what to do

about it. Please, please, *please* make my pain go away.’ Give me a fucking break already, would you? Stop your whining and grow the fuck up, why don’t you? This shit’s been going on for *far* too long. Get a *grip*.”

Dana pulled back her head on her shoulders. “Hey, fuck you, asshole.”

Blankenship didn’t drop his icy stare. “No, fuck *you*, Dana.” He paused



and laughed. The ugliness of his words froze the blood in her veins. “You didn’t really think that you *killed* me in that underground bunker, did you? I *can’t* die, you arrogant bitch. I’m *immortal*.”

Dana fumbled for her seat belt to get away from him, but it was already too late. Blankenship produced a long, bloody knife from the inside pocket of his blazer and yanked it above his head.

Drops of warm blood slid down the sharp edge before plopping down onto her face one by one like rust-colored water from a leaky faucet, burning her skin and sizzling away into vapor with a nasty hiss.

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“Dana! Wake up!”

Dana emerged from unconsciousness with a full scream

exploding from her throat. Blankenship gripped her shoulders forcefully with his fingertips and shook hard. “Dana, wake up, honey,” he repeated, more fervently this time. “Wake up. You’re having a nightmare.”

Dana sat up straighter in her seat and looked around frantically. A flight attendant came rushing down the aisle. “Are you OK, ma’am?” the woman asked, coming to a stop next to Dana and

shooting Blankenship a dark look.

Dana stared up at the woman, completely confused. A cold sweat had broken out across her entire body, soaking her blouse all the way through underneath her blazer. Painful goose bumps danced across her skin.

“Ma’am?”

Dana concentrated on the woman’s mouth. Flecks of lipstick

dotted the top lip. Crooked teeth lined the bottom gum. A deep voice that sounded like a record player set to the wrong speed came from deep within the woman's thin throat. The voice seemed much too slow. Much too menacing.

*“Ma’am?”*

Dana shook her head hard, finally speeding up the flight attendant's voice to the correct pitch and frequency.

*“Ma’am, are you OK?”*

Dana shook herself physically and forced herself to answer the woman, hard as it was for her to accomplish. “Yes, thank you,” she managed. “I’m fine.”

But Dana *wasn't* fine. Lord knew that much. And the other woman – Stella Jenkins, according to her nametag – knew it too. The flight attendant pressed her highly painted lips into a

tight line. “Would you like some water, ma’am?”

“No... thank you. I’m fine. Honest.”

The flight attendant lifted her perfectly plucked eyebrows and glanced over at Blankenship again, then back at Dana. “OK,” she said, “but just let me know if you need anything. Water, coffee, tea – anything at all.” She turned and pointed to the front of the plane.

“I’m just around the corner up there near the cockpit if you need me.”

Dana forced a trembling smile onto her lips, feeling utterly ridiculous.

“Thank you. I’ll do just that.”

When Stella Jenkins had finally gone back up to the front of the plane, Dana turned to Blankenship. He pressed his lips into a worried frown. “A nightmare?” he asked, furrowing his



eyebrows.

Dana nodded.

“A bad one?”

She nodded again.

“Wanna talk about it?”

Dana shook her head. “Hell,  
no.”



## CHAPTER 57

Randy McMichael answered the door himself. Still a man of the people, Angel saw.

The former ballplayer looked every bit as handsome in person as he did splashed across the screen of a color television set. Tall and muscular. A shock of unruly blonde hair that fell softly over his forehead and directly into his bright blue eyes. A smile that could

melt an icecap. A smile that could've melted any girl's heart of his choosing and served as a first-class ticket straight into her lacy white panties.

So why the hell had he been using an escort service?

McMichael seemed surprised to see Angel standing there on his landing, like maybe he'd been expecting someone else. He lifted his eyebrows into twin

question marks high upon his forehead and tugged down his rumpled green dress shirt over a pair of faded designer blue jeans that were hanging above the worn-out moccasins covering his feet. He had the ultra-hip thing down pat without looking like he'd put too much effort into it – not always the easiest feat in the world to pull off. Angel was amazed that Abercrombie & Fitch hadn't yet contracted with him to sell their

clothing. McMichael would've been a natural fit for the job – a perfect poster-boy for the over-thirty crowd still stuck in its wild college days. “Can I help you?” McMichael asked.

Angel took a deep breath and cleared her throat, trying to hide the fact that she'd been completely star-struck. She felt like a total idiot, of course, but she just couldn't help herself. Randy

McMichael had been a big deal to her grandmother, so that made him a big deal to her, too.

When the words finally came, they came rushing out in a torrent. “Mr. McMichael, my name is Angel Monroe. I’m a private investigator and I’m looking into the disappearance of a young girl. If I could just talk to you for a minute, it would be a huge help to me.”

A sharp look of irritation

creased McMichael's handsome face, which Angel saw didn't look *quite* so handsome when he frowned. "What the hell are you talking about, lady?" he snapped. "What young girl? I don't have time for this shit."

He began closing the door in Angel's face.

"Her name is Sasha Diggs, sir, and if I could just have a minute of your



time...”

McMichael continued closing the door in her face. “Sorry, lady. I don’t know anybody by that name. You’re going to have to leave now or I’m going to be forced to call security.”

Angel shook her head. So much for being a man of the people.

But the door had almost closed completely now so she needed to concentrate on that fact for the time

being. “It’s about Candy, Mr. McMichael,” she said quickly, shifting her head in an effort to maintain eye contact with him through the ever-narrowing crack. “The girl from the escort agency, from Elite Escorts of Cleveland.”

The door opened again. McMichael looked embarrassed as hell, but also resigned to the fact that he’d just

been caught red-handed.

He let out a heavy sigh that sagged his muscular chest like a car's airbag after a crash. "I knew this shit was going to catch up with me sooner or later," he said. "You got receipts? Pictures? Videotapes? You a reporter or something? Looking for a payoff?"

He opened the screen door all the way and stepped out onto the landing, towering over her like a giant.

“I’m sure we can work something out if you do. I don’t think I have to tell you how much something like this could hurt my reputation.”

He paused and glowered down at her. “And it would send my bar business straight to hell,” he finished up, referring to the chain of sports-themed bars he owned all around the city. “*R-Mac’s Dugout*,” he said in the TV

commercials, favoring viewers with his trademark Colgate smile. *“It’s time for you and your buddies to order up another relief pitcher.”*

Angel shook her head, ashamed of herself for feeling so intimidated. That being said, the man could have snapped her in half between his fingers like a breadstick if he’d wanted to. “No, Mr. McMichael,” she said, “it’s nothing like that at all. I’m not a reporter and

I'm not looking for a payoff. I don't have any pictures or videotapes. I'm a private investigator and all I've got is a sheet of paper from an appointment book with your name on it. But that's all I've got, I swear. I just need to talk to you about Sasha, about *Candy*, for a moment. It'll only take a minute or two of your time, I promise."

McMichael swore underneath his

breath but stepped aside to let her in, motioning for her to follow him inside with an annoyed jerk of his head. “Well, come on in then if you really have to.”

All things considered, Angel had seen much warmer receptions at an IRS audit, but she was inside the doorway now and only a few feet behind McMichael as she trailed him through his ornately decorated mansion, the pure *luxury* of it all taking her breath away.

Italian marble tile on the floors. Original oil paintings by nationally known artists hanging on the walls. Fine French furniture scattered tastefully throughout.

When they'd reached the end of a long hallway, McMichael pushed open a set of double doors leading into what Angel guessed was his innermost sanctuary, the place inside his house



where he felt the most comfortable.

*His lair?* she wondered briefly, then shook her head to chase away the stupid thought. It was highly unlikely that this was some sort of Phil Spector setup. The preternaturally gifted “Wall of Sound” music producer – a pop-music genius who’d worked with the Beatles on their Grammy-winning *Let It Be* album, among a host of other musical luminaries – had been convicted of

murdering his girlfriend, Lana Clarkson, in his own home in 2003, saying that Clarkson had accidentally committed suicide when she'd "kissed the gun". Still, nobody could be that sloppy in this day and age of advanced forensics.

Could they?

McMichael's sanctuary didn't seem quite a den, but not quite an office either. It could've served the purpose of

either or both, though. A large mahogany desk was angled sharply into one corner underneath a large bay window that overlooked the flawlessly manicured back yard. Comfortable-looking leather couches surrounded a huge flat-screen TV in the center of the room. A Nintendo Wii video game system with enough controllers for four people to play at the same time lay in a tangle of wrist-straps in front of the

television on the floor.

McMichael sank his huge frame deep into one of the expensive leather couches and motioned for Angel to do the same in the one opposite. “You want a drink?” he asked.

Angel shook her head and sat down. “No thank you, Mr. McMichael. Like I said before, this won’t take but a minute of your time. I’m a private

investigator and I'm looking into the disappearance of a young girl named Sasha Diggs. She went by the name of 'Candy' at the escort agency. The appointment ledger indicated that she'd spent some nights here recently, including the night before her grandmother said she went missing. I need to know if that's the last time you saw her. What her mood was like then. If she might've mentioned any troubles

she was having to you. Anything you can think of at all.”

McMichael was shaking his head the entire time she was speaking. Leaning his head back into the couch, he put his large hands to his face and rubbed wearily at his bloodshot eyes. Even from ten feet away, Angel could smell the sour odor of vodka on his breath. Then again, *he*’d already made

his millions, right? What *else* did he have to do with his time these days?

Besides possibly murder twenty-two-year-old Rhodes scholars who just so happened to moonlight as high-class call girls, of course.

“Listen,” McMichael said. “I don’t know about any of that shit, lady. The last time I saw Candy was a week ago, but I’m pretty sure you already knew that from that little sheet of paper

of yours, right?”

Angel nodded. “So she didn’t share *anything* with you the last time she was here, Mr. McMichael? Nothing at all? She must’ve have been one of your favorites, considering all the times she visited. During all those nights you two spent together you never discussed any personal matters?”

McMichael looked embarrassed



again, and Angel didn't blame him in the least. After all, who the hell wanted to discuss their sex life with a complete stranger?

Especially when you'd been paying for it.

“No, Miss... what's your name again?”

“Monroe.”

“No, Miss Monroe. We never discussed anything of a personal nature.

She'd come here when I called, we'd do our thing, and then she'd leave again. That's all there was to it."

Angel looked down at the sheet of paper in her hands and frowned. "It says here that they were all overnight visits, Mr. McMichael."

The former ballplayer waved a hand in front of his face, as though he were swatting away a bothersome fly.

“Well, whatever it says there is dead wrong. Look, lady, I paid her the overnight fee for however long it took – ten minutes...twenty minutes...an hour. It was sort of like an added bonus for her to keep her mouth shut about who she was coming to see, you know what I mean? She was in and out of here the last time I saw her in less than an hour.”

Angel deepened her frown and rose to her feet, slipping out a business

card from her purse and handing it over to him. “Well, if anything else comes to mind, Mr. McMichael – anything at all – I’d really appreciate it if you’d give me a call at the number on this card. Anytime. Day or night.”

McMichael rose to his own feet and took her card before tucking it away in the back pocket of his designer blue jeans. “I’ll do that, Miss Monroe.”

Angel nodded, feeling like a complete jackass as she stood there trying to think of something else to ask to him but coming up with absolutely nothing. She cleared her throat in an effort to fill the dead air between them. Wasn't very effective. "Well, then I guess I'll just see myself out."

As she exited his den/office/sanctuary/lair, McMichael

called out to her. “Miss Monroe?”

She turned around to face him.

“Yes?”

“I trust that these, um, *personal* matters will remain personal?”

Angel waved a hand at him, swatting away her own bothersome fly now. “As long as you play things straight with me, Mr. McMichael, I’ll play things straight with you.”

She paused. Before she left his

den, she added, “By the way, Randy, I’ve always been a big fan of yours. My grandmother, too. Pisser about those goddamn Yankees.”





## CHAPTER 58

The gun in Richard Patton's hand clicked dryly. He pulled the trigger again. Nothing happened.

Grinning maniacally, the Race Master came around the massive desk and into the center of the room, where Patton stood trembling like a leaf, his face very white. "Well now, Richard," the Race Master said. "This is certainly a surprise. Not what I was expecting at

all.”

Patton swallowed hard. He didn't know what to say. All he could manage was a weak, “I'm sorry, sir.”

The Race Master waved away the insincere apology with a quick sweep of his left hand. “No need to apologize, Richard. I'm sure you only did what you thought the honorable thing.”

He stared at the younger man evenly. “You may lower the gun from your temple now, Richard.”

Richard Patton did as he was instructed, exhaling a grateful sigh of relief through his nostrils as he did so. “Will there be anything else, sir?” he asked.

The Race Master walked back behind his desk and settled down into

his huge leather chair before opening up a file and beginning to read. “Is there any news from Cleveland, Richard?”

Patton shook his head. “No, sir. No word from Treblehorn yet. He’s not answering his cellphone. I’ve been calling all morning.”

The Race Master looked up from the file and frowned. “And from O’Reilly and Collins?”

“No word from them yet either,

sir.”

The Race Master dropped his gaze back down to the file and clucked his tongue in disappointment. “Pity. Good men are so very hard to find these days. Wouldn’t you agree with that assessment, Richard?”

Patton nodded. “Yes, sir, I certainly would.”

The Race Master looked up

again and held his protégé's nervous stare. Surprisingly, Patton didn't blink in face of the enormous pressure. Always a good sign in an underling. Respectful without being an out-and-out coward. "Are *you* a good man, Richard?"

"Yes, sir. I am."

The Race Master paused for what seemed an eternity then. Finally, he smiled. "You know what, Richard? I

think I believe you. Job well done today, my boy. You've proven yourself a worthy servant, and as a worthy servant you'll be rewarded appropriately when the time is right and my brother is freed from his cold prison cell in Germany to take his rightful place at the head of our organization."

At the Race Master's feet, Bane lifted his massive head and growled as

Patton exited the room.

Out in the relative safety of the hallway, Richard Patton exhaled another forceful sigh of relief; infinitely happy he'd made the right decision with the gun.

Or *had* he?

Only time would tell.





## CHAPTER 59

When Dana and Blankenship's plane touched down in Sacramento forty minutes later, they rented a car at the Hertz desk and made the half-hour trip to Marjorie Trimble's house on the outskirts of California's capital city.

As they drove, the hot sun blazed down so brightly from the cloudless blue sky above that it necessitated the wearing of dark sunglasses on both

agents' parts. And why not, right? After all, Hollywood wasn't too far away, so they might as well look the part while they were here in the neighborhood. Besides, who knew? Maybe they'd even run into Brad Pitt and Reese Witherspoon at some upscale, outdoor deli on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills while they were out here "doing" California.

Then again, maybe not.

Dana was behind the wheel of a 2009 white Nissan Sentra that still smelled faintly of stale cigarette smoke and ineffective air freshener. She wrinkled up her nose against the smell and pressed down her foot gently against the accelerator to pull onto the freeway as Blankenship brought her up to speed on what he'd discovered about the

Brotherhood's origins while she'd been off doing life-and-death battle with Nathan Stiedowe in her blood-soaked dreamland.

“Chapters in all fifty states and most provinces of Canada, but it looks like the Brotherhood got its start over in Germany,” Blankenship said. “No known home base here in the US, but pretty heavy pockets of activity going on in Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas.

Head of the organization was locked up for murder in Germany a couple decades ago, and the Brotherhood splintered off into several dozen different arms from there. No centralized leadership that I can find, which should only make tracking down whoever is ordering these killings that much harder.”

Dana shook her head in disappointment at the discouraging

news. “Great,” she said, cracking her window to let some fresh air inside the car. She couldn’t *stand* the smell of cigarette smoke, stale or otherwise. “What about the coroner’s report on Marjorie Trimble? He or she find anything interesting during the autopsy?”

Blankenship shook his head.

“Nope. Not a thing. Trimble’s body received the same special treatment as Betsy Campbell’s. Only DNA

recovered belonged to the victim. ME thinks that the body was bathed in a water-hydrogen peroxide mix to wash away the perp's own DNA.”

Dana lifted her eyebrows thoughtfully. Seemed that Agent John Olokawandi – the Seattle fed who'd yearned for his own personal crack at the Brotherhood – hadn't been too far off base with his whitewashing theory.



“That would mean Betsy Campbell’s body could’ve been transported somewhere else before being returned to the Subaru,” she said, then paused while the idea developed more fully in her brain. “Seems to me that these assholes have all the time in the world to commit their crimes, and they fucking well know it, too. That might point to the killings not being random in nature. A lot of thought is obviously going into the

selection process of the victims here. Anyway, what do we know about the father of Trimble's baby?"

Blankenship reached into the briefcase that was sitting on the floorboard at his feet and extracted a flimsy file. Flipping it open, he ran his gaze across the page on top and cleared his throat. "Reginald Craft III; president of Sacramento Mutual Bank; forty-two

years old; a legacy. Graduated from the University of Southern California with an MBA back in 1992, then took over Sac Mutual from his father, Reginald Craft II, who traveled the same educational route before taking over the bank from his *own* father, the original Reginald Craft – another USC alum. Anyway, Craft's alibi is tighter than a snare drum, just like Michael Timmons's was back in New York City. At the time

the Trimble murder was happening, Craft was serving as the keynote speaker at some hoity-toity finance conference out in Vegas. Seven hundred fat cats in attendance there to serve as well-heeled witnesses to his presence. Also like Michael Timmons, Craft's got no known connection whatsoever to the white-power set. Not that I expected to find one, of course. After all, he *was*

boinking a black chick, you know.”

Dana rolled her eyes at Blankenship’s awkward use of frat-boy lingo – and also at the mention of Reginald Craft III’s lofty position, a cushy job that had clearly been facilitated through the not-so-subtle application of nepotism, according to Blankenship’s report. Must’ve been nice. The corollary would’ve been her taking over Bill Krugman’s top slot at

the Bureau directly after graduating from the Academy. Not a bad place to start off. “Tough life, huh?” Dana asked.

Blankenship laughed without humor. “Yeah, tell me about it. The only thing *my* father ever gave me was two semi-permanent black eyes and about fourteen different bloody noses.” He paused and looked thoughtful for a moment. “Only got violent with us when

he was drinking, though. Sadly for us, however, that just so happened to be most of the time with him. The man did so love his drink. Johnny Walker, neat, if memory serves. Loved that shit more than he loved his own family.”

Dana looked over at her new partner and frowned. Besides what he'd told her about his wife and children, he hadn't shared too much with her about his personal life yet. She wanted to

know more, but she also didn't want to push it. She knew all too well for herself how being pushed felt. Wasn't a pleasant sensation. Treading carefully, she asked, "Real winner, huh?"

Blankenship stretched his neck and adjusted the sunglasses on his face. "Yeah, but I'm not sweating it. Larry Blankenship spread the wealth around. My older brother and mother got their



fair share of bumps and bruises along the way, too. The old man died of lung cancer in 1988. Probably smoking an unfiltered Pall Mall with Satan in the ninth circle of hell right now as we speak. Would've had to bum the smoke, though. Never had two nickels of his own to rub together."

Dana pressed her lips into a sympathetic line. "Wow. I'm really sorry to hear that, Bruce. Sounds

rough.”

He waved a hand in the air.

“Yeah, it *was* rough. But we’ve all got our own personal crosses to bear, right? I’m no different than anyone else in the world. Nothing special about my sob story.”

Dana focused on the road in front of them, not knowing what to say. She knew that Blankenship was underplaying

the misery of his childhood, but he'd also hit the nail on the head about most people in the world having their own long rows to hoe. God knew *she* had plenty of personal crosses to bear. *Heavy* ones. Always had ever since she'd been four years old. Probably always *would*, too, thanks to Nathan Stiedowe and his murderous little games. "I just don't see how anyone could hurt their own children," Dana

said, shaking her head in irritation as her thoughts flashed to Bradley and the traffic-court judge who'd whipped him so mercilessly with a thick leather belt before a video of the incident had found its way to YouTube. "It's just sick."

Just then, Blankenship's phone sounded from inside his blazer, cutting short the uncomfortable conversation. He looked over apologetically and dug

out the phone before glancing down at the caller ID. “Anyway,” he said, “no big deal, right? My family life these days is a hell of a lot better than it used to be, that’s for sure. And I’m sure yours will be too very soon, Dana.”

He glanced down again at the phone still ringing in his hand, then back up at her. “Anyway, I’d really like to take this call, if you don’t mind. It’s my wife.”

Dana waved a hand in the air, happy to end the previous conversation. And why wouldn't she be? Thinking about the past *hurt*. "Take it," she said. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm not even here."

Blankenship nodded and slid the digital green answer-bar across the bottom of his iPhone before hitting the speakerphone feature on the keypad.

“Madison!” he boomed. “What’s the good word, my dear? How are my two little angels doing?”

A woman’s voice sounded over the speaker of Blankenship’s iPhone. “Don’t you mean your *three* little angels, Bruce?”

“Of course I do. That’s what I just said.”

The woman snorted. “Like hell you did. Anyway, your two little angels

are just fine. Sitting here on my lap right now.”

Behind the wheel of the Sentra, Dana smiled at the image of Madison Blankenship balancing the adorable twin toddlers on her legs. She couldn't *wait* to experience that sort of thing for herself with Bradley. The sooner, the better.

“You on speakerphone?”



Blankenship asked his wife.

“Yep, and Olivia and Sydney are just *dying* to say hello to their Daddy. Wouldn’t stop bugging me about it until I finally broke down and called you. They miss their Daddy with all their hearts – and so does their Mommy.”

Blankenship widened the smile on his face. “Well now, you don’t say. That a fact?”

“Yeah, it is. Anyway, go ahead

and say hello to them already. They're waiting for you."

Blankenship cleared his throat and cut his stare over to Dana. Raising his voice two octaves, he said, "Hey there, girls! How are my little babies doing? Hi, little Olivia. Hi, little Sydney. It's your Daddy and I love you very much. I love you to pieces and pieces and pieces and forever and ever

and ever.”

Dana stifled a laugh as she listened Blankenship talk to his daughters. She could already tell that he was a great dad, but where was the surprise in that? She hadn't expected anything less from him.

A loud crackle of static sounded over the speakers. A moment or two later, Madison Blankenship came back on the line. “Well, that went just about

how I expected it might. Olivia kissed the phone and Sydney tried to eat it. I guess that's their way of saying hello. We're really going to have to work on that."

Blankenship laughed. "Hey, I'll take it. No complaints over here. Anyway, how are *you* doing, sweetheart? Miss me yet?"

"Of course. How could I not,

right?”

Blankenship pursed his lips modestly. “Good point. I guess I’m quite the miss-able fella, now ain’t I? And before you ask – yes, honey, I miss you too.”

“Yeah, but do you love me to pieces and pieces and pieces and forever and ever and ever?”

Blankenship’s face reddened. “You know it, girlfriend.”

Madison Blankenship snorted again. “You’d better, buster. Anyway, I’ve got some good news for you, if you’re feeling up to hearing it.”

Blankenship lifted his eyebrows. “Of course. What’s going on?”

“I think I’ve found a place for us to live in Ohio. Is your new partner around? I’d like to speak with her for a

minute.”

Blankenship cut his gaze over to Dana, who nodded back. “Yep, she sure is. Sitting right here next to now.”

“Am I on speakerphone, too?”  
Madison Blankenship asked.

“Yep.”

“Good,” the woman said. She paused and cleared her throat. “Dana?”

Dana turned toward the phone.  
“Yes, ma’am?”

“Hey there! How are you doing? First things first: I’ve heard nothing but great things about you and it’s awesome to finally sort-of meet you – if only on the phone for right now. Anyway, I really hate to put you on the spot like this, but I think I might have found a house for us in Avon and I wanted to ask if you were familiar with the area.”



Dana took the iPhone from Blankenship's hand and spoke more directly into the mouthpiece. "Yep, I sure am," she said in response to Madison Blankenship's inquiry about the sleepy little hamlet thirty miles west of Cleveland.

"What's it like?"

Dana thumbed on the cruise control. "Well, from all reports, it's a

great place to raise a family,” she said. “Usually makes Cleveland Magazine’s *Best Places to Live* issue. About thirty-thousand residents. Used to be mostly farmland, but they’ve built it up like crazy over the past fifteen years or so. Quiet streets, a great public school system and pretty good shopping, too, if memory serves. At least three malls within driving distance that I can think of off the top of my head. Anyway, when

were you thinking about coming to Ohio to check things out?”

“As soon as humanly possible,” Madison Blankenship said. “Just as soon as you and Bruce can wrap up this case you’re working on right now, I guess. Anyway, while I’ve still got you here on the phone, I also wanted to ask a quick favor.”

“What’s that?”

“Take care of my husband, would you? He might not like to admit it, but he’s got two left feet. Gets himself into trouble with his own clumsiness if you don’t watch out for him. One time he even broke his left ankle in three different places while he was getting out of the car. Don’t ask me *how* he did it, he just did.”

Blankenship rolled his eyes in

the passenger seat of the car. “Hey, honey,” he cut in. “I heard that. No fair telling tales out of school.”

His wife laughed. “I *know* you heard me, Bruce. That’s exactly why I said it. Anyway, I know that you two superheroes are busy chasing down villains right now so I’ll give you a call later on tonight, OK? The girls just wanted to say hello to their Daddy and I just wanted to tell you the good news

about the house.”

Madison Blankenship paused.

“It was a real pleasure speaking with you, Dana,” she said. “I can’t wait to finally meet you in person. From everything Bruce has told me about you, I love you already.”

Dana smiled. “Same here, Madison,” she said, handing the phone back to Blankenship. “Anyway, here’s

your husband again. I'll keep an eye on him for you while he's entering and exiting cars."

Madison Blankenship laughed again. "Thanks. I appreciate that. It's a load off."

For the next thirty seconds, Dana listened to Blankenship wrap up the phone conversation with his wife. When her new partner had finally signed off and tucked his iPhone back into his

blazer, she turned to him and smiled.

“She sounds like an absolutely incredible woman, Bruce.”

Blankenship nodded. “She is. Thanks for saying so. I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

Ten minutes of easy conversation later, Dana finally wheeled the Sentra through the gates of Marjorie Trimble’s exclusive gated housing complex thirty



miles south of the airport, flashing her FBI ID at the security guard out front before heading deeper into the development. With the help of the GPS sitting on the dashboard, they found the murdered banker's impressive mansion tucked away at the end of a tranquil suburban street less than five minutes later.

She pulled into the long, winding driveway and switched off the ignition

before turning in her seat to face Blankenship. “Ready to get back to work?” she asked.

Blankenship put on his game-face. “Damn right, I am,” he said. “The faster we can track down these white-power assholes, the better, as far as I’m concerned. I’ve got a house to move into.”

Dana put on her own game face

next to him and steeled herself for what would come next. More blood. More dead women. More brutally murdered babies. “Great,” she said. “So let’s go do this.”

Blankenship smiled grimly at her as he unfastened his safety belt and exited the car without incident. “Right behind you, my dear Holmes,” he said. “Right behind you.”



## CHAPTER 60

Angel had made it halfway home to the west side of Cleveland when her cellphone rang in her purse.

She dug it out while simultaneously trying to keep her attention focused on the two-lane road in front of her and the traffic whizzing by in the opposite direction. Flipping open the phone, she wedged it between her cheek and left shoulder so as to keep

both her hands on the steering wheel.

“Hello?”

“Angel, it’s Stosh. I need to see you right away.”

Stosh’s voice sounded worried, like he was holding something back, and for some reason or another that irritated the living shit out of Angel.

Hell, what *didn’t* irritate the living shit out of her these days?

But it was obvious that Stosh had something to say, something he didn't want to tell her over the phone, and that marked *exactly* the kind of cloak-and-dagger shit that Angel wasn't in the mood to deal with right now. "What is it, Stosh?" she asked, feeling the start of a world-class headache begin to crack away at her temples. "Is it something about Razor? A break in the case? A

confession?”

The Cleveland cop cleared his throat on the other end of the line.

“Well, no. As a matter of fact, as far as that goes, it’s just about the furthest thing from a confession you could possibly think of, Angel. Razor Diggs swears he had nothing to do with your grandmother’s murder. Says he simply dumped you in the alleyway next to his building after he knocked you out and



that's the last he saw of you."

Angel gripped the steering wheel so hard that the blood drained from her knuckles. "And that was *good* enough for you?"

Stosh grunted into the receiver. "Of course not. Don't be ridiculous. We're still holding him on the murder of the teenager you witnessed. Other than that, though, we didn't find his prints

anywhere in your house. And the bullet we recovered from your grandmother didn't match any of the guns we found in his apartment, either, including your .45."

Angel let out an annoyed breath. With her nerves already teetering on the edge, this revelation only served to shove her over the cliff. "Who in the fuck *else* could've done it, Stosh?"

"I don't know, Angel, but like I

said before, that's not what I'm calling you about. I need to see you right away."

Angel clenched her teeth until her jaw began to ache. "Tell me what it's about and I'll be more than happy to come right over," she said slowly. "Listen, Stosh, it's been a real long day already and I'm exhausted, so I'm really not in the mood to play any games right

now, OK? What the hell is going on?”

There was another long pause on the other end of the line. Finally, Stosh said, “It’s Sasha Diggs.”

Angel resisted the urge to scream into his ear through the mouthpiece of her cellphone. “What *about* her, Stosh? Just tell me already, goddamn it.”

“She’s dead, Angel. Murdered. We found her body twenty minutes ago.”



## PART III

“Racism rests upon and functions as a kind of seesaw: the persecutor rises by debasing and inferiorizing his victim.” – Albert Memmi, in his 1999 book, *Racism*.



# CHAPTER 61

Angel mashed down her foot against the gas pedal and flew down the highway at eighty-five miles an hour, as though screaming demons were following hot on her heels and intent upon claiming her eternal soul for the Devil's dark side of the ledger.

Finally reaching Cascade Park in Elyria fifteen long minutes later, she came to a screeching halt in the parking



lot and slammed the car into park mode before throwing open the driver's side door and jumping out in a flash, leaving the keys dangling from the ignition in an effort to save time and dashing frantically toward the commotion a hundred yards away.

Her heart pounded madly in her throat as she followed the trail of flashing blue lights all the way down to

the edge of the Black River, which was meandering its way through the massive park like some kind of dark, pulsating snake that was completely unconcerned with the human drama currently playing itself out along its timeworn banks.

Angel found Stosh Meyers among fifty or so other law-enforcement personnel; all of them hovering over Sasha Diggs's hacked and bloody body like a flock of hungry vultures. Most of

the law-enforcement personnel looked sick to their stomachs as they muttered to each other – and themselves – in low voices.

Angel resisted the urge to close her eyes against the horrific sight that slapped her hard across the face and left her ears ringing. Sasha Diggs was completely naked and lying on her back at the river's edge. Her lifeless hazel

eyes stared directly up into the harsh glare of the blazing noontime sun, completely unseeing now, though they'd obviously seen *far* more than their fair share of horror over the past week. Twigs and little bits of mud and grass were weaved into her once-luxurious long black hair, which now sat grotesquely matted to her head with the dirty brown water of the Black River. Little white maggots wriggled madly in

her split-open belly in their quest to claim the tastiest bits for themselves.

Gagging, Angel saw that Sasha's beautiful body didn't even come *close* to sticking out in all the right places any more.

She covered her mouth and nose against the revolting stench – a nauseating combination of vinegar and baking meat – and again resisted the urge

to close her eyes against the horrific sight. It wouldn't have done her any good, anyway. She had very little doubt that the shocking images would remain seared into her memory forever.

Sasha Diggs had suffered before she died. She'd suffered *a lot*. Her breasts had been hacked off all the way to the breastbone, and it looked as though some kind of powerful bomb had gone off inside her stomach.

Something else, also bloody, lay in the dirt right next to her destroyed body.

“What *is* that?” Angel asked, barely recognizing the haunted sound of her own trembling voice.

The blood drained completely from Stosh’s face, turning his cheeks a ghostly white. His own voice shook with a powerful combination of sorrow

and rage.

“It’s a fetus, Angel. Sasha Diggs was four months pregnant.”





## CHAPTER 62

Richard Patton filled in the Race Master on the latest news from Cleveland while the sounds of Handel's *Messiah* floated softly in the air all around them.

“The mission: it's finally been completed, sir. Sasha Diggs is dead.”

The Race Master looked up from his tattered copy of *Mein Kampf* while Bane calmly chewed on Josef Sullivan's

leg bone at his feet, a contented growl coming from deep within his thick throat. “And Gerald Trebblehorn, Richard?” the Race Master asked.

“He’s dead, too, sir. Dispatched by O’Reilly and Collins.”

“And the money?”

“Eight hundred thousand dollars, sir.”

The Race Master frowned. He

knew that the former military men made a habit of skimming off the top, but twenty percent still seemed a bit hefty for his liking. “What’s the status of the private investigator, Richard?”

“She’s still working the case, sir.”

The Race Master sighed. Perhaps the silly woman hadn’t received the message clearly enough the first time around. Perhaps it was time to ramp up

the pressure a bit.

Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.

The Race Master paused and frowned. *Perhaps*, but the thought of killing Angel Monroe outright didn't sit well with him. The death of the woman's grandmother had been deviation enough from his master plan. Any further murdering of the minor characters in this brilliant play just

wouldn't seem *artistic*.

“Have O'Reilly and Collins keep a close eye on this stone in my shoe, Richard,” the Race Master said.

“Tell them that they've already been paid quite handsomely with the money they've stolen from me – both in this instance and in the past.”

Patton nodded. “Will there be anything else, sir?”

The Race Master waved a hand

in the air, eager to get back to his reading. “No, I think that will be all for now, Richard. The baseball player in Cleveland should keep everyone busy for a little while, which should in turn give us ample time to plan our next move. For now, just proceed with the woman basketball player down in Houston. Other than that, though, keep up the good work, my boy.”

Richard Patton beamed.

Compliments were *exceedingly* rare in The Brotherhood, and this marked the second time in as many days that he'd managed to please the Race Master. If nothing else, he knew he must've been doing *something* right.

He snapped to attention and raised his right arm in a stiff Nazi salute before pivoting sharply on his heel and



quickly exiting the room. “Yes, sir. I certainly will.”



## CHAPTER 63

Dana popped the trunk on the Sentra, and she and Blankenship dressed quickly in the fresh sets of PPE they'd brought along with them from Seattle before making their way up the sidewalk.

Ducking under the yellow police tape stripped across the front doors of Marjorie Trimble's beautiful mansion and stepping inside the foyer a moment

later, they both immediately recoiled against the horrific sight that slapped them hard across their faces. Dana's ears rang. Her palms flooded with sweat. Her hands shook. Her world swayed.

The shocking bloodbath that had taken place within the ridiculously high-ceilinged foyer of Marjorie Trimble's remarkable home exceeded even the

disgusting horror show that had transpired in the back seat of Betsy Campbell's green Subaru hatchback a few days prior. Previously, Dana would have thought such a feat utterly impossible to accomplish. But standing here now and taking in the unspeakable tableau before her shocked eyes, her reeling brain had no choice but to reconsider its earlier judgment.

Dana swallowed back an acrid

measure of stomach acid that rushed up from her stomach and flooded into her mouth. Cringing against the foul taste, she blinked rapidly to refocus her vision. What seemed to be *gallons* of blood had been splashed against the walls. The marble-tiled floor had been *covered* in red, as had the faux-Tudor vanity mirror that was hanging above an expensive-looking side table directly in

front of an elaborate, winding staircase that led up to the second floor.

Blankenship blew out a slow breath over his teeth and shook his head. “*Fuck*,” he muttered, leaning down to place his briefcase on the floor at his feet. “This looks *twice* as bad as the Betsy Campbell scene.”

Dana slid her stare over to him. “That’s just what I was thinking. But I guess it *should* look twice as bad,

because it *is* twice as bad. Sacramento coroner said Marjorie Trimble suffered eighty-eight knife wounds to her hands, face and body, compared to Betsy Campbell's forty-four."

Blankenship gritted his teeth.  
"Eighty-eight. HH. Heil Hitler. White Power Assholes 101. Another code?"

Dana nodded. "Sure seems like it. The murders might be getting more



vicious, but at least the codes are getting simpler.”

Blankenship stretched his neck.

“Well, I suppose we’ve got that going for us/”

Dana pursed her lips. “Not good for the victims, though.”

“Good point.” Blankenship paused and swept his stare around the blood-drenched foyer some more. “Gotta be a video security system

around here somewhere in a place this fancy.”

“Local cops said they couldn’t find one.”

“Yeah, well, the local cops ain’t the FBI, sweetheart. There’s a security system in here, Dana, I’m sure of it. Now all I’ve got to do is find the damn thing. Shit, I’ll bet that thirty different cameras are staring at us in the face right

now.”

Dana shivered at the thought, wondering if Marjorie Trimble’s murder had been captured on video like Laura Settle’s had back in New York City. “Wouldn’t an outside company take care of something like that, though?” she asked. “There must be bills lying around here somewhere.”

Blankenship pulled back the sleeve on his blazer and checked his

watch. “I don’t think so. From what I’ve heard about Trimble, she was the type to be more concerned with the help stealing the silverware than with the possibility of becoming the victim of cold-blooded murder. She probably had the security system installed by a third party, sure, but then I’ll bet she took over the monitoring duties from there. More in keeping with her character.

From all reports, she was a micro-manager, a control freak.”

“So, what now then?”

Blankenship leaned down and unsnapped the metal fasteners on the briefcase at his feet, reaching inside and extracting a handheld electronic device before powering it on. “Now we sweep the place,” he said, straightening back to his full height of just over six feet and nodding down to the device in his hand.

“This here is the Simpson S2100. Basically works on the same principles as sweeping for bugs, only better.”

Dana rolled her eyes. “You know, Blankenship, sometimes you remind me of ‘Q’ from a Bond movie. Not in a good way, either.”

Blankenship considered the comparison. “Funny, I’ve always thought of myself as being more like

Agent Double-Oh Seven, himself: suave, debonair; a real lady-killer.”

He paused and amended the statement. “Well, romantically speaking, at least. Anyway, you did all the dirty work back in Seattle, so I’ll take care of it here. I’ll take the foyer. You head on upstairs and see what you can find there.”

Dana nodded and looked down at her feet to make sure that her paper

shoe-covers hadn't moved out of place. Then she let out a slow breath and headed for the staircase fifteen feet away. "Sounds like a plan to me, 'Q'," she said as she reached the foot of the staircase a moment later.

Blankenship cut his stare over to her and injected a thick Scottish accent into his voice. "Uh-uh, my dear," he said. "The name's Blankenship.



“*Bruce* Blankenship.”



## CHAPTER 64

Cleveland PD hauled Randy McMichael's handsome ass into jail less than an hour later. Despite her earlier promises about keeping his private business private, Angel had absolutely no qualms whatsoever about giving up the murdering bastard. Not after what Stosh had told her he and his people had discovered shoved deep inside Sasha Diggs's traumatized vagina:

A decidedly foreign object positively *covered* with the former baseball star's fingerprints.

The task of telling Jelani Diggs about the vicious murder of her granddaughter had somehow fallen upon Angel's unsteady shoulders, even though it was highly irregular for a civilian to perform such a task. Still, Stosh had said that he didn't want to send some

random uniform up to the old woman's front door to tell her the bad news, hoped Angel might soften the blow in some small way.

But how in the hell did you soften the blow of a *sledgehammer*?

Jelani Diggs displayed none of usual histrionics that you normally see on the evening news when Angel knocked on her door in Westlake an hour later. No gnashing of her teeth, no

rending of her clothes and no beating of her breast. Just a brief look of shock, then cold, hard detachment. The old woman's yellowing brown eyes flared up like a supernova for a fraction of a second, and then the light inside her eyes simply blinked out forever, never to return again. Angel left the house knowing that Jelani Diggs had died every bit as much on the inside as her

poor granddaughter had died on the outside.

The media circus surrounding Randy McMichael's perp-walk a few hours later had no equal in the history of Cleveland journalism. National press outlets had shown up – CNN, Fox, truTV – and international media was on its way, winging its way in from all four corners of the globe as it rushed to Ohio to cover the shocking story. The murder

of Sasha Diggs marked the biggest scandal in the sports world this side of the O.J. Simpson debacle in 1994, and the similarities between the two cases couldn't be ignored. Same disgusting, instigating event: a young woman brutally butchered by a beloved sports star – the laughable “not guilty” verdict in the O.J. Simpson case notwithstanding.



Everything seemed a haze for the rest of the afternoon as Angel's mind struggled to process the unspeakable events of the day. She'd finally taken the first step down what she'd figured would be the long, hard road to finding Sasha Diggs, then she gets a phone call telling her that there would be no happy ending at the end of the trail. Only a dead body.

Or, more accurately, *two* dead bodies.

They'd be fast-tracking the DNA tests on Sasha Diggs's unborn baby to confirm that Randy McMichael was indeed the father, but it would take at least a week for the results to come in. Still, Angel didn't have the slightest doubt in her mind about the paternity. She *knew* the baby belonged to Randy

McMichael, and she didn't need the double-helix breakdown to tell her that again.

She seethed while she sat in her Cabriolet in the parking lot just outside Edgewater Park Cemetery in Lakewood, clenching and unclenching her teeth so hard inside her mouth that she thought she might shatter her jawbone.

It just wouldn't have done for the Great White Hope to father a child out of

wedlock with a black woman nearly twenty years his junior, now would it have? Not in this backward-ass country, anyway. Especially not when the woman in question had essentially been nothing more than a high-class prostitute, spreading her legs for money in the exact same way that a back-alley hooker did, regardless of how much money she charged for her services or how fancy

her expensive designer clothes happened to be.

Angel shook her head in disgust.

The United States had come a hell of a long way since the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s – no debating that obvious fact – but Cleveland still remained a dirty place in a lot of ways, still ranked as the third-most segregated area in the country as recently as the 2000 census. So a bombshell revelation

like Randy McMichael and Sasha Diggs having a baby together just wouldn't have done. As the former baseball star himself had told her himself, it would have sent the asshole's bar business straight to hell.

Angel took in a deep breath through her nostrils and finally switched off the Cabriolet's ignition before tucking the keys into her purse and

slipping a pair of dark sunglasses onto her face to shield her eyes from the bright sunlight that was shining down from the blazing blue skies above. If nothing else, she knew she couldn't handle this alone. She needed someone to talk to about the bloody nightmare she'd just witnessed at Cascade Park in Elyria.

She sighed and exited the car.

As had been the case so many times

before in her life, she needed to talk to her grandmother.





## CHAPTER 65

Kimberly Anderson jockeyed for position down low in the paint and called for the ball. The point guard whipped in the pass and Kim lowered her shoulder, gave a head fake to shake off her tenacious defender and powered up to the rim. The basketball rattled around the iron for a second or two before falling through the net with a soft *swish!*

Thirty feet away, the coach blew a shrill whistle. “All right, ladies, great practice! Hit the showers! Road game in Detroit tomorrow. Bus leaves for the airport at six p.m. tonight. Don’t be late or it’ll cost you a hundred dollars a minute.”

Rivers of sweat dripped from Kim’s face and dotted the shiny hardwood floor at her feet as she

followed her panting teammates into the locker room and flopped down onto a long wooden bench in utter *exhaustion*.

A metal locker slammed three feet away. Sneakers squeaked against the tiled floor. Heavy blasts of steam poured out of the shower stalls fifty feet across the room.

A moment later, LaTasha Reynolds, the Houston Comets' all-star point guard, flopped down onto the

bench beside Kimberly. “How much longer you gonna be able to play for, Kim?” Reynolds asked, still breathing hard from the exertion of the intense practice. The Comets were in the playoff hunt now, and the practices seemed to be getting more and more difficult each and every time they stepped out onto the floor.

Kimberly, the team’s lanky small

forward and a third-year pro out of the University of Kentucky, wiped sweat from her face with a clean white towel.

“Doctor said I can keep going for another month or two. After that, my season’s over.”

“You guys having a boy or a girl?”

“Girl.”

“What are you gonna name her?”

Kim leaned down and unlaced

her high-tops. She preferred Nikes but Reebok paid the bills. “Nancy,” she said. “Nancy Rose.”

LaTasha Reynolds smiled at her. “You’re naming her after Nancy Lieberman, ain’t you?”

Kim smiled back. “Damn right, I am. Gotta pay homage to the ones who paved the way, girl. C’mon now, you know that.”

The point guard laughed and bumped her shoulder playfully against Kim's. "Nancy Lieberman might have been the greatest female basketball player of all time, Kim, but you do know that's a *white* name, don't you? Why don't you guys go for something a little more ethnic sounding? What do you think about Shaniqua?"

Kim rolled her eyes. "Shut the



hell up, LaTasha. That's a stupid name, and you know it. Besides, Joey's white, so the baby's going to be half-white, anyway.”

The point guard looked thoughtful for a moment. Then she lifted her eyebrows and said, “I don't suppose you guys would consider a hybrid, seeing as how the kid's gonna be a hybrid and all. How does Nanciqua sound to you?”

Kim laughed and shooed away her teammate. “Get out of here, LaTasha.”

“That’s *Kim*Tasha to you, bitch.”

Finishing up in the showers an hour later, as always, Kim was the last one to leave the gym. As she walked back across the now-deserted basketball court and toward the parking lot with her heavy canvas gym bag slung over her

right shoulder, a large blonde man suddenly emerged from the tunnel on the southwest side of the arena.

The man's bright blue eyes bulged wildly from their sockets when he saw Kim. "Please come quick!" he shouted. "My baby's having a seizure over here."

Kim's heart pounded madly in her throat as she dropped her heavy gym bag to the floor and raced across the

court as fast as her frantically pumping legs would carry her. A cold sweat broke across her entire body, soaking into her fresh clothes and nullifying the long, hot shower from which she'd just emerged.

Reaching the tunnel in a matter of seconds, she widened her big brown eyes in shock as a second blonde man emerged from the shadows and

immediately stabbed a sharp silver knife deep into her slowly growing belly. He grunted hard with his efforts and yanked up the unforgiving steel with unbelievable force, slicing open Kim's abdomen from her belly button all the way to her sternum.

Seizing hard, Kim flopped around wildly on the floor for a moment or two before her body finally relaxed and her world slipped away into the

dark and confusing – and absolutely  
*petrifying* – void of forever.



## CHAPTER 66

Dana rummaged through Marjorie Trimble's dresser drawers in the woman's elaborately decorated bedroom for a good ten minutes or so, finding nothing of interest other than a small pink vibrator and an unused prescription for birth-control pills. Too little, too late, in this case, Dana supposed.

As she pawed around Trimble's



intimates some more, she felt ashamed of herself for the intrusion, even if the woman was dead now. This was the part of the job she'd always *hated*. So insensitive, heartless and downright *rude*. Lord knew that she wouldn't have wanted anyone pawing through *her* things after she'd passed away. Still, if the rest of the banker's lingerie drawer could be considered an insight into the

woman's sex life, Dana would've had to peg Trimble as a no-nonsense type of gal. No big surprise there, however. Folks who worked in the stuffed-shirt world of high finance tended to keep things straightforward, even in the bedroom. *Especially* in the bedroom. Dana had learned that much firsthand when she'd briefly dated a stockbroker in the early nineties. The man hadn't even liked to get *undressed* in front of

her, much less anything more adventurous than that.

For her part, when it came to underwear, Marjorie Trimble owned nothing more racy than two stacks of neatly folded, clean white granny panties and about twenty different industrial-strength underwire bras – all of those also white. Still, who knew? Maybe that's the way Reginald Craft III had

liked it. Maybe dating a woman of another race had been all the excitement the corporate fat cat could handle.

Dana sucked in a sharp breath at the seemingly random thought. A weird feeling buzzed through her veins. Slipping out her cellphone from her purse, she logged onto the Internet and navigated the browser over to Amazon before typing in the name of Laura Settle's lover – Michael Timmons.

Timmons had published at least four novels under his own name that she knew of, although none of them had been especially brisk sellers.

After what seemed an eternity, Timmons's author page finally popped up on the world's biggest book-selling site. A pleasant-looking face stared back at Dana from the tiny screen on her cellphone, a shock of unruly white-

blonde hair falling softly over a smooth forehead and directly into bright blue eyes. Dana felt her heartbeat rev up some more in her throat as she navigated the browser over to Facebook next and found Betsy Campbell's homepage before studying the picture attached.

Bald and frail from six months of invasive chemotherapy treatments, Betsy Campbell's husband was seated beside her on a park bench at the beach,

wearing a floppy fisherman's hat to protect his sensitive skin from the unforgiving sun that was streaming down from the cloudless blue sky above. Despite the protective headwear, Brian Campbell already showed the beginnings of a mild sunburn.

*Jesus.*

Dana shook her head in disbelief. Because when you added

those two men to the esteemed Reginald Craft III, you got a connection so obvious that Dana wished she could somehow bend her leg at the proper angle in order to give herself a swift kick in the ass for not realizing it sooner.

All three partners of the murdered black women – not to mention the fathers of their unborn children – had been *white*.

She snapped shut her phone,



feeling dizzy as she exited the bedroom and headed for the stairs. She needed to fill Blankenship in on the white-black connection. *Now.* It could prove the difference between another pregnant woman's continued life and her horribly painful death.

Or, more accurately, *two* horribly painful deaths.

She'd made it halfway down the

staircase when her phone rang in her hand. Frowning, she flipped it open and placed it to her ear. “Dana Whitestone.”

Bruce Blankenship’s voice sounded in her ear, surprising her enough to stop her dead in her tracks. “Hey there, Dana Whitestone,” he said. “Bruce Blankenship here. Long time, no talk, huh?”

Dana knitted her eyebrows and finished her descent of the staircase,

baffled as to why Blankenship would be calling her from inside the same house. Marjorie Trimble's mansion was big, sure, but it wasn't *that* big. "Where are you?" she asked.

Blankenship cleared his throat. "In the basement. And you'd better come down here right now."

"Why?" Dana asked, and she thought she heard the faint whir of

electronics in the background of the call.

“Because you’re not gonna *believe* what I just found.”



# CHAPTER 67

Angel knelt beside her grandmother's freshly dug grave and traced her trembling fingers over the engraved lettering that was flanked by beautifully depicted cherubim and seraphim on either side of the shiny marble headstone:

BERNICE ELIZABETH MONROE

LOVING FRIEND, MOTHER AND

GRANDMOTHER

GONE FROM OUR LIVES – BUT  
NEVER FROM OUR HEARTS

Angel closed her eyes and let the tears come again. A moment later, she began to sob uncontrollably. Hard, painful sobs that wracked her entire body so violently she could barely even *breathe*.

The source of the pain wasn't hard to trace. It was right there in the middle of her chest. It was her *heart* that hurt. And why not? The goddamn thing had been broken. Pummeled. Smashed into a million tiny pieces and never to be made whole again. When Granny Bernice had died, a big piece of Angel had died right along with her. Maybe even *most* of her.



Angel took off her sunglasses and wiped at her stinging eyes. Then she took a deep breath and felt something snap physically in her chest, like a dried-out twig breaking underfoot on a solitary walk through the beautiful New England woods on a crisp fall day. Before she knew what was happening, a dark bank of storm clouds abruptly moved in to block out the bright sun that

had been streaming down from the clear blue sky above just a moment earlier. Then the wind kicked up so hard from the east that it swirled Angel's hair wildly around her head and plastered thick clumps of interwoven strands to her soaking-wet cheeks. The air temperature all around her seemed to drop ten degrees in the space of just five seconds, chilling her all the way down to her bone marrow and sending waves

of painful goose flesh rippling across her suddenly freezing skin.

Just then, from the corner of her left eye, she caught a flash of black streaking forward. There was no time to turn her head against the force of the impending blow.

Angel jerked up her arms quickly to protect her face, recoiling in horror from the airborne projectile headed

straight for her. She squeezed shut her eyes and braced herself for the impact.

But it never came.

She opened her eyes tentatively – just in time to see a fat black crow come to a gentle stop in a mad fluttering of wings directly on top of her grandmother’s elaborately engraved headstone.

“Good *lord*,” Angel breathed, lifting her watery stare to the newly

darkened skies above. “You know, if you’re trying to make me feel better about things, you’re not doing a very good job of it, Granny Bernice.”

She shook her aching head. Somewhere up there in heaven, she just *knew* that her grandmother was laughing off her ample behind right now – most likely while wearing her beloved Cleveland Indians baseball cap.

But *not* while wearing her extra-large jersey with Randy McMichael's loathsome name stitched across the back. Not now and not ever again. Because if Randy McMichael ever played baseball again, he wouldn't be playing it anywhere *near* Granny Bernice. Because if the murdering asshole ever played baseball again, he'd be playing it smack-dab in the ninth

circle of hell.

Exactly where the sadistic  
motherfucker *belonged*.





## CHAPTER 68

In the clearing twenty yards into the gorgeous woods on his sprawling property in rural Massachusetts, the Race Master looked on while Bane savaged the pit bull that had been cowering in fear across from the massive *Presa* all morning long on the opposite side of the sturdy eight-by-ten-foot pen.

The scarred pit bull had been

marketed in the periodicals that advertised such things as a veteran fighter worthy of the lofty price asked for its sparring services – supposedly a champion of some sort on the underground circuit. But Bane had absolutely no trouble at all finding his mark deep in the other dog's throat. The entire bloody massacre concluded in a matter of just minutes.

The Race Master turned to Richard Patton and shook his head in disgust while he hooked a heavy steel chain to Bane's thick leather collar. "Dispose of the corpse, Richard," he said. "Dispose of the corpse and find me another dog." He swept his free hand toward the dead body of the pit bull. "Find me a *better* dog. I'm sick and goddamn tired of throwing away my

hard-earned money on all these fucking *losers*. We've got an important competition coming up tonight and I was hoping that Bane might get a decent tune-up for it. Seems I was painfully wrong about that, huh?"

Patton nodded. "Yes, sir. I'm extremely sorry about that. In any event, at what time will you be leaving tonight?"

The Race Master stepped out of

the pen with the collared Bane, who busied himself by licking the other dog's bright red blood hungrily off his thick black lips. "Six p.m. We're scheduled to land in Virginia by eight. I'll be back either very late tonight or very early tomorrow morning. Make sure things that run smoothly around here while I'm gone, Richard. With great power comes great responsibility. Always remember

that. I'll hold you personally responsible for any fuck-ups that may occur in my absence."

Patton nodded again. "I'll make sure that everyone stays in line, sir. Good luck with tonight's fight."

The Race Master turned to the young blonde man and held his stare. "Luck has absolutely nothing to do with it, Richard. Absolutely nothing at all. You should know that by now."

He cast his icy stare back to the pen, where the destroyed body of the pit bull lay in a bloody pile of shredded flesh. “If not, then you’d better learn it pretty goddamn fast.”





## CHAPTER 69

Dana found the basement stairs just off the kitchen and descended the steps, freezing dead in her tracks at the bottom when she heard a deep voice coming from no more than fifty feet away.

She reached inside her blazer and unholstered her Glock, her heartbeat pounding so ferociously in her ears that she could barely even hear herself think

as she rounded a corner near a hot-water heater with her Glock at the “ready-low” position. Lifting the gun chest-high, she swept the barrel side-to-side and took quick, short steps toward the source of the noise, just like they’d taught her to do all those years ago during field training at Quantico. Not exactly like riding a bike – but not all that much different, either.

Clearing the blind spot around the corner, she lowered the Glock to her side at once and blew out a short, hard breath through her nostrils.

Twenty feet away, Bruce Blankenship was seated with his back to her in front of a small bank of television monitors.

He didn't bother turning around.  
“You almost took off my head just now,

didn't you?"

Dana tucked her Glock back into its holster inside her blazer and tried not to think about how close she'd come to splattering his brains all over the television screens. "Of course not," she said. "Don't be ridiculous."

Blankenship turned around and grinned at her. "Liar. I watched you the entire way down, Dana. Textbook approach all the way. I'm impressed."

He turned again and swept a hand over the bank of television monitors. “Anyway, no harm, no foul. Long and short of it: I found a false wall behind which you now see Marjorie Trimble’s nifty surveillance hub. Wasn’t all that difficult, really. Local cops definitely should’ve found it for themselves. In any event, I followed the feed-wires from the pinhole cameras I

found all over the place down to the basement. Just like following a trail of breadcrumbs. I found cameras in just about *everything* I looked in: the paintings, the light fixtures, some of the potted plants. Hell, I even found three cameras in the downstairs guest *bathroom*, for Christ's sake."

Dana covered the remaining distance between them and came to a stop next to Blankenship, running her

gaze over the bank of television monitors. Each television screen measured eight by eight inches, with two rows of six screens each making up the entire bank. What she assumed to be recording equipment lifted three feet height off the floor next to the television monitors, fed by a hopeless tangle of multi-colored wires that wee coming in through the wall. “Good lord,” she

said. “I guess you were right about Marjorie Trimble’s ‘I-Spy’ fetish, huh? I feel like I’m the set of *Candid Camera* here.”

Blankenship laughed. “Yep, but that’s not even the *half* of it. She even went so far as to tape her, um, bedroom activities, if you catch my drift.”

Dana lifted her eyebrows at her partner.

Blankenship misread the gesture.



“I know, right? Don’t get your hopes up about it, though. From what I saw, the ‘I-Spy’ routine was Trimble’s *only* fetish.”

Dana shot her partner another look to clarify her meaning. “Tell me you didn’t watch that stuff, Bruce. *Please* tell me you didn’t watch it.”

Blankenship looked offended. “Of course I didn’t watch it. Don’t be

ridiculous.” He paused. “Well, not *all* of it, anyway.”

Dana rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Well, what *did* you see then?”

Blankenship shrugged his shoulders. “Not much. Just enough to tell me that nothing very interesting was going on. From the look of things, you’d think Trimble and Reginald Craft III *invented* the missionary position or

something. Nothing more racy than that, though, I'm afraid. Kind of boring, actually, if you want to know the whole truth. I've seen more exciting stuff on *Nip/Tuck*."

Dana smacked him lightly in the back of his head. "Pervert." Then she glanced over at the black-and-white television screen that was located second from the left on the bottom row

of monitors. A man in a dark hood had been frozen in place on the screen, his mouth half open. “What’s that?” she asked.

Blankenship cracked his knuckles. “That,” he said, “is what I called you down here about.” He looked up at her and held her stare. “I’m warning you right now, partner, it’s pretty gruesome stuff. You don’t have to watch it if you don’t want to. I can just

summarize.”

Dana winced. “That bad, huh?”

Blankenship nodded.

“Worse than the Laura Settle footage?”

Blankenship knitted his eyebrows thoughtfully. “Well, I’d say it’s *just* as bad. Hard to rank things like that. Anyway, it’s Marjorie Trimble’s murder on video, interspersed with a

personal message from our new friend here in the black hood.”

Dana felt a tickle of hope flutter in her chest. Whenever a killer made personal contact, it meant they’d most likely left open a window somewhere. Now all she and Blankenship needed to do was find it.

Still, a task much easier said than done.

“If the murder’s on video, that’s

got to be a good thing for us, right?” she asked. “Maybe Criminal Justice Information Services can run the asshole’s facial features and match them up with a set of fingerprints already on file. This could be just the major break we’ve been waiting for.”

Blankenship let out a slow breath. “Well, I wouldn’t pin my hopes on that if I were you.”

“Why not?”

“You absolutely *sure* you’re OK to watch this?”

Dana nodded. “Yeah. Let’s just get it over with it already. Let’s see what we’ve got here.”

Blankenship leaned forward in his seat and tapped the large black button again. “OK, Dana, but *this* is why you shouldn’t pin your hopes to it.”



Dana slid her stare back over to the television monitor as it sprang to life two feet away. The grainy, black-and-white video began with an outside camera taping Marjorie Trimble's return home as she pulled her brand-new Mercedes into her long, winding driveway, then switched at once to an inside camera when Trimble stepped inside the marble-tile foyer.

Dana watched the banker toss her car keys onto a small table shoved up against the north wall near the staircase, pausing for a moment to study her reflection in the expensive-looking mirror hanging above. The woman tried to smile at herself, but it didn't work. Dana empathized with her at once. She knew the feeling all too well for herself. After all, smiling at yourself was a

pretty hard task to accomplish when you didn't think you *deserved* it.

Two seconds later, she gasped out loud as a blurred-out figure suddenly stepped into the picture from the right-hand side of the screen and slammed a long knife deep into Marjorie Trimble's slightly distended belly, just as the woman turned away from the mirror.

The sharp steel sliced effortlessly through skin and fat and

muscle in nauseating sprays of red. Then the glittering blade wrenched upward violently, spilling Marjorie Trimble's entrails all over the marble-tiled floor at her feet in a wet rush of unfurling innards. Dana gagged hard and almost projectile-vomited all over the surveillance equipment.

She lurched forward and hit the large black button to put a stop to the

bloody massacre going on in the video.

“Oh my God,” she breathed. Hot tears sprang into her pale blue eyes and streaked down her cheeks. Her voice trembled. “Oh my fucking *God*.”

Blankenship rose quickly to his feet and put a comforting hand on her shoulder. “*Fuck*,” he hissed though clenched teeth, shaking his head and closing his eyes briefly before opening them up again. “I knew I shouldn’t have

let you watch it, Dana. I'm such a goddamn idiot. I'm sorry. Here, sit down."

Dana let Blankenship lower her into the chair he'd just vacated. She swallowed hard, trying to keep the powerful storm brewing inside her gut from exploding through her mouth in a sickening mixture of stomach acid and undigested food.

“You want some water?”

Blankenship asked. A look of concern colored in his soft brown eyes. “I can run upstairs real quick and grab you a glass. Not a problem at all.”

Dana shook her head and winced against the foul rush of bile in her mouth. She *was* thirsty – *parched*, as a matter of fact – but she didn’t want Blankenship to leave her alone in the

basement. Not right now, anyway. Not after what she'd just witnessed. "No, thanks," she said unsteadily, still trying to calm her shaking hands. Didn't work. Not even a little bit. "What else is on the tape?"

"Just the message from the jerk in the hood. He says..."

"I want to *see* it, Bruce."

"Well, I don't think that's a very good..."



“I said I want to see the fucking thing, Blankenship,” she snapped. “Just play the goddamn video already.”

Blankenship twisted up his face in offense. “Fine, Dana. *Relax*. You don’t have to bite my head off about it. I was just looking out for you, for Christ’s sake.”

Dana’s cheeks flushed hot. She tried to apologize to him with her eyes,

but when that didn't work, she forced herself to say the words out loud. "I'm sorry, Bruce. I appreciate your concern, I really do, but I want to see the rest of the video for myself. *Need* to see the rest of it for myself."

Blankenship shook his head in irritation and leaned forward to press the black button again, obviously not wanting to continue the argument any further. He depressed the black button

for several seconds, fast-forwarding the video through the blurred-out man's exit from Trimble's house after the sadistic asshole had finished butchering the pregnant woman. Finally, after a jumpy edit, the man in the black hood stared directly out from the television monitor.

His ice-blue eyes leapt from the screen like a rapist in the night. His voice came over the speakers deep and

slow, computer-altered by a speech-masking device.

“For unclean coons, killing them has energized faithful Brotherhood intentions. Forgotten under cloaks, kindred thoughts honor every fanciful break in failed undertakings, constantly keeping their hatred enveloped for Black interlopers foisted upon Christian Klansmen.”

The video jumped forward

shakily, then began anew from the start.

“For unclean coons, killing them has energized faithful Brotherhood intentions. Forgotten under cloaks, kindred thoughts honor...”

Dana watched and listened to the loop three times through before leaning forward and putting a stop to the video with another press of the black button.

She glanced up at Blankenship. “Same

stupid code?” she asked.

Blankenship nodded.

“What does it say this time?”

A dark look flashed across his handsome features. “It says: “Fuck the FBI.”



## CHAPTER 70

Angel left the cemetery after her maybe/maybe-not encounter with Granny Bernice and drove downtown before parking the Cabriolet in a public lot.

Twenty bucks, which really pissed her off, but what could she do about it? Barter? This wasn't a Middle Eastern bazaar here, where you haggled down prices. This was *Cleveland*. And in Cleveland you did what all



Clevelanders did – you shot the parking-lot attendant a passive-aggressive glare and then you paid whatever the hell the handwritten sign posted outside the guard gate *said* you paid.

In this case: twenty bucks.

Angel slid the Cabriolet into an empty space between a dust-covered minivan and a huge pickup truck sitting on monster tires before exiting her car

and stepping out onto the blacktopped pavement, tucking her keys into her purse as she did so.

She closed her eyes and lifted up her face to warm her skin in the bright sunlight that was streaming down from the again-cloudless sky before embarking upon what Paul Hogan in the movie *Crocodile Dundee* might have called a “walkabout”.

Angel stretched her neck in

preparation for her journey. She'd come downtown today in an effort to repair her troubled relationship with the city of Cleveland, to make peace with the much-maligned "Armpit of America" – a place that had proved almost as influential in shaping her life as Granny Bernice had. And to heal her troubled relationship with the city, Angel knew that she'd need to get close to it again.

Walk its streets. Take in its sights.  
Smell its familiar smells. To press her  
ear against the very *chest* of Cleveland  
and listen to its heartbeat. To get lost in  
the city's grime-covered streets in a way  
that only someone who'd actually been  
*born* there could ever get lost in them.

Angel relaxed her mind while  
she listened to the dissonant yet  
somehow beautiful chorus of the city.  
Seagulls squawked noisily high in the air

above Lake Erie, floating effortlessly on the soft breeze and looking like the simple squiggles in a child's crayon drawing. A hundred yards to her right, the rattle of rusted-out carburetors filled her ears while the mid-day traffic zipped incessantly down I-90. From the far corner of the parking lot came the hushed voices of a couple quietly fighting.

This was it. This was

Cleveland. Her *home*.

Angel opened up her eyes again and took a deep breath through her nostrils, catching the sharp scent of sulfuric smoke from the LTV steel plant half a mile away – an intimidating, almost *gothic* structure that stood watch over the city in much the same way the Eiffel Tower stood watch over Paris.

Despite the undeniably *unpleasantness* of the odor, Angel

breathed it in again, somehow comforted by what most people probably would have considered an offending smell. Like it or not, this was Cleveland. *Her* Cleveland. Warts and all. And as much as she never wanted to compare herself to a baby-murdering piece of shit like Randy McMichael, she was a Clevelander all the way, too. Always had been and always would be. Felt

*pride* in the city even though most people around the country probably thought Cleveland didn't have a single damn thing to feel proud about.

Still, Angel knew better than that, knew for a certainty that Cleveland possessed a resilient soul hidden beneath its ugly gray exterior, a soul unlike the soul of any other big city in the entire world. Getting kicked around by the rest of the country for so long had



allowed the residents of The Renaissance City to band together and fight back, their fists balled up and steely looks of determination glinting in their narrowed eyes – though they'd certainly lost far more battles than they'd ever won. Still, it didn't *matter* if you got your nose bloodied up and your lip busted and your eyes blackened. What *mattered* was that you didn't back down

from the fight the bully offered. Because even when you got your collective ass kicked as often and badly as Cleveland did, there lay a certain sort of bittersweet moral victory in the knowledge that you hadn't just laid down for your more-powerful attacker. Angel supposed that if you hadn't grown up in Cleveland you simply wouldn't have been able to understand it.

But *she* understood.

Finally setting off on foot down Marginal Road, she took a right onto East 9<sup>th</sup> Street a few minutes later and came to a stop in front of the Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame & Museum. Taking off her dark sunglasses, she stared up at the crown jewel of the city – a quirky twist of angled metal and glass that had been designed by world-renowned architect I.M. Pei, the same man who'd

designed the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston and the first foreign-born architect to ever work on the *Louvre* in France.

The Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame marked the unquestioned focal point of downtown, finally putting the city on the map in a good way for once in Cleveland’s history – though even *that* much hadn’t come easy for them. Soon after Cleveland had been awarded the

museum, Rock Hall co-founder Jann Wenner – a former editor of *Rolling Stone* magazine – actually had the gall to say, “One of the small, sad things is we didn’t do it New York in the first place.”

Hey, fuck you, too, Jann Wenner.

Finally turning away from Cleveland’s glittering crown jewel, Angel bought a foot-long hot dog from a street vendor on the corner and slathered

it with mustard and onions before heading in the general direction of her modest office on the fourth floor of the Caxton Building over on Prospect Avenue. While she was downtown, she might as well get a little work done today. At least that way her day couldn't be considered a *complete* waste.

Reaching the intersection of Ontario Street and Carnegie Avenue ten minutes later, on a whim, she decided

against going into work at all that day  
and instead joined the waves of Indians  
fans rolling toward the baseball  
stadium. And why not? The Yankees  
were still in town for another day and  
maybe – just *maybe* – this would be the  
day the Tribe finally beat the bullies.  
Bloodied up *their* noses. Busted *their*  
lips. Blackened *their* eyes. Stranger  
things had certainly happened in the

history of the world – though admittedly not many.

A scalper thirty feet to Angel's right caught her attention. "Tickets!" he shouted, holding her stare while he waved around the tickets in front of his face like a geisha's fan. "I've got tickets here!"

Angel approached him, still going with the feeling of impulsiveness that had overtaken her. She'd never



bought a ticket from a scalper before, but whatever. Beat the hell out of standing in line at the walk-up window. “How much?” she asked.

The scalper, a black man, of course, gave Angel the once-over. “How many you need, sweetheart?”

“Just one.”

The scalper looked her over more intently, lingering at her breasts

this time. “Well, for a fine sister like you, I’ll cut you a deal. Thirty bucks.”

“Where’s the seat?”

The scalper looked down at the tickets in his hand. “Section 567.”

Angel screwed up her face.

“You think I’m from out of town or something? That’s in the nosebleeds. I’ll give you ten bucks for it.”

“Twenty-five,” the scalper countered. “They’re playing the

Yankees.”

“Fifteen.”

“Twenty.”

“Sold.”

Fifteen minutes later, Angel settled into her seat in the uppermost reaches of the stadium. In the top of the first inning – when the Yankees had already jumped out to a seven-to-nothing lead – she purchased and downed her

first beer in short order.

Her fifth beer came in the third inning, by which time the Bronx Bombers had tacked on an additional seven runs, extending their lead to fourteen to zip. As the innings flew by and the Yankees piled up even *more* runs, Angel drank even *more* beers, doing her best to keep the dizzying pace with every pinstriped run that crossed the plate. Wasn't easy. The more the

Indians got plastered, the more she got plastered herself. And why not, right? Misery loved company. Always had and always would.

Especially when you lived in a city like Cleveland.

In the seventh inning – the cutoff for alcohol sales and with the Indians now down twenty-four to one – Angel ordered her tenth and final beer of the

day before focusing her blurry vision on the loudmouthed Yankees' fan sitting ten rows down.

Angel narrowed her eyes. The portly man had outfitted himself head-to-toe in New York attire, and he'd screamed out his healthy lungs in ecstasy each and every time his beloved Yankees had scored another run, as though his stupid team had just discovered the cure for cancer or

something.

When the Yankees scored their twenty-fifth run in the top of the ninth inning, the obnoxious jerk wearing his authentic-looking Derek Jeter jersey let out yet another tooth-grating “Woooo-hooo!”, and Angel finally unleashed her own alcohol-lubricated tongue. Honestly, she’d surprised herself by keeping it in check for this long.

“Hey!” she slurred as loudly as she could manage. “You there in the Jeter jersey.”

The Yankees fan turned around to face her. “You talkin’ to me, sweetheart?”

Angel nodded, feeling like she was talking to Robert DeNiro’s “Travis Bickle” character in *Taxi Driver*. “Yeah, I’m talkin’ to you.”



“What the fuck do you want?”

Angel narrowed her bloodshot eyes some more as several nearby fans turned to watch the brewing spectacle.

“I want you to shut the fuck up already, *that’s* what the fuck I want.”

The Yankees’ fan pulled back his head in mock offence and twisted his face into a smirk. Obviously, this didn’t mark his first rodeo. Not even close.

Still, was the big surprise in that? Who in the world had ever been more combative and confrontational than New Yorkers?

Nobody, that's who.

“Yo, don’t be such a hater, sweetheart,” the man said, egged on by his buddy standing next to him in an Alex Rodriguez jersey. “Twenty-seven world championships and counting, baby.”

Angel hiccupped. Beer bubbled

up from her stomach and foamed in her esophagus. She swallowed it down. “What did you just call me?” she snapped. “You better watch your mouth, cuz I ain’t your baby *or* your sweetheart.”

The remaining fans in Section 567 who weren’t already watching them turned their attention from the game in order to better take in the clever verbal

exchange for themselves. Obviously feeding on this increased public awareness, the Yankees fan said, “Well, you can be my baby *and* my sweetheart, if you want, doll face. What’s your number, baby?”

Angel looked down at the fresh beer in her hand, then refocused her blurry vision on her adversary. “Watch your step, asshole,” she said, swaying back and forth in her aisle on rubbery

legs. “Just watch your fuckin’ step right now.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll come down there and kick your goddamn ass, that’s what.”

The Yankees fan rolled his eyes. He spread his arms wide in front of his body. “Oh, yeah? Well, I’d sure as hell like to see that, *baby*.”

Just then, as though possessed of

a mind of its own, the beer in Angel's right hand suddenly took flight. Unbelievably – despite her world-class drunkenness – she somehow scored a direct hit on the obnoxious jerk even from ten rows up, drenching the New York fan in a cold shower of nine-dollar suds.

That was when security finally came rushing up to the scene to “help” Angel out of the stadium.

As two men in matching blue-and-white uniforms held her tightly by her arms on either side of her body and hustled her down the stairs, the huge Jumbotron behind the center field wall followed all the action going on in Section 567. The chorus that rose up from the forty thousand spectators in attendance didn't surprise Angel in the least. After all, it was the same song

they *always* sang whenever a fan got ejected from a game.

“*Na, na, na, na! Na, na, na, na! Hey, hey, hey – goodbye!*”

Angel burped up some more beer while her security escort dragged her past the now-soaked Yankees fan. The Derek Jeter fan smiled happily at her.

“See ya later, sweetheart. Have fun in jail, *baby!*”

Five minutes later, stadium



security handed her off to a uniformed Cleveland cop, who read Angel her Miranda rights before handcuffing her wrists behind her back and stuffing her inside the back of a police vehicle.

World spinning, Angel stared blankly out the grimy window as the cop pulled away from Progressive Field and swung a left-hand turn onto Carnegie Avenue before easing his vehicle over to

the side of the road. Sliding out from his position behind the steering wheel, the man left the cruiser's engine running and pulled open Angel's door in back. "Get out," he barked.

Angel did as she was instructed.

"Now lean your body forward against the car."

Again, Angel did as she'd been instructed. A moment later, a small *click!* sounded in her ears as the locking

mechanism on her handcuffs disengaged.

“Now turn around.”

Angel turned around. Lieutenant Dan Yarborough – the very first partner she’d ever had during her days on the Cleveland police force – lifted his bushy eyebrows and shook his head. “Jesus Christ, Angel. Getting into a drunken fight at a *baseball game*? Don’t you have anything better to do with yourself

on a Wednesday afternoon these days?”

Angel rubbed at her wrists where her silver bracelets had been snapped into place just a moment earlier. “Nope, Dan. Not a goddamn thing.”

Yarborough wrinkled up his nose. “For Christ’s sake, you smell like a fucking brewery. C’mon, get in the front seat and I’ll give you a ride home so you can sleep this shit off.”

Angel took an unsteady step toward the passenger side of the cruiser. Looking over the hood at her former partner a moment later, she asked, “Can we stop at a store first?”

“For what?”

“So I can buy some more beer. I don’t want to lose my buzz.”

Yarborough exhaled forcefully through his nostrils. “Just get in the

fucking car, Angel.”



# CHAPTER 71

Inside his fine den while Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* played on the antique phonograph over in the corner, the Race Master adjusted the picture on a flat-screen television monitor that was sitting on his massive desk, then sat back in his leather chair in front of a towering bookshelf upon which sat *scores* of history books, sagging the wooden shelves beneath



their heavy weight.

Furrowing his brow in concentration, he watched the FBI special agents watching *him* in return.

On video, of course.

The Race Master pursed his thin lips. Just as he'd suspected, Bruce Blankenship had followed the trail of wires tucked inside the walls of Marjorie Trimble's mansion down to the

basement. And why wouldn't he? Why should the man keep searching for something he'd already *found*?

Still, the FBI agent had thought himself too clever by half. Hadn't noticed the pinhole camera that was staring him and his new partner directly in the face right now. The same pinhole camera that was currently transmitting images of the feds back into the Race Master's impeccably appointed den.

The female agent's face blanched, then turned an alarming shade of purple while she watched the Sacramento operative butchering Marjorie Trimble like the black pig she'd been. Cringing in horror, the woman looked as though she might throw up the contents of her stomach as the sharp knife dug deep into the banker's slightly distended belly,

ripping open her flesh in mesmerizing splashes of red and purple before spilling her guts onto the marble-tiled floor in a disgusting wet rush.

The Race Master leaned forward in his office chair and studied his operative's work more closely. Not half-bad work. He'd need to remember to reward the man with a hefty monetary bonus for the exemplary performance. And why not? After all, you got what

you paid for, now didn't you?

Most of the time, at least.

The Race Master shook his head in irritation and forced his thoughts away from O'Reilly and Collins back in Cleveland. He'd deal with those two sticky-fingered thieves soon enough, in much the same manner he'd dealt with Christopher Johansen. Right now, though, he had bigger fish to fry.

Because judging by the way Whitestone and Blankenship were examining the security footage of Trimble's grisly murder, it was a fair bet that they wouldn't give up on their task any time soon and just walk away. They had a *job* to do, for Christ's sake.

Still, so did the Race Master.

The Race Master cut his gaze over to the antique phone on the corner of his desk. One call – perhaps two –

would bring the whole thing to an *exceedingly* abrupt end, but he didn't exactly relish the prospect of the hell-storm that would no doubt come raining down over his head should he dare take the bold step of ordering the cold-blooded murders of two federal agents. So for now he'd simply watch them.

Watch them and *wait*.

Shaking away *that* thought, he

slid open a drawer on the left-hand side of his substantial desk and extracted a thin file on Dana Whitestone, flipping through the pages for a moment or two before tossing it onto the cluttered surface of his desk next to the Walther. He'd already memorized the information contained within:

Parents murdered when she'd been just four years old. Best friend also cut down by the masterful hand of



Nathan Stiedowe – who'd also somehow found the time to take out Whitestone's former partner and mentor, Crawford Bell, while he'd been at it. Bad as that had been, though, even *those* four particularly bloody murders hadn't marked the end of it for the woman. Because then there'd also been the vicious – not to mention exceedingly *clever* – murder of Whitestone's last

partner, Jeremy Brown.

The Race Master reached into his desk again and extracted a file on the federal agent whose windpipe had been severed eighteen months earlier in the ritzy Presidential Suite of the Fontainebleau Hotel in downtown Manhattan.

Lighting up a cigar and blowing out a huge cloud of smoke, he tapped a line of ash into the ivory ashtray before

leaning back in his chair again and flipping through Brown's file. After first learning of the man's spectacular demise sometime earlier, the Race Master had immediately gone to work establishing a secret correspondence with the interesting young murderer who'd pulled off the impressive deed. An interesting young murderer who now resided in an upstate New York mental

institution for youthful criminal offenders.

The Race Master smiled. Jack Yuntz had picked up on the simple-but-effective coded communication almost at once – no small feat to accomplish considering the boy's tender years. From there, all of the necessary arrangements had been made. So even if the Race Master's ambitious plan to spring his brother from his cold prison

cell in Germany should ultimately fail, Dana Whitestone wouldn't be off the hook for her meddling. Instead, the celebrated FBI agent whose picture had so recently graced the cover of Newsweek would *pay* for her irritating habit of always getting in the way of grown men's work. And she'd pay for it in blood.

Though it wouldn't be her own.

The Race Master stubbed out his cigar in a small shower of orange embers and cautioned himself to slow down. No point in thinking along those lines at this juncture. No point in getting ahead of himself here. Because he had absolutely *zero* plans to fail in his mission. *Couldn't* fail in his mission, really. Because his older brother was still sitting in a cold prison cell

somewhere deep inside the heart of the  
Fatherland right now, *counting* on him.  
And blood was thicker than water,  
wasn't it?

Sure as hell was. Just ask poor  
Marjorie Trimble about that much.

Not that the butchered woman  
would be likely to answer you any time  
soon, of course.





## CHAPTER 72

Two agents from the Sacramento field office – both women and noted specialists in video analysis – joined Dana and Blankenship in Marjorie Trimble's basement forty minutes later.

“It's your basic setup,” said Jessica Kingfisher, spooling through the yards of multi-colored wires that were coming in through the wall directly in front of the bank of television monitors.

“Hardwired to the house with no outside access that I can see from here. Pretty much useless as a home-defense system unless the only thing you were worried about was catching the help stealing silverware.”

Blankenship dug an elbow lightly into Dana’s ribs. “See? I *told* you.”

Kingfisher, a striking redhead with sparkling green eyes and a flawless

porcelain complexion, glanced up at Blankenship. “Well, you were right about that much, Agent Blankenship,” she said. “But did you happen to find anything else interesting in the surveillance footage? Other than Marjorie Trimble’s gruesome murder and the hooded guy’s message?”

Blankenship lifted his eyebrows at her. “What do you mean by that? Anything interesting like what?”

Kingfisher smirked. “Like any badly made amateur porn?”

Blankenship’s cheeks flushed. “Of course not,” he said, weakly. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Kingfisher deepened her smirk, then turned to her partner, who was seated in front of the bank of television monitors. “What do you have, Bethany?”

Special Agent Bethany Quartz, a forty-two-year-old African-American mother of four and a woman who just so happened to moonlight as one of the Bureau's top linguists, fiddled with some buttons on the control panel in front of her. "Here," Quartz said, pointing to the screen where a bookshelf could be seen behind the hooded man's head. "We've got some handwriting on

the cover of a book on the third shelf.”

All four agents leaned in as Quartz sharpened the image on the screen. “It’s *Mein Kampf*,” the agent said after a moment or two, narrowing her pretty brown eyes. “Adolf Hitler’s ‘how-to’ guide on cleansing the world of undesirables. Anyway, from the look of it, I’d say it’s very old and printed in its original German. Quite the find for the right collector. Could be a first edition.

Probably worth a small fortune if it is.”

Dana frowned. “What does the handwriting on the cover say?” she asked.

Quartz zoomed in some more. Neat penmanship covered a clean white space on the cover of the book. To Dana’s eyes, the handwriting just as well might have been hieroglyphics. Luckily for them, though, Quartz was a

master at deciphering such things.

“It’s an inscription,” Quartz said, zooming in on the book some more while putting her language skills on display. “Also written in German.”

“What’s it say?” Blankenship asked.

Quartz ran her stare over the writing, moving her lips silently. Finally, she leaned back in her chair and said, “To Jared, follow these teachings



and your path will always be true,  
Father.””

Dana’s heartbeat thumped  
against her ribs. “Holy shit,” she  
breathed. “We’ve got a name.”

Blankenship pursed his lips.  
“Yeah, but only a *first* name. We’re  
gonna need something more than that  
before we go around patting each other  
on the backs here.”

Just then, Jessica Kingfisher leaned forward and stared at the wall facing them. “What the fuck’s that?” she asked, reaching a hand toward the wall.

Dana’s gaze followed Kingfisher’s hand to the wall. When her eyes caught sight of the same thing her fellow G-woman’s had, her thumping heartbeat shifted from her ribcage to her throat.

“*That,*” Dana said, “just might be  
the something more we need to go on.”



## CHAPTER 73

Angel spent most of the next day in bed, recovering.

Her skull throbbed; the four aspirin she'd taken upon first waking up might as well have been Flintstones vitamins for all the headache-reducing good they'd done. Her stomach bubbled over with nausea, necessitating several frantic trips to the toilet in order to avoid throwing up all over herself.

Even after downing half a dozen sixteen-ounce bottles of water, her body still felt completely dehydrated.

Served her right.

Old black-and-white movies kept her company in bed for most of the day. Ernest Borgnine in *Marty*, for which the famously gap-toothed thespian had won the Academy Award for Best Actor in 1955. *Pillow Talk* with Rock

Hudson and Doris Day, a film in which Hudson's character had ironically *feigned* gayness in a clumsy effort to get closer to the beautiful and bubbly blonde-haired object of his desire. <sup>12</sup> *Angry Men* starring Henry Fonda, in which a dissenting juror attempted to change eleven other minds in a murder trial that might not be as clear-cut as it first seemed. Not as *black and white* as it first seemed.

Angel shook her head, only exacerbating the excruciating pain inside her skull. The third movie's title seemed especially appropriate to her. Because as it had played across the television set sitting on her oaken bureau fifteen feet away, one *very* angry woman joined the twelve angry men in that deliberation room.

A very angry *black* woman.



Angel winced again at the incessant headache cracking away at her temples. Black-and-white movies of the 1950s, meet the black-and-white reality of today.

She sighed. The troubled relationship between the races went a lot deeper than just identifying the skin-color difference between those scalping tickets outside Progressive Field and

those headed inside the stadium to watch the Indians get their butts kicked again by those goddamn Yankees for themselves, she knew. The black and white races seemed so different at times, yet so undeniably inseparable. Still, were they *really* so different?

Lately, she'd begun to think so.

Lynchings. Lunch counters.

Colored water fountains. "Back of the bus, nigger" statements – spoken out

loud in the 1950s and still silently spoken today through way too many white people's eyeballs. As far as Angel was concerned, white didn't make right – it only made *trouble*. And maybe the time had come to give some of that trouble right back to old whitey. Give him a bitter taste of his own hateful medicine.

Finally dragging herself out of

bed with a pained groan, she glanced over at the small digital alarm clock on her bedside table. *11:49 p.m.* Late hour or not, though, she had something she needed to do. *Now.*

No, check that.

Something she *wanted* to do.



## CHAPTER 74

The Race Master leaned back in his comfortable leather executive's chair and watched Jessica Kingfisher's puzzled stare find his hidden pinhole camera in Marjorie Trimble's basement, the pretty FBI agent's hand moving forward to block out the picture in a blur of manicured fingertips.

Leaning forward again in his chair, the Race Master flipped off the

connection and shrugged. Nothing to be concerned about here. Not really, anyway. He'd already considered the possibility they'd find his camera, had *prepared* for it, as a matter of fact. Still, it was highly unlikely the feds could trace the satellite signal coming from Sacramento all the way back to his Massachusetts den. And even if that *did* turn out to be the case, who the hell

cared? It would take the FBI weeks – if not *months* – to do all the paperwork required to obtain the subscription details. Then they'd need to subpoena the subscription lists from Verizon Wireless before combing through them in a desperate effort to narrow down the gigantic pool of suspects. And even *then*, the Race Master certainly hadn't been stupid enough to register the account under his own name. So, all



things considered, he considered himself safe as a house.

Besides, he didn't need months – or even weeks – here. He needed just a few more *days*.

Ninety minutes later, the Race Master led a collared Bane onto the chartered Cessna that was waiting for them on the narrow tarmac of a private airport in Worcester –about half-hour's

drive north of Southbridge. Settling down into his seat, he looked around the sumptuous interior of the plane and nodded approvingly. The Cessna had been outfitted with all the creature comforts a discerning traveler could possibly desire: comfortable captain's chairs upholstered in the finest leather available on the market; a fully stocked bar; a large, flat-screen television set with built-in DVD player; Internet and

telephone access even when the plane had lifted off and was zipping along like a sharp silver knife through the endless blue skies six miles above the ground.

Ten minutes later, the pilot – a man who'd long been sympathetic to the Brotherhood's cause – pulled back on his joystick in the cockpit and pointed the Cessna's nose skyward.

The Race Master took a deep

breath through his nostrils as the plane lifted off and let it out again in a slow rush over his teeth. This was it. Do or die time. No turning back now.

When they were cruising along at an altitude of thirty thousand feet, the Race Master reached into the caddy attached to his chair and flipped on the television set with the remote control.

A Nazi documentary in its original German sprang to life on the

screen, and his heart twinged in his chest at the sight of his beloved homeland. Thousands of excited people lined the downtown Berlin streets, waving tiny Nazi flags in ecstasy while offering up bold Nazi salutes to the *Fuhrer* as the great man passed by in a heavily guarded motorcade.

Sighing, the Race Master leaned down and unsnapped the briefcase at his

feet, extracting a folder before going over his correspondence with young master Yuntz – the exceedingly interesting boy who'd cut down FBI Special Agent Jeremy Brown in the ritzy Presidential Suite of the Fontainebleau Hotel in downtown Manhattan eighteen months earlier. A year and a half into his sentence already, the sixteen-year-old chess prodigy still had another nine years to go yet on his thoroughly unjust

sentence.

Technically speaking, of course.

Flipping open the folder and taking out the thick sheaf of papers that he and Jack Yuntz had been sending back and forth to one another over the past several months, the Race Master began to read, starting with the first note he'd ever sent the boy:

QUEEN-ROOK-KNIGHT-

BISHOP-PAWN3. PAWN. QUEEN-

BISHOP-PAWN2. BISHOP2-ROOK2-

PAWN4. PAWN4-ROOK2-BISHOP2.

QUEEN-ROOK-PAWN. PAWN2-

QUEEN-ROOK. QUEEN-BISHOP.

PAWN. QUEEN-ROOK2-BISHOP2.

PAWN. KNIGHT2-PAWN. PAWN.

BISHOP2-KNIGHT2-PAWN.

PAWN5?



The boy's answer had come  
three short days later:

QUEEN-ROOK2-BISHOP2!

The Race Master smiled;  
pleased again with how easily Jack  
Yuntz had picked up on the code.  
Though he'd initially feared things might

turn out more complicated than that – that his meaning wouldn't be read between the lines – that hadn't turned out to be the case at all.

The code was simple enough to understand if you knew what you were looking for. Using the relative point values for chess pieces – one for pawns, three for knights and bishops, five for rooks and nine for queens – all you needed to do was match up the numbers

to their corresponding place in the alphabet. Therefore, “A” was worth one – or a pawn – and “Z” was worth twenty-six, or “QUEEN-ROOK2-BISHOP2-PAWN”. So, in plain English, their first exchange had read:

“Want to play a game?”

“Yes!”

From there, the arrangements had been made in relatively short order. According to the deal they'd struck, the Race Master would spring Jack Yuntz from the Connelly Institute and set him up financially for life on one condition: the boy would need to ensure that Dana Whitestone paid in blood for her maddening interference should the Race Master's ambitious mission to spring his

brother from his cold German prison cell happen to fail.

Looking down at Jack Yuntz's final sequence of relative values – which had once again made the exceedingly dull workers at the Connelly Institute who examined such things think that the two new pen pals were simply engaged in a complicated game of long-distance chess through the mail – the Race Master sighed again. Because they

*were* playing a game here, weren't they?  
Of course they were. Still, he and Jack  
Yuntz weren't playing chess at the  
moment. Not even close. What they  
were playing was something much more  
*interesting* than that.

Nothing less than a game of life  
and death.

Reading through the boy's last  
response, the Race Master stretched his

powerful neck and smiled again.





## CHAPTER 75

Jessica Kingfisher used a small screwdriver to extract the tiny pinhole camera from the wall and held the camera in front of her eyes for a closer look. In all seriousness, she said, “It’s an SVAT PI1000 Covert MPEG4 Recording System with a built-in color pinhole surveillance camera inside the motion sensor, WiFi-equipped. Images are probably shuttled through Trimble’s

Internet connection right here in her own house. Ain't life just a bitch?"

Dana rolled her eyes. For all intents and purposes, she might as well have been listening to a female version of Bruce Blankenship. "In English, please, Agent Kingfisher," she said.

Kingfisher shook her head. "Right, sorry about that, Agent Whitestone. Basically, it's a very

expensive little piece of equipment that contains all the bells and whistles a murdering Peeping Tom could ever want.”

Dana asked, “Any way to find out who put it there?”

Kingfisher pursed her lips. “Maybe, but there’s a lot of red tape we’ll need to go through first with the wireless provider, and even then I wouldn’t say that it’s a sure bet we’ll

find whoever's paying the bills for the account.” Kingfisher turned to Bethany Quartz. “Anything else interesting in the surveillance footage, Bet?”

Quartz leaned back in her chair and shook her head. “Nope. Not a damn thing, I’m afraid. Trail ends with the hooded guy’s message.”

Kingfisher and Quartz then devolved into yet *another* round of

maddening techno-speak from there while Dana dug out her cellphone from her purse and connected to the Internet before Googling what she needed to know. Most of what the circuit-heads were talking about right now was pure gibberish to her, anyway. Time to get back on her own turf where she felt a little more comfortable.

To Kingfisher and Quartz, she said, “Could you two ladies hold down

the fort here for a bit while Blankenship and I go out exploring?”

Quartz waved a hand in the air.

“Of course. Go. We must be driving you mad with all this technical mumbo-jumbo.”

Blankenship asked, “Where we going?”

Dana looked over her partner from head to toe, mentally gauging his

size. “C’mon,” she said. “I’ll show you.”

Five minutes later, they were back in the rented Sentra, Dana behind the wheel again. Following the pleasant, British-accented female voice coming from the GPS unit sitting on the dashboard, Dana pulled the car into the parking lot of a Goodwill thrift shop fifteen minutes later.

Blankenship gave her a puzzled

look as she slid the car into an empty space. “We passed two thrift shops on the way over here, Dana. What’s so special about this one?”

Dana switched off the ignition and tucked the keys into her purse. “You’ll see,” she said. “Anyway, what size shoe do you wear?”

Blankenship twisted up his face. “Eleven. Why?”



Dana opened the driver's-side door and stepped out of the Sentra before leaning her head back in. "Wait right here. I'll be out in ten minutes."

Leaving her confused partner sitting in the car, she then made her way across the parking lot and pulled open the front door to the thrift shop before stepping inside and looking around. The musty scent of old clothing filled her

nostrils and made her want to sneeze as she headed for the back of the store. Fifteen minutes later, she exited the thrift shop again, looking *much* different than she had when she'd walked in.

Blankenship stepped out of the Sentra and onto the blacktopped pavement as she approached, his eyes widening as he took in her altered appearance. “Nice get-up, Dana,” he said, examining her new clothing and

shaking his head. “You going to the prom or something?”

Dana smiled and glanced down at the “white-power” uniform she’d just purchased: Tattered white wife-beater. Baggy camouflage pants. Red suspenders. Shiny black army boots complete with bright red shoelaces.

She looked up at Blankenship and tossed him a heavy paper bag filled

with similar attire. “Yep,” she said, “I’m going to the prom, all right, and you’re my date. So hurry up and get dressed.”

Blankenship asked, “So, where exactly will this exceedingly formal event be taking place?”

Dana pointed across the street to a skinhead bar located on the southwest corner. “Right over there,” she said. “So hurry up already. I don’t want to be

late for this.”



## CHAPTER 76

Angel exited the house that she'd shared with Granny Bernice since she'd been a baby, hopping inside her twelve-year-old Cabriolet with more than a hundred thousand miles on the odometer and cranking the engine into life with a quick twist of her right wrist. Putting the car in reverse, she backed the vehicle carefully out of the driveway and pointed its headlights in the direction of

downtown.

Angel stretched her neck as she drove, knowing she needed to prepare for this. Knowing she needed to get *loose*.

After all, she'd be *hunting* tonight.

She clicked on the radio as she hit the entrance ramp for I-90 East ten minutes later. Eminem's *Lose Yourself*



came blasting over the stereo speakers as she merged with the late-night traffic zipping down the busy highway, but she frowned and hit the scan button. The station switched over to Public Enemy's seminal rallying call, *Fight the Power!* There. That was better. More in keeping with the overall theme of the night.

Angel breathed in deeply through her nostrils and steeled herself for what

would come next. Her prey tonight would come in the form of the not-so-elusive, inbred, alcoholic, backwoods, racist redneck.

Failing that, any garden-variety skinhead snake would do.

She glanced down at the clock on the dashboard that was glowing bright green numbers in wavering shafts of artificial light. *12:12 p.m.* The drunks

at the downtown bars should be good and oiled-up by now. Exactly how Angel *wanted* them to be.

Circling the block around the Flats area of downtown – Cleveland’s faded entertainment district – she passed Howl at the Moon, Shooters on the Water and the Shark Club, among the dozens of other watering holes dotting the busy strip. Small pockets of revelers trickled in and out of the nightclubs, the

women dressed in their finest “hoochie-mama” get-ups in an effort to draw attention to the most interesting parts about themselves. Fishnet stockings. Low-cut, tight-fitting spandex shirts. Black-leather miniskirts. Thigh-high hooker boots with zippers running along the sides.

The usual douchebags were in attendance, too, trying their best to pick

up the young ladies while outfitted in two-sizes-too-small pastel-colored polo shirts with the collars popped and multi-pocketed cargo shorts in varying shades of beige and green. Fashionably messy Justin Bieber hair had been sculpted out of what looked to be *gallons* of “product”. Or, as an alternative, the young men simply sported plain white T-shirts with necklaces of dubious precious metal-content worn on the

outside and chomped on mangled toothpicks that hung casually from the corners of mouths bent into know-it-all sneers.

Angel narrowed her gaze and slowed down the Cabriolet as she eased past Blizzard, the oh-so-cleverly-named white-power club in the Flats. Blizzard: a weather phenomenon marked by blindingly white snow. Get it? Don't

you just *hate* niggers?

A clearly drunken skinhead stumbled out of the bar as she passed, dressed in his nigger-hating best: A German National Soccer Team jersey. Shiny black army boots featuring blood red shoelaces. Wristbands on each wrist with '88' written by hand in permanent black marker.

Angel took in the rest of the man's appearance and felt all the little

hairs on the back of her neck rise in anger as one. Silver jewelry pierced every pierce-able part of the skinhead's pale-white face, including his labrum – the small section of skin just below his bottom lip. The man's head had been shaved completely bald, probably with a straight razor and right before he'd left the house that night to go party it up with his fellow hate-mongers.



Angel watched the drunk stumble toward the parking lot just outside the bar, pulling out a set of silver keys from his pants pocket as he did so. She frowned angrily. Maybe the inconsiderate asshole hadn't seen all of those public-service announcements explaining how drunk driving was a *bad* thing. Then again, maybe he didn't care *who* he hurt or killed with his reckless

behavior.

Maybe Angel should remind him of these things.

She pulled over the Cabriolet to the far side of the road and waited for the idiot to carom out of the parking lot in a huge shower of orange sparks before following him back to I-90, keeping a safe distance behind him while he drifted back and forth between lanes before mercifully taking the exit

for Rocky River ten harrowing minutes later.

Angel seethed as she continued to follow the jerk all the way across town to the Crown Arms apartment complex on Lorain Road. It was times like this that she understood *exactly* how the general public felt when they said there never seemed to be a cop around when you really needed one. Not the

easiest thing in the world to admit when you'd once been a cop, yourself.

Sliding the Cabriolet into an open space about ten spaces over from the skinhead, she exited her car and walked quickly up to the driver's-side door of his Toyota 4-Runner while the man struggled to extract his keys from the ignition.

She lifted a hand and rapped on his window. The skinhead looked up,

clearly confused, and narrowed his alcohol-glazed stare. Activating the power window, he snapped, “Yeah? What do *you* want, nigger?”

Angel took a deep breath through her nostrils. Then she pulled back her right arm and punched the unsuspecting drunk straight in the face just as hard as she possibly could, her balled-up fist knocking out his two front teeth in a

misty spray of bright red blood and slumping the moron over unconscious in the driver's seat of his car.

And why not? It was clearly the guy's bedtime, anyway.



## CHAPTER 77

The Race Master took a pencil and pad of paper from his briefcase and translated Jack Yuntz's latest message again, this time just for fun.

Although he'd told the boy to make sure that Dana Whitestone paid in blood should the Race Master fail in his mission to spring his older brother from his cold German prison cell, the enterprising young man had had ideas of



his own. Then again, where was the big surprise in that? After all, wasn't it that way with *all* geniuses?

Once deciphered, the message read:

*I'll make Dana Whitestone pay, anyway. It'll be my distinct pleasure. I told that bitch a long time ago that I wasn't finished with her yet. Just set me loose and watch me attack.*

The Race Master tucked away the message into his briefcase and glanced down at Bane, who was twitching wildly at his feet, obviously off in a faraway, blood-soaked dreamland where he was no doubt savaging a hapless opponent. Soon — much like Jack Yuntz — the Race Master would set Bane loose and watch the *Presas* attack, as well. First things first,

though. They needed to prepare.

After all, as Muhammad Ali had once so profoundly said, you needed to run the road *long* before you danced under the lights.



## CHAPTER 78

Looking equally as ridiculous as Dana – perhaps more so – Blankenship emerged from the thrift shop ten minutes later, ringing the small silver bell hanging above his head as he left.

Dana cringed as her clearly ashamed partner paused and held open the door for an elderly black lady who was struggling into the store with the help of a four-legged, rubber-stoppered

walker. Somehow hanging his head in embarrassment and nodding to the woman at the same time, Blankenship gave a curt, polite, “Ma’am.”

The old woman let Blankenship continue holding the door for her until she’d made it all the way inside. Then she turned around and took in the shocking white-power outfit covering his body from head-to-toe: clean white

tank top tucked into full-length camo pants; a black, AC/DC baseball cap on his head; shiny black army boots featuring crisscrossed, blood red shoelaces on his feet.

The woman twisted her lips into a disgusted sneer. “Go fuck yourself, honky.”

Dana winced as Blankenship let the door close behind the woman before he crossed the blacktopped parking lot.

“Ouch,” she said. “That hurt me even *watching*.”

Blankenship came to a stop beside her. “Yeah, well let me tell you: it wasn’t any picnic participating, either. Off to a smashing start already, aren’t I?”

Dana nodded, then turned and motioned with a jerk of her head to the skinhead bar across the street. “Yeah,



but c'mon. I'm sure we'll receive a much warmer welcome over there."

Blankenship lifted his eyebrows. "Couldn't be any colder, I suppose." He paused and nodded down to the silver Rolex strapped around Dana's left wrist – her mother's old watch. "Might want to take that thing off before we go in, though. Fancy jewelry like that doesn't exactly fit in with the rest of your overall presentation."

Dana shook her head at her own carelessness and unsnapped the watch before tucking it into her pants pocket. Inattention to detail like that marked *exactly* the sort of thing that could get them killed. These white-power jerks didn't play around. Laura Settle and Marjorie Trimble – not to mention their unborn babies – had been proof positive of that much. “Thanks,” she said. “I

owe you one.”

Blankenship smiled. “Well, at *least* one, right? Anyway, let’s get this show on the road already. I’m parched.”

After waiting for a loud pickup truck to pass, they crossed the busy street and Blankenship held open the door for her before following her inside Bar Deutschland.

The sounds of the Sex Pistols blared from the jukebox sitting next to

the single pool table over by the  
bathrooms, illuminated by a Grolsch  
beer light. Johnny Rotten screeched out  
his healthy lungs against the injustices  
foisted upon the younger generation in  
his trademark wail while a heavily  
muscled skinhead dressed in remarkably  
similar fashion to Dana and Blankenship  
slid back a chalked stick across his  
bridged fingers and broke a fresh rack in

a loud explosion of scattering pool balls.

Blankenship led the way over to the scarred mahogany bar before plopping down onto a red nylon-covered stool, acting as a buffer between Dana and the four skinheads doing shots a little farther down the bar. The bartender – a man in his mid-fifties who obviously did all his *own* shopping at *Skinheads 'R Us* – gave them the once-over while wiping up a puddle of

spilled beer from the bar. He slapped the damp white cloth over his right shoulder a moment later. “What’ll you have?”

Dana scanned the fully stocked, see-through refrigerator behind the man. All German beers inside. “I’ll take a Heineken,” she said. “No glass.”

The bartender nodded and slid his bloodshot stare over to Blankenship.

“And you?”

“Make it two Heinekens.”

The bartender nodded again and turned around to extract the beers. Popping off the caps against a bottle-opener hidden beneath the lip of the bar, he slid them over. “You guys new in town?” he asked, scratching at his heavily whiskered chin. “Ain’t seen you around here before.”

Dana wrapped her hands around

her ice-cold beer and swallowed hard, suddenly feeling *very* thirsty. She knew better than to raise the bottle to her lips, though. If she did *that*, she might as well just go ahead and reserve a room for herself at the Betty Ford Clinic over in Rancho Mirage right now. She hadn't had a drink in nearly a year now, and she wanted to keep it that way. Still, that didn't mean that the *temptation* had gone



away. Far from it, actually.

She took her hands off her sweating beer bottle in order to remove the temptation and looked up at the bartender. No use in teasing herself with the prospect of a drink any more than she absolutely needed to. “Yep,” she said. “We’re new here. Just moved here from Cleveland.”

The bartender twisted his lips. “I was in Cleveland once. A real

fucking shithole, from what I remember.”

“Yeah, that’s why we moved here,” Blankenship said, sitting up straighter on his barstool and flexing his hands around his own beer bottle hard enough to make the impressive muscles in his upper arms dance. “Not much of a scene there, anyway.”

The bartender eyed him suspiciously, but with a little more

respect this time. It was clear who represented the alpha male in this scenario, though – and it certainly wasn't the bartender. “Who'd you run with in Cleveland?” the bartender asked.

Blankenship didn't flinch at the thinly veiled challenge. “The Separatists,’ he said, holding the other man's stare. “You're looking at their former Master-at-Arms sitting here right now.”

Dana winced internally at Blankenship's mention of his self-assigned title, fearing he'd overplayed his hand. In the white-power world, the Master-at-Arms position held a *lot* of sway, ranking just a notch or two below the top slots of president and vice-president.

Thankfully, though, the bartender only lifted his blonde eyebrows, duly

impressed. “Nice,” he said, reaching out to shake Blankenship’s hand. He nodded down at the Heinekens. “Those two are on the house. Cory Hanson here. Pleasure to meet ya.”

Blankenship shook the bartender’s hand firmly. “Yancy Middlebrooks,” he said. He dropped the man’s hand and turned to Dana. “This here’s my wife, Michele.”

The bartender nodded.

“Pleasure, ma’am.”

Dana gave him a small smile.

“Likewise, I’m sure.”

The bartender turned back to Blankenship. “Ain’t no Separatists out here in California, so are you guys lookin’ to hook up with a new group? I run with the Phineas Priesthood, myself. *Real* good group of people. Don’t fuck around too much, just stick to the

business of getting America back to where it needs to be. You should check out one of our meetings sometime. I could make all the intros, if you want.”

Blankenship leaned back his head and took a long swallow of his beer. Dana’s blue eyes instantly turned green in their sockets with envy. She could practically *feel* the icy alcohol cutting into the back of her throat. “Maybe we will,” Blankenship said.

“But we were sort of looking to hook up with the Brotherhood. I hear they’ve got a lot of serious shit going on these days.”

The bartender leaned forward and put his hands on the bar. “Well, why didn’t you say so in the first place?” He glanced across the bar at the muscular skinhead who was playing pool by himself fifty feet away. “Andy over there’s been a member of the



Brotherhood for five or six years now.”

The bartender lifted up his chin and raised his voice. “Ain’t that right, Andy?”

The pumped-up muscle-head looked up from his solitary game. “What’s that, Cory?”

The bartender raised his voice even louder. “I was just telling these two here how you run with the Brotherhood. They say they’re

interested in joining.”

Dana’s heart skipped three beats in her chest as the poster-boy for anabolic steroids laid his pool stick across the green felt of the pool table and headed their way. Pure *luck*, she knew, but she’d take it. Anything that might help them finally put a stop to the gruesome murders of pregnant black women was just fine with her.

Blankenship rose to his feet and shook the newcomer's hand when the man had made it all the way over to them. "Yancy Middlebrooks,"

Blankenship said again. "This is my wife, Michele."

The skinhead gave Blankenship's hand one short, hard pump. "Andy Oliver," he said. "So, you guys are interested in joining the Brotherhood?"

Blankenship nodded. “That’s right.”

The skinhead smiled dull brown teeth. “Well, you ready to get started right now?”

Blankenship frowned. “How do you mean?”

Andy Oliver widened his smile. “I’m on my way over to Cancel Avenue right now to go talk with some spic who

owes me some money. I could use the backup if you two ain't doin' anything else important right now. Whaddya say?"

Blankenship paused while he pretended to consider the offer. Finally, he shrugged. "Sure, why not?" Turning to Dana, he said, "That OK with you, honey?"

Dana nodded. "Yep. Always willing to chip in for a good cause."

Andy Oliver widened his rotten grin even more before turning to Cory Hanson behind the bar. He pointed to the Heinekens. “Put those two beers on my tab, all right?”

The bartender waved away his fellow hate-monger’s generosity.

“Already taken care of, Andy.”

“Great. See ya around then.”

“Later days, buddy.”

Exiting the bar thirty seconds later, Oliver led Dana and Blankenship to his light-beige Range Rover and they all hopped inside the mud-splattered vehicle. Blankenship rode shotgun, with Dana in the backseat on the driver's side.

Oliver glanced up into the rearview mirror and caught her eye. He winked. "Ready to go, sweetheart?"

Dana forced a smile onto her lips. “Ready as I’ll ever be, I guess. Let’s go do this.”

Oliver nodded and pulled the Range Rover out into traffic, chatting amiably with Blankenship as they drove. A few minutes later, he slowed down the vehicle and squinted his eyes toward a green street sign about twenty yards away. “That’s it,” he said,



flipping on his left turn signal and changing lanes. “That’s the street we’re looking for. I need to make a left up here.”

Dana caught Blankenship’s stare in the rearview mirror. Getting the non-verbal go-ahead, she slipped out her Glock from her pocket, leaned forward in her seat and pressed the barrel of the gun directly to the back of Oliver’s thick neck. “Make a right instead,” she said.

Oliver froze in his seat. He clenched his teeth and glanced over at Blankenship. “What the fuck is this, man?” he snapped. “What the fuck’s going on?”

Blankenship took out his own Glock and leveled it at Oliver’s stomach, holding it just below the dashboard of the Range Rover so as to not attract any unwanted attention.

“Relax, Sparky,” he said. “Don’t go getting all jumpy on me. We just want to discuss some things with you, that’s all. Find us somewhere private where we can talk uninterrupted, OK?”

The skinhead shook his head in barely contained anger.

“*Motherfucker*,” he hissed. “You guys cops?”

Dana returned her Glock to her pocket. Blankenship had Oliver covered

now, and *she* didn't want to draw any unwanted attention to their actions, either. What she and Blankenship were doing at the moment was highly illegal, of course, but what the hell. When in Rome and all that...

“Something like that,” Dana said, looking up and catching sight of a long row of abandoned warehouses in Sacramento's struggling industrial

district. “Pull the car over in front of those buildings,” she ordered.

The skinhead looked up into the rearview mirror again and held her unblinking stare. The glare coming from his own bright blue eyes seemed hot enough to burn right through six inches of solid steel. “Fuck you, bitch.”

Blankenship pressed his Glock harder into Oliver’s stomach. “Just do as the nice lady says, Andy.”

Grudgingly, Oliver finally did as he'd been instructed.

Two minutes later, Dana and Blankenship extracted him from the driver's seat of the Range Rover and hustled him inside the warehouse. Dragging the skinhead over to the far southwest corner, they snapped Blankenship's handcuffs into place around the man's wide wrists and made

him hug a hot-water pipe that was running up from the filthy concrete floor beneath their feet.

“Fuckin’ nigger lovers,” Oliver snarled, staring at them with undisguised hatred flashing in soulless blue eyes. “You two race-traitors should have a baby together. At least the fucking thing would be white when it came *out*. But then you two shitheads would probably just turn it into another nigger-lover after

that anyway, huh?”

Dana twisted her face in disgust. It was clear to her that Andy Oliver believed each and every foul word that emerged from his rotten mouth. “Are both *your* parents white?” she asked.

Oliver snorted. “Of course they’re fuckin’ white.”

Dana lifted her eyebrows. “There you go. And just look at what a



piece of shit *you* turned out to be.”

Oliver turned his head and spat on the ground “Suck my fucking cock, whore.”

Dana resisted the urge to smack the potty-mouthed skinhead across his filthy lips with the heavy butt of her gun. What would be the point? He already needed more dental work than a hundred dentists could ever cover. “Shut up, Oliver,” she said. “Just shut the fuck up

and listen to me for a minute. Who's in charge of the Brotherhood? Who's the head guy every one else reports to?"

Oliver spat on the ground again.

"Maybe you didn't hear me the first time, bitch. So let me say it again: suck my fucking cock, *whore*."

Blankenship took a menacing step forward. "Watch it, buddy. That's my wife you're talking to there."

Before either Dana or

Blankenship knew what was happening, the skinhead sucked in a hard lungful of air through his nostrils and let fly with a disgusting glob of phlegm that smacked Blankenship directly in his face before dripping down his chin. Suddenly possessed of a mind of its own, Dana's right hand – the one holding the Glock – shot forward in a blur of silver

movement. The heavy butt of her gun cracked into the skinhead's left temple, knocking the jerk out cold and slumping him down unconscious to the floor. A thin trickle of blood leaked out from the fresh gash, slipping down his left cheek.

“Jesus                      fucking *Christ!*”

Blankenship gagged, pulling off his tank top and balling it up before wiping frantically at the skinhead's spit. “I think I'm going to throw up my own

fucking *stomach*.”

Just then, Dana’s cellphone rang in her pocket. She dug it out and looked down at the caller ID. Bill Krugman.

She looked back at her partner and resisted the urge to throw up herself. “It’s the Director,” she said. “You OK?”

“I’ll live,” Blankenship said, waving an irritated hand in her

direction. “Just take the fucking call.”

Dana nodded and flipped open the phone before placing it to her ear.

“Yes, sir?”

Krugman cut straight to the chase. “Two more murders of pregnant black women with their unborn babies cut from their stomachs with knives. First of the murders happened down in Houston — a professional basketball player by the name of Kimberly

Anderson.”

Dana’s knees buckled. Her world swayed. She took a deep breath to regain her equilibrium. “What about the other murder?” she breathed. “Where did that one happen?”

Krugman blew out a short breath. “Right in your own backyard, Dana. Got a suspect in custody already, a Randy McMichael. He’s a former

professional baseball player who once played for the Cleveland Indians.

Anyway, I've already assigned a pair of agents down in Houston to cover the Kimberly Anderson angle, and you and Blankenship can leave the Trimble investigation with Kingfisher and Quartz. I just finished briefing them on what they need to do. In any event, I need you guys on the next plane back to Ohio. Understood?"



Dana nodded. “Yes, sir. We’re on our way now.”

Flipping off the phone, she turned back to Blankenship. By this time, he’d finished wiping the skinhead’s spit from his face and had removed the handcuffs from around Oliver’s wrists.

He turned the skinhead over onto his side to make sure the asshole didn’t

choke to death on his own vomit should he get nauseas during his unscheduled trip to La-La Land. Then he looked back up at Dana. “We’re on our way where?” he asked. “Where are we going now?”

Dana held her partner’s stare and let out a slow breath that fluttered her lips. “We’re going home, Bruce,” she said.

“We’re going back to Cleveland.”





## PART IV

“There are times when one would like to hang the whole human race and finish the farce.” – Mark Twain



## CHAPTER 79

Angel was back inside her office downtown the next day, sitting on the window ledge again.

She glanced down at her right hand and flexed her fingers, wincing against the pain. Half moon-shaped indentations caused by the skinhead's shattered teeth still remained visible from where she'd punched the asshole hard in the face.

Angel rotated her wrist clockwise, then counterclockwise as she tried to work out some of the stiffness. Didn't work. Still, it was the *good* kind of pain, the kind of pain that let you know you'd accomplished something truly worthwhile. Angel felt sorry for the people out there who'd never know the overwhelming *joy* brought about by cracking someone you *despised* square



in the mouth with all your might. She imagined that baseball players experienced much the same thrilling sensation when they'd really laid into a pitch grooved right down the middle of the plate, making solid contact with the ball on the sweet spot of the bat barrel and knowing for a fact that the tightly-wound horsehide would travel a long, *long* way.

Angel kicked off her heels and

rubbed at her aching feet as she leaned her forehead against the reinforced glass of her office window and surveyed the scene four stories below on Prospect Avenue. The foot traffic down there seemed light today, sporadic, the gray skies overhead threatening a hard rain. The electricity hanging in the air was an invention of the storm-front moving in now, not the result of a happy crowd

anticipating an exciting night of baseball. The Indians had left on a road trip following their latest humiliating loss to the Yankees anyway, and they wouldn't be back in town again for an entire week. Tonight it was a five-ten p.m. match-up against the Royals out in Kansas City. The weather there, they said, was sunny and bright. Not a cloud in the sky.

A moment later, a woman and a

man, both wearing dark suits, the female with a dark skirt, entered the room. “Are you Angel Monroe?” the woman asked.

Angel identified the woman’s outfit as Gucci even from across the room. Whoever she was, the chick had style, and plenty of it, too. In addition to that, she also looked like a carbon copy of Reese Witherspoon, only smaller and

with shorter hair. For his part, the man could have stood in for Mark Harmon on the set of *NCIS* – all neatly trimmed brown hair and smoldering brown eyes.

Angel lifted herself off of her perch on the window ledge and adjusted her own skirt, feeling more exhausted than she had in years. She really wasn't up for taking on any more cases today, but neither had she begun the rolling in the proverbial clover yet, so she needed

to keep all her options open here. After all, she *did* like to eat every now and then. “Yes, ma’am,” she said, forcing some professionalism into her weary voice. “I’m Angel Monroe. How may I help you?”

The woman flipped open an ID, and Angel widened her hazel eyes in surprise. The letters on top of her ID read: *FBI*.

“My name is Special Agent Dana Whitestone,” the woman said, then turned and motioned with a nod of her head to the man standing next to her. “This is Special Agent Bruce Blankenship. We’ve been assigned to investigate the murder of Sasha Diggs and we were told that you may have some notes on the case.”

Angel’s mouth went dry at the

mention of Sasha's name. Confusion set in, followed almost at once by the painful thumping of her heartbeat inside her suddenly constricted chest.

*The feds were looking into  
Sasha's murder now? On what  
grounds?*

Then it hit her. Hard. Only one possible explanation.

“Are there others?” Angel asked weakly. “Other dead girls besides



Sasha Diggs?”

The blonde woman smiled gently. “I’m sorry, Miss Monroe, but I’m not at liberty to discuss the particulars of the case.” She paused and looked over at her partner, who nodded his head. “It’ll all be clear in the morning when the papers come out, Miss Monroe. Much as we prefer he not, a local reporter is breaking the news on

this one. Until then, though, I'm afraid I'm not authorized to discuss the details."

Angel nodded, understanding the woman's reasoning. Red tape had everybody's hands tied these days. You needed to follow every procedure, every protocol and every policy at all times. You could never break rank or it would cost you your fucking job. It had marked one of the main reasons why she'd left

the Cleveland police force in the first place.

“The notes, Miss Monroe?”

Angel’s cheeks flushed hot. “Of course. Sorry about that, Special Agent Whitestone.”

Angel went over to her desk and pulled out the case file on Sasha Diggs. Sadly, there wasn’t much to it. Just a thin file with the eight-by-ten photograph

from Elite Escorts of Cleveland and the perverted bio attached. Also, the single ledger sheet of Sasha's appointments and a piece of loose notebook paper upon which Angel had scrawled down a few of her thoughts on the case.

As she handed the file over to Dana Whitestone, she wished like hell that she'd made a copy, cursing herself that she hadn't.

Whitestone smiled and took the

file before the two women shook hands.

And then something very strange happened. The woman held onto Angel's hand a moment longer than was usual for a simple business handshake.

Whitestone looked over at her partner, who nodded again. "I understand you'd like to be kept in the loop on this one, Miss Monroe. I'm very sorry for the loss of your

grandmother. It's a terrible thing to lose someone you love. From all reports, she was a wonderful woman. Anyway, I can't promise you any investigative details, but I'll do my very best to keep you apprised of events as they unfold."

Angel smiled back tentatively, suddenly understanding that they were sharing a moment here, silently acknowledging the bond that they shared as women in their line of work.

“I’d really appreciate that,  
Special Agent Whitestone.”

“Call me Dana.”

Angel nodded. “I’d appreciate  
that very much, Dana.”

And with that, just as quickly as  
they’d appeared, the FBI agents were  
gone again.





## CHAPTER 80

The Race Master donned a pair of heavy rubber gloves and unscrewed the cap from a large bottle of ferric chloride before pouring a small measure into a clean white cloth and rubbing the slightly hissing liquid deep into Bane's thick black fur.

Like the champion he'd always been since birth, Bane didn't even flinch as the ferric chloride soaked into his

skin. “Good boy,” the Race Master said, patting the dog’s massive chest reassuringly. “That’s a *very* good boy, indeed.”

Though certainly harsh, ferric chloride had long been a favorite tool of professional boxers looking to gain an edge. Rubbing the chemical into their gloves just prior to a bout ensured that their opponents would experience a

stinging, blinding sensation whenever a punch was landed near the eyes. No less an icon than former heavyweight champion Sonny Liston had reportedly used this tactic to gain just such an advantage during his 1964 world-title match against a young Muhammad Ali, then known as Cassius Clay. Not that it had done Liston any good, ultimately. Employing a dizzying array of his trademark fancy footwork and crisp

punching, a half-blinded Clay had left Liston sitting exhausted on his stool at the end of Round Six, unable to answer the bell for Round Seven, a stunning turn of events that had prompted Clay's joyful dance of crisscrossing steps that would soon become known the world over as the "Ali Shuffle".

The Race Master pulled off his rubber gloves carefully and deposited

them into a waiting plastic bag, being very careful to not burn his own skin. He knew that Bane didn't need any sort of artificial advantage here, of course, but he also knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the other dog would be similarly equipped. Standard operating procedure in the highly illegal world of underground dog fighting. If you weren't cheating, it simply meant you weren't *trying* hard enough.

The Race Master patted Bane's muscular chest again and leaned down to peer directly into his beloved pet's coal-black eyes. The dog stared back at him, steely and unblinking, leaving no doubt at all that the powerful canine stood ready and willing to do what he'd been born and raised to do.

*Kill.*



# CHAPTER 81

Dana and Blankenship had just left Angel Monroe's office on Prospect Avenue when Dana's cellphone sounded inside her purse.

She dug it out just as she and Blankenship reached her Protégé in the underground parking lot of the Caxton Building. Glancing down at the caller ID, she frowned, not recognizing the number.



She flipped open the phone and placed it to her ear. “Hello?”

“Special Agent Whitestone, it’s Shelley Margolis. How are you doing today?”

Dana’s heart immediately leapt up into her throat and began taking vicious potshots at her carotid artery. She took in a deep breath to steady herself. “I’m fine Dr. Margolis,” she

said, surprising herself by just how *calm* her voice sounded. “And you?”

“I’m great, Agent Whitestone, thanks so much for asking. Anyway, are you terribly busy at the moment?”

Dana cut her stare over to Blankenship, who lifted up his eyebrows on his forehead and gave her the “thumbs-up” sign over the hood of the Protégé in a show of encouragement, having heard Dana address the child-

care advocate by name.

“No,” Dana said, checking her watch. And it was the truth. According to Bill Krugman, Dana and Blankenship were to take off the rest of day after they’d obtained the case file on Sasha Diggs from the Cleveland-based private investigator – no ifs, ands or buts about it. After all, even the good guys needed a little time off to rest up every now and

then.

“Great,” Margolis said. “I’m so happy to hear that. Anyway, I really hate to spring this on you at the last minute like this, but is there any way you could meet me at the Chuck E. Cheese over in Parma in about an hour or so?”

Dana pressed her lips together, confused. Chuck E. Cheese? Why the hell would Margolis want to meet her at a children’s restaurant featuring six-foot-

tall animatronic mice, ridiculously flat soda and pizza that tasted even worse than the greasy circles of cardboard upon which it arrived?

Then it hit her. *Hard.*

“Of course,” Dana breathed, feeling her knees buckle beneath her. She paused and took another deep breath, forcing herself to choose her next words carefully. She didn’t want to fuck

this up. “Will we be meeting alone, Dr. Margolis?”

Margolis laughed. “I knew the mention of Chuck E. Cheese would lift your antennae. Anyway, no, we won’t be meeting alone. Bradley will be joining us for lunch, if that’s OK with you. I’d really like to see the two of you in action together before the final adoption decision is made.”

Dana leaned her trembling body

against the Protégé for support. Ten feet away, Blankenship shot her a sympathetic look before pretending to check his own cellphone, attempting to give her the illusion of privacy. “Of course it’s OK with me,” Dana said. “As a matter of fact, I’d like nothing else better in the entire world.”

“Fantastic. The restaurant is on West Ridgewood Road, in case you

didn't already know. You could probably find it with your GPS, if you needed to. Anyway, so I'll see you in Parma around two-thirty?"

Dana checked her watch again. One twenty-two p.m. now, which made it T-minus sixty-eight minutes and counting. After that, who *knew* what her world would look like? If nothing else, though, for better or worse, she knew it would never look the same again.



Only one way to find out.

“That sounds great, Dr.

Margolis. I’ll see you then.”

She flipped off her phone and stared at Blankenship across the hood of the Protégé. “Wow,” she said, widening her pale blue eyes in astonishment while her reeling brain tried desperately to process all the details of the stunning phone call. “Just, *wow*.”

Blankenship smiled at her and slipped his cellphone back into his blazer, finally ending the pretense of not having listened in to the entire call. “Good news?” he asked.

Dana closed her eyes. “I sure as hell hope so, Bruce. I guess I’ll know for sure in about an hour and a half.”

Even though Blankenship was standing just feet away, his voice

sounded as though he were calling her long-distance from another country – static-y connection and all. “You’ll knock ‘em dead, Dana,” her partner said. “Don’t you worry about that. *I’m* not.”

Dana opened her eyes again. “Just so long as they don’t knock me dead first, right?”

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After dropping off Blankenship

at his temporary home of the Wyndham Hotel on Euclid Avenue twenty minutes later, Dana raced over to the east side of Cleveland at ninety miles an hour, pressing down the gas pedal all the way to the floorboard and not giving a damn about the possibility of receiving any speeding tickets. If need be, she'd pull rank so fast on any state trooper foolish enough to pull her over right now that

she'd make his or her goddamn head spin right off their shoulders. No way in *hell* she was going to be late for this. Not today. Not when there was this much at stake.

Not when she could be on her way to meet her *kid*.

She pulled into the parking lot of Chuck E. Cheese in Parma just as the digital clock on the Protégé's dashboard flipped over to two p.m. Selecting a

parking spot about forty yards away from the restaurant's entrance, she leaned over and extracted a pair of binoculars from the glove box.

Then she waited.

The seconds passed by slowly, finally stretching into minutes that seemed to take *hours*. Each successive tick of the clock made her feel like she was serving a fifty-year prison sentence

with all the heartless murderers she'd put away over the course of her career. Nathan Stiedowe. Jack Yuntz. Timothy Preston. Dozens of others.

Two-oh-three p.m. Two-oh-seven. Two-nineteen. Finally, at two twenty-seven p.m., she lifted the binoculars to her face and brought into sharp focus the image of Margolis holding little Bradley's hand as they made their way inside the busy

restaurant.

Dana's heart stopped beating dead in her chest. Nausea swirled in her gut. This was it. Do or die time. No turning back now.

She exited the Protégé and crossed the parking lot on rubbery legs. Pulling open the door several moments later, she stepped inside.

Ten feet away and wearing a



clean white “Sponge Bob” T-shirt to go along with his adorable little khaki shorts, Bradley turned around in the waiting area of the restaurant and smiled up at her shyly. Then he looked down at the floor for a moment before lifting his stare again. “There you are,” he said quietly. “I’ve been waiting a long time for you.”

Ice-cold goose flesh danced across Dana’s skin. Finally, she smiled

back at the little boy. Her *son*? “I’ve been waiting a long time for you, too, Bradley,” she croaked, her unsteady voice wavering so badly in her throat she feared it would shatter away into a million tiny pieces. Hot tears flooded into her eyes, blurring her vision before slipping down her cheeks.

Bradley paused uncertainly. Then, suddenly, he rushed over to her

and threw his tiny arms around her legs. Looking up at her with his enormous blue eyes, he asked, “Are you going to be my new mommy?”

Dana cut her stinging gaze over to Margolis. The child psychologist nodded. “Just as soon as I can receive the final approval from my superiors, Agent Whitestone, I plan on recommending that you and little Bradley here become a family.”

Dana's heart snapped clean in two inside her chest – for the first time in her life in a *good* way. Wrapping her arms around the little boy's – her *son's* – frail body, she held on tight, knowing that she'd never, *ever* let him go.

She swallowed back painful sobs. “Yes, Bradley,” she choked out, feeling another powerful wave of goose flesh ripple across her freezing skin.

“I’m going to be your new mommy.”



## CHAPTER 82

Half an hour after Dana Whitestone and Bruce Blankenship had left her office in downtown Cleveland, Angel made her way down to the underground parking lot of The Caxton Building and started up the Cabriolet.

Now that the feds were working the case, she'd have to work a bit more surreptitiously, of course, but there was no way in hell she was just going to step

to the side on this one. Not even for someone as nice as Dana Whitestone.

Twenty minutes later, she was back on Jelani Diggs's front porch in Westlake. The sky overhead still featured the same menacing gray cast as it had earlier in the day – the gusting, lake-effect wind clearly noticeable even here, ten miles inland.

Jelani Diggs looked as though



she'd aged twenty years since just the previous afternoon. Wearing a thick, hand-knit sweater, the brisk wind swept hard through her brittle silver hair as she opened the door and stepped out onto the porch. "Angel," she said in a flat voice, more a statement than anything else.

Angel pressed her lips into a tight line and fought back the sudden urge to cry. She needed to stay strong here, though, she knew that. If not for

her own sake, then for the old woman's.

“May I come in, ma'am?” she asked quietly.

Jelani Diggs nodded slowly.

She still seemed in a daze, still shocked into submission by the mind-bendingly brutal murder of her beloved granddaughter. And who the hell could blame her for that? Much as had been the case for Angel when Granny Bernice

had died, the best parts of Jelani Diggs had probably died right along with Sasha and her unborn great-grandchild. “Of course, Angel,” the woman said in her dead monotone. “Please come in.”

Angel followed Jelani Diggs into the house and through the living room, past a loudly ticking grandfather clock, before they entered the small kitchen. Other than the incessant ticking of the clock, however, the house featured an

almost *deafening* silence, the air in every room stale and unmoving. To Angel's nostrils, the house smelled like a place that never entertained any children; as though someone had come in with a gigantic vacuum cleaner and simply sucked all the life clean out.

The picture of Jesus stared down from the wall over the kitchen table, His soft brown eyes moist and sad. Just like

Jelani Diggs's eyes.

“You want some coffee?” the old woman asked.

Angel shook her head and took a deep breath before bringing Jelani Diggs up to speed on the FBI's abrupt appearance in the case, leaving out the part about Dana Whitestone's promise that additional details would be available in tomorrow morning's edition of the newspaper. Angel just didn't feel

like making the situation any harder on the woman than it already was. The poor thing still needed time to *mourn*.

“I’d like to have another look in Sasha’s room,” Angel said while she and the old woman stood just feet away from one another in the kitchen, though they might as well have been standing on entirely different planets at the moment. “I’d like to try to get into

that computer of hers.”

The old woman waved a hand lazily in front of her face, barely able to summon the energy to do even that much. “What does it matter now?” Jelani Diggs said. “My baby, my great-grandbaby, both dead.”

The old woman paused and held Angel’s stare. “What did my great-grandbaby look like, Angel? What color eyes did she have? What color hair?”

When Angel didn't immediately answer, Jelani Diggs lowered her gaze to the floor. After a moment or two, her bony shoulders began to shake.

Angel went to her and put a comforting arm around her skeletal shoulders. The old woman felt so tiny, so frail, so weak – as fragile as a newborn kitten. Her chest heaved up and down, but no tears came from her



wounded eyes. Not any more, and maybe never again. Jelani Diggs was all cried out now, all dried up from the inside out.

After several long moments, the shaking finally subsided.

Looking up into Angel's eyes again, Jelani Diggs's own tired brown eyes showed the same kind of hurt that Angel recognized all too well from her own bathroom mirror. A defeat so

complete that it was difficult to comprehend. A cold, hard wind had blown through her life and completely stripped away her soul, until it had become utterly *bare*. Bare all the way down to the fucking wood.

“Take the computer with you,” the old woman said, waving her hand in the air again. “Take anything out of that room that Jesus wouldn’t approve of. I

don't want nothin' to remind me of what my baby was doin', Angel. I just want to remember her the way I want to remember her."

Angel took a large black garbage bag with her up to Sasha's bedroom before emptying the drawer of sex-toys into it. Then she did the same with the lingerie drawer. Wrapping the power cord around the computer monitor, she placed it on top. The CPU went in last.

Carrying the bag from the bottom, Angel descended the creaking stairs again, the bag's weight heavy in her arms but surely nothing compared to the enormous weight pressing down on Jelani Diggs's soul.

Reaching the bottom of the steps, she found the old woman still standing in the living room, not having moved an inch since Angel had gone upstairs.

Jelani Diggs had her bony arms wrapped tightly around her frail little body, as though she just couldn't get warm for the life of her, no matter how many heavy sweaters she wore. She didn't say a word as Angel left the house.

Outside in the cold light of day, Angel let out a deep sigh and finally let the tears come streaming down her cheeks. She supposed there just wasn't anything left to say anymore.

Not for Jelani Diggs, and maybe

not for her, either.



## CHAPTER 83

Richard Patton's static-y voice filled the Race Master's left ear as the chartered Cessna streaked like a silver bullet toward Virginia across the rapidly darkening skies.

“The female FBI agent – Dana Whitestone – is likely to be approved in her efforts to adopt the little boy, sir,” Patton said. “I just received the briefing from our man in the state records



office.”

The Race Master didn't know whether to smile or frown. He'd need more information to decide. “Do you have a timeframe for this possibility, Richard?”

Patton cleared his throat. “Yes, sir, I do. It's likely to happen in the next week or so.”

The Race Master paused. A

week or so left him with more than enough time to complete his mission, and having Dana Whitestone's mind occupied with unrelated matters certainly *seemed* an advantageous turn of events. Still, the woman's FBI jacket told the story of just how tenacious she could be, even in the face of enormous pressure, so he'd need to be extremely careful with her, no matter what route he chose. But not *too* careful. Equal

measures of offense and defence usually proved the best approach. “Very well, Richard,” the Race Master said. “Keep me apprised of any additional details as they become available.”

“Yes, sir. I certainly will.”

Switching off with Patton, the Race Master placed the telephone back into its cradle and stretched his muscular neck while the titillating idea wormed

its way even deeper into his brain. As the *wunderkind* chess prodigy Jack Yuntz had so recently told him in the course of their cleverly coded correspondence, the real power in chess didn't lay with the queens, as most people thought it did.

The real power in chess lay with the *pawns*.



## CHAPTER 84

Sitting across from each other at a glass-topped table in the Wyndham Hotel's beautiful lobby restaurant the next morning, Dana and Blankenship enjoyed a late brunch.

“So?” Blankenship asked, lifting his eyebrows as he spread cream cheese carefully across his toasted onion bagel with a silver butter knife. “What happened after the initial meeting then?”

Everything else at Chuck E. Cheese go smoothly from there?”

Dana took a long swallow of her orange juice, still feeling positively *giddy* from the events of the previous day. “Yep,” she said, trying to ignore the intense sensation of butterflies swarming in her stomach. She just couldn’t help herself, though. She was *psyched*. And why the hell not? She

was going to be a *mother*. “Everything went smooth as silk.”

Dana sat up straighter in her chair and enjoyed the feeling of pure *energy* flooding through her veins. She hadn't felt this good this since she'd been four years old. And it was all because of little Bradley. The words tumbled out of her mouth like those of an excited sixteen-year-old girl describing her brand-new prom dress. “We ate our



pizza – Bradley likes pepperoni and extra cheese on his – and then we played all the games at the restaurant. We played Skee-ball, air hockey, about fifty different arcade games, then we took our picture together in one of those silly little booths, then we...”

Blankenship lifted a hand to cut her off. “Hold on, there, Dana. Just hold on one cotton-pickin’ second. Let’s

see it.”

Dana frowned. “See what?”

Blankenship rolled his eyes.

“The picture. I know you’ve got it with you in your purse right now. Don’t pretend you don’t. So, c’mon. Cough it up already.”

Dana widened the smile that had been frozen to her face for the past twenty-two hours now. Damn *straight* she had the picture in her purse. She

also had a copy next to her bed, one in her bathroom, one in the living room, one clipped to the sun visor above the driver's seat in the Protégé, one on the refrigerator...

Dana shook her head and took out the thin, laminated strip from her purse before handing it over to Blankenship.

Reaching across the table to take

it, he laughed and pointed one by one to each of the three frames. “Nice,” he said, focusing on the first frame, which showed Bradley and Dana sitting nicely together and just looking calmly into the camera lens. “Look at your eyes in this one. Exact same shade of blue. You *look* like mother and son.”

Dana nodded excitedly. She’d thought the same thing.

Blankenship progressed to the

second frame, a shot that showed Dana and Bradley screwing up their eyeballs and sticking their tongues sideways out of their mouths. “Attractive,” Blankenship said, shaking his head in bemusement. “You’re lucky nobody hit you guys in the backs of your heads. Your faces would’ve stayed that way for life. According to my mother, it’s a scientific fact.”

Dana giggled. As long as she and Bradley would be together, she wouldn't have cared one little bit.

The third frame featured Bradley tilting up his chin to kiss Dana softly on the cheek. “*This*,” Blankenship said, tapping the frame, “is my favorite one of the three, by far.”

Dana looked on with her partner at the third photograph on the strip.

“Yep,” she said, feeling her cheeks suffuse with blood. “That’s my favorite one, too.”

She unconsciously touched her left cheek where the little boy’s lips had been. She could still *feel* Bradley’s kiss there.

Blankenship handed back the photograph strip and shook his head again. “You’re a very lucky woman, Dana. Don’t ever forget that.”

Dana shook her own head again and tucked the strip back into her purse. “Never.”

Just then, Blankenship’s iPhone sounded on the glass-topped table next to his freshly prepared bagel. He glanced down at the caller ID, then back up at Dana. “It’s Krugman,” he said, picking up the phone and sliding the digital green answer bar across the



bottom of the screen. “This should be interesting.”

He placed the phone to his ear.

“Yes, sir?”

Dana watched Blankenship frown while he listened to what the Director had to say. From all appearances, it seemed to be a one-sided conversation.

Thirty seconds later, Blankenship said, “Yes, sir,” again, then

put the iPhone back down on the table.

Dana lifted her eyebrows at him.

“Well?” she asked. “What did Krugman have to say?”

Blankenship cleared his throat and briefed her. “Living witness in New Mexico,” he said. “A Janice Wiley, some sort of professor of creative writing at the state university. Krugman wants me to go out there and talk to her

personally. See what I can find out.”

Dana furrowed her eyebrows.

“What about me? What does Krugman want me to do?”

Blankenship shrugged. “Don’t know. He said he’ll call you in a bit and let you know. He seemed distracted by something.”

Dana frowned. Seemed weird that the Director would separate her and Blankenship at this late stage of the

game, especially seeing as how they'd finally started making some serious progress on the case. Still, Bill Krugman was no dummy. He knew what he was doing here – and Dana knew better than to question his decisions. “What time are you supposed to leave for New Mexico?” she asked.

Blankenship glanced down at his watch. “Hour and a half. There’s a

ticket waiting for me at the United desk at Hopkins. First-class this time, thank God. Anyway, do you think you could you give me a lift over there?”

“Of course.”

Blankenship rose to his feet and slung the strap of his briefcase over his left shoulder. Holding Dana’s stare, he paused and said, “Hey, congratulations again on everything that’s going on with little Bradley, Agent Whitestone.

You're gonna make a completely awesome mom. I'm very happy for you."

A sudden wave of warmth ripped like honey through Dana's veins, raising all the tiny little hairs on her arms as though they were dancing to music only they could hear. "Thanks, Bruce," she said. "That means a lot to me coming from a completely awesome

dad like you.”





## CHAPTER 85

Angel placed the garbage bag filled with Sasha Diggs's computer equipment into the trunk of the Cabriolet before beginning the short drive back to her and Granny Bernice's modest little house on the west side of Cleveland.

Angel didn't know whether she had the law on her side at the moment – didn't know if taking the items from Sasha Diggs's bedroom could be

construed as tampering with evidence – but she felt a little bit better knowing that she'd be sharing any information she found out with Dana Whitestone.

Angel shook her head. She couldn't quite put her finger on the reason why, but she already felt a strong kinship with the woman. Maybe because the FBI agent was a fellow female. And why not? There sure as

heck weren't too many of them in their field, so they needed to stick together whenever they could. After all, it had always been a *man's* world out there.

A mean, cheating, *murdering* man's world.

When she'd reach home ten minutes later, Angel dragged the computer equipment inside with her and set everything up at the kitchen table before plugging the power cord into the

wall and pressing the power button on the CPU, waiting for all the start-up processes to complete.

A moment later, the monitor blinked on. Thankfully, the computer had already been equipped with a wireless card – complete with a little plastic antenna sticking up in the back – which allowed Angel to access the Internet from the Linksys router set up in

her and Granny Bernice's house.

Sasha Diggs had set her homepage to Google, the popular search engine that had made a pair of college buddies from Stanford very rich men. Using the computer mouse featuring a "Hello Kitty" sticker fixed to the top, Angel moved the pointer over the downward-facing arrow next to the search bar and called up the history log in the browser.

A few sites she wasn't surprised to find: Cleveland State University; Elite Escorts of Cleveland; Travelocity.com.

Then a site she was *very* surprised to find:

[www.thebrotherhood.com](http://www.thebrotherhood.com).

Angel frowned and clicked on the link, not knowing then that she was essentially opening up Pandora's Box and releasing all the screeching demons

trapped inside.





## CHAPTER 86

The sounds of Borodin's *Symphony No. 2* filtered into the Race Master's iPod earbuds as he leaned back in his comfortable leather captain's chair on the Cessna and punched his password into the keyboard on his MacBook Pro before watching the website pop up. A few more keystrokes were then followed by a second password that granted him

administrative access.

The Brotherhood's website had always been a fine tool for keeping tabs on his operatives scattered throughout the country, and it provided him with a nice little chunk of income, as well. Only those willing to pay the exorbitant registration fee were allowed access to the secret forums where the Race Master had painstakingly outlined his personal

philosophy regarding the best way to purify the White race, and only those who'd proved themselves worthy servants to the cause were permitted to view the mission-statement page upon which he'd carefully laid out his plan to free his older brother from his cold prison cell in Germany.

The Race Master shook his head. The vast majority of it was complete bullshit, of course. He

pandered to the weak-minded with what they wanted to hear simply to keep them in line, and that seemed to be working out well for him so far. Four thousand subscribers in America, and another seven thousand in Germany, where the neo-Nazi movement had experienced a recent surge in popularity following the brutal murder of a white tourist in Leipzig by a gang of drug-running

Jamaicans.

Bane snoring peacefully at his feet and resting up for tonight's upcoming fight, the Race Master navigated over to the hit counter and called up the IP addresses of the website's most recent visitors next. He gritted his teeth when he saw the hit coming from a computer terminal on the west side of Cleveland, Ohio.

She hadn't managed to get into

any of the forums, but the private investigator was still trying her damndest to track him down.

It was something she'd soon regret.

Flipping shut the computer and rising to his feet, the Race Master picked up the airphone from its cradle on the interior wall of the Cessna and punched in the number for Miles O'Reilly. After

fifteen rings, the call clicked over to voicemail.

*You've reached Miles O'Reilly.*

*I can't take your call at the moment but...*

The Race Master turned and slammed the phone violently back down into its cradle, shattering the plastic casing and startling Bane awake.

*God damn it, O'Reilly, he thought. Where the fuck are you?*







## CHAPTER 87

Six hours after dropping off Blankenship at the airport, Dana soaked in a hot bubble bath back home in her apartment in Lakewood.

Slipping down into the suds with a loud groan, she tried her best to relax, but it wasn't easy. The gruesome murders of the pregnant black women had taken up primary residence in her mind again, replacing the giggly, happy

thoughts that had been brought about by her visit with little Bradley. Now that she would be a mother herself, Dana knew just how much children meant to those in charge of their safety and well-being, and her dedication to tracking down whoever had ordered the violent deaths of Laura Settle, Betsy Campbell, Kimberly Anderson and Sasha Diggs had been redoubled.

Dana pushed herself up straighter in the tub and lifted a soapy sponge to squeeze some hot water over her bare shoulders. She'd tried calling Bill Krugman down in DC after dropping off Blankenship at Hopkins for her partner's flight out to New Mexico, but the Director still hadn't called her back yet. Odd. Krugman usually stayed on top of these sorts of things better than that.

Dana wondered briefly if anything were wrong, and hoped that wasn't the case. Krugman's wife had recently beaten breast cancer – as much as anyone could *really* beat breast cancer, at least – but maybe Marie had begun feeling sick again.

The ringing of her cellphone on the side of the tub jangled her nerves and cut into her thoughts. Lifting her hands out of the water, she shook off some

excess moisture and flipped open the phone before placing it to her wet ear. “Bruce, you touch down in New Mexico yet?”

In the background of the call, Dana heard a disembodied voice on an intercom system. “*Dr Bailey, Room 212. Dr Bailey, Room 212.*”

Dana frowned. Blankenship’s voice followed a moment later. “Yep,

touched down about an hour ago,” he said. “I’m standing in the hallway of the Brandon-Day Medical Center in Las Cruces right now, current residence of one Janice Wiley, professor of creative writing at New Mexico State University.”

Dana sharpened her frown. The report from the New Mexico field office had said that Wiley had avoided physical injury. Only one other

alternative. “Mental breakdown?” she asked.

“You got it. And that would be putting things *extremely* mildly.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Worse. You ever see that movie *Don't Say a Word*? The one starring Brittany Murphy, where her character says in an eerie, singsong voice, ‘*I'll never te-ee-ll!*’?”



Dana shivered despite the warmth of her bath. “Yeah, that was a pretty creepy movie. Thanks for the visual, Blankenship.”

He laughed without humor. “No problem. Anyway, Janice Wiley makes Brittany Murphy’s character in that movie sound downright chatty. She’s frozen stiff as a board still. That means it’ll probably take me a little longer to

thaw her out than I originally expected.

Krugman get back to you yet?”

Dana stretched her neck. The tension that had started to slip away in the comfort of her bath was already back full-force. So much for her day off.

“Nope,” she said. “Haven’t heard from him yet.”

“What’re you doing right now?”

Dana looked down at her naked body. “Taking a bath.”

Blankenship made a noise.

“Must be nice.”

“It is.”

“Lucky you. Anyway, I better get going. I just wanted to touch base with you, check in real quick. I’m meeting with Wiley again in about five minutes. Should be a real picnic. Wish me luck.”

“Luck.”

Dana flipped off the connection

with him a moment later and set her jaw. Like it or not, she knew that it would take hell of a lot more than simple *luck* for them to crack this maddening case and finally bring the gruesome murders of pregnant black women to a stop. Luck wouldn't be a bad place to start, though.

Wouldn't be a bad place to start, at all.



# CHAPTER 88

*WHITE POWER, WORLD*

*WIDE!*

The frightening words leapt out in bold black letters from the top of The Brotherhood's homepage, right next to a circle intersected by a cross.

Angel sucked in a sharp breath that stabbed her lungs like a switchblade knife, immediately recognizing the symbol as an Odin's Cross – an ancient

Celtic symbol that had been co-opted by the neo-Nazis in an effort to instill fear in the hearts of black people, much like the KKK did with their burning crosses.

A dozen thoughts flashed through her mind at once: Why the hell had Sasha Diggs been visiting a white-power hate-group's website? Research? A paper she needed to do? Some sort of morbid curiosity?\_

Or had it been something else?

Angel didn't know, but she sure as hell planned to find out.

Various sub-section tabs sat beneath the Odin's Cross. Newslinks & Articles. Announcements. A forum for posting photographs and ideological hate-speech. All of them were password-protected, though, and registration wasn't cheap. Five hundred



bucks just for a three-day trial.

Angel sighed and powered down the computer. Oh, well. To hell with it. She'd always been better at old-fashioned research, anyway.

Much like the Rhodes scholar Sasha Diggs had once been, she was certainly no stranger to the library, herself.



## CHAPTER 89

Three long hours after stepping onto the chartered Cessna in Worcester, Massachusetts, the Race Master led Bane by a thick steel chain onto the tarmac of a private airport in Richmond, Virginia.

After they'd been ushered into a waiting limousine, he cracked the seal on a fresh bottle of Black Label and sipped the strong drink while the long

black vehicle whisked them off to a sprawling farmhouse thirty miles south of the city. The intro to perpetually-in-trouble-rapper DMX's *It's Dark and Hell is Hot* blasted over the Bose sound system as they drove. Obviously enjoying the aggressive tunes, Bane flattened back his ears against his thick skull and howled along in perfect time to the thumping music.

The Race Master took a deep breath. Tonight's fight would be for one hundred thousand dollars and marked the crown jewel of a yearlong underground competition run by a professional football player, who'd cleverly named his illicit operation "Bad Intentionz Kennelz".

Only two dogs remained following the preliminaries that had

taken place over the course of the past several months: Bane and Jaws, the football player's powerful brindle pit bull. Each canine had already dispatched four opponents apiece in the most ruthless fashions imaginable. Hell, after the last fight, the Race Master had actually had to pick bits of Bane's opponent out of his *teeth*.

Since they were in the South, they'd be adhering to "Cajun Rules".

No matter. Bane had been trained very well in all aspects of the fight game and, as always, he stood ready and willing to get down to work.

As per Cajun Rules, the pit itself was square with sides two feet high, the scratch lines twelve feet apart.

Half an hour later, a palpable air of excitement crackled in the barn as dogfight lovers from all over the country

huddled around to watch the bloody battle that would end in the violent death of at least one of the dogs. Entering the pit on opposite sides, the Race Master and the football player held their fighters facing away from one another. A moment later, the referee in the middle of the pit gave the order for which everyone had been waiting.

“Face your dogs.”

Bane strained mightily against



his leash as the Race Master turned him around. The massive pit bull did the same on the other side of the pit. The referee looked down at the dogs, then back up at their owners before bringing down his right arm in a quick chopping motion.

“Let’s go!”

Snarling angrily, the dogs were at each other’s throats in a matter of

seconds. The pit bull drew first blood, sinking its sharp white fangs deep into Bane's thick neck. a look of wild fury exploding in its flashing brown eyes. In the very next instant, Bane tore his flesh out of the other dog's powerful jaws and whipped his head around like a lightning bolt as his own teeth found their painful mark.

The fight raged on for nearly three minutes from there, both dogs

giving as good as they got, before the brindle pit bull finally began to tire. The fury had gone out its eyes now, and it whimpered helplessly as Bane went in for the kill.

“Enough!” the football player cried out, turning his terror-stricken gaze up to the Race Master. “Call off your fucking dog!”

But the Race Master simply

ignored his opponent and let Bane finish off what they'd come there to do. This was a fight to the *death*, after all, as had been clearly spelled out in the rules.

The pit bull's tortured screams echoed throughout the huge barn and the raucous crowd went wild as Bane's sharp white teeth found their mark once again.

Seconds later, with his dog lying dead on the ground in a pile of bloody at

his feet, the huge football player lunged across the pit at the Race Master, his dark brown eyes flashing with the same sort of fury his destroyed dog had displayed only moments earlier.

Stepping quickly to one side, the Race Master brought up the heel of his palm hard into the football player's broad nose, splintering the bone and sending a sickening gush of blood

rushing down his face.

After several intense moments of pushing and shoving in the crowd that were punctuated by loud curses and the production of at least one silver handgun, everyone in attendance agreed that the action had been taken in self-defense.

The authorities were not called.



## CHAPTER 90

Two hours after her bath back home in her apartment in Lakewood, Dana continued her all-too-rare off-day by strolling through the boy's clothing department at the Wal-Mart in nearby Rocky River. And why not? She wanted to be completely prepared for little Bradley's arrival when he came to live with her, and Dr. Margolis had made it sound as though that might



happen in as soon as a week or so.

Dana's skin broke out into a wave of warm goose flesh at the stomach-dropping thought.

Browsing the clearance racks in the boy's department, she lifted up a series of T-shirts featuring such clever sayings as *Dear Math, I'm Not a Therapist – Go Solve Your Own Problems* and *Back Up – I'm Going to*

*Try Science*, inspecting the size labels stitched into the back collars. Luckily for her, children's clothing sizes more or less corresponded with their ages. Since Bradley was five years old, that meant he wore a size 5. Simple enough to understand, right? If nothing else, one fewer thing she'd need to learn – though she knew that she still had a *steep* learning curve in front of her.

Still, it couldn't *really* be

considered work when you loved your job, now could it?

Dana smiled to herself and lifted up the next T-shirt. This one pictured Jesus ascending to heaven while the apostles gathered 'round in awe and wonder. The word bubble coming from Jesus's mouth read: *BRB*.

Dana snickered and placed the T-shirt into her shopping cart.

Definitely a keeper.

“They grow out of clothes so fast, don’t they? I feel like I’m *always* buying new ones.”

Dana looked up, startled. Five feet away, a delicately pretty woman of about thirty or so was inspecting the rack of graphic T-shirts next to the one she’d been looking through. The woman smiled at her as she held up another shirt and read the slogan emblazoned across

the front. “How old is your son?” she asked.

Dana gathered herself and forced herself to answer the woman, even though social interactions with strangers had never exactly been her forte. Still, now that she was going to be a mother herself, she should probably get used to the idea of hobnobbing with her fellow mothers in the boy’s clothing department

at Wal-Mart – among the many other hopelessly glamorous places mothers no doubt frequented. “He’s five,” Dana said, feeling another warm wave of goose flesh ripple across her skin with the words. And why not? It felt *good* to say them. *Natural*. “And yours? How old is he?”

The woman put the T-shirt she’d been inspecting into her own cart, this one reading, *I Know Karate (And, Like,*

*Two Other Japanese Words*). “He’s six – and going on sixty-five,” she said. “Taking me right along with him, too. Anyway, what’s your son’s name?”

“Bradley,” Dana answered, feeling positively *giddy* now. Even the mere sound of the little boy’s name was like music to her ears.

The other woman nodded. “That’s a great name. My little boy’s

named Alexander. Anyway, have a great night. I hope you find some good bargains in this joint.”

Dana widened her smile. “How can I not? It’s Wal-Mart, right? Anyway, you have a great night, too.”

Pushing her cart back out into the center aisle, Dana headed for the toy department thirty yards away. She still needed to buy a Rubik’s Cube, a beanbag, a bicycle and an *Operation*



board game before heading back home for the night – all the same creature comforts she'd loved as a kid. And as soon as she got done with work tomorrow night, she'd be off to about a dozen different department stores in order to do a little price-comparison shopping for bedroom furniture.

Come hell or high water, she'd be *ready* for her son's arrival.

An unmistakable spring lightened her step as she pushed her cart through the busy store, completely unable to remember the last time she'd felt this happy. The last time she'd felt this *alive*. Being Bradley's mother would mark the single-most important, joyful and *satisfying* thing she'd ever done in her entire life.

And any way you sliced the

bread, that wasn't a bad payoff, now was it?

Nope, wasn't a bad payoff, at all.



# CHAPTER 91

After thinking it over for a little while, Angel decided to skip the library in favor of the nearest Barnes & Noble bookstore ten miles away in Lakewood.

Angel knew the people at the west Cleveland branch of the library very well – *too* well, really. And having practically grown up there as a kid, she really didn't feel up to the task of explaining why the hell she was

checking out a bunch of books on white-power hate groups.

Fifteen minutes later, she parked the Cabriolet in an empty space before hurrying inside the huge chain bookstore teeming with people. So much for the publishing industry wheezing out its last death rattle. To paraphrase Mark Twain's immortal line, the stories of the publishing industry's demise had

obviously been greatly exaggerated.

She browsed the aisles for twenty solid minutes before finally deciding on two books to buy. One was titled *White Power for Beginners*. The other purported to explain the long history of hate groups in America, including a lengthy chapter on The Brotherhood.

She paid for the books with her debit card – almost fifty bucks, which

pissed her off almost worse than the outrageous fee she'd been charged for parking downtown – before leaving store and heading over to Edgewater Park, where she sat down on the same bench that she and Malachai had sat just a few days before. Angel sighed heavily, wondering where he was right now – and what he might be up to at the moment.



She let out another sigh, missing Malachai badly as she settled down into the bench and dropped her Coach bag to the ground at her feet. It seemed like a lifetime ago already since she'd last seen him, and she immediately decided – right then and there – that she'd be seeing him again tonight. *Had* to see him tonight, really.

Angel stared out at the tranquil

lake and felt infinitely grateful for her peaceful surroundings. The same soft easterly wind blew gently across the same blue-gray waters of Lake Erie. The same familiar merchant marine ships bobbed up and down on the same beautiful waves. The same seagulls sang their same dissonant song in the clear blue skies high overhead.

Reaching into her purse, she slipped her sunglasses onto her face

against the bright sunlight streaming down from above and opened up *White Power for Beginners*.

The first chapter consisted of a dictionary of racial slurs. There were forty-four of them, which she couldn't help but notice was a multiple of eighty-eight.

*Heil Hitler.*

# GREAT NAMES TO CALL

## OUR NIGGER FRIENDS

### **1. Antique farm equipment:**

Niggers were once the country's cheapest form of field labor.

### **2. Aunt Jemima:** Nigger bitch

on the box of popular breakfast foods.

### **3. Baboomba:** From the booming

of niggers' car stereos.

### **4. Buckwheat:** Nigger character

from *The Little Rascals* television show.

**5. BUN:** Big Ugly Nigger.

**6. Burrhead:** Reference to niggers' hair texture.

**7. Canadian:** Alternative to “nigger”. Used in politically sensitive company.

**8. Coon:** Reference to the Portuguese word for slave pens or barracks – “barracoons”. Also short for

“raccoon”, an animal known for its innate tendency to steal.

**9. Crickets:** Niggers who stay up all night playing loud, thumping music. Especially used in the Midwestern part of the United States.

**10. DAN:** Dumb Ass Nigger.

**11. FEB:** In the United States, February is Black History Month.

**12. GAR:** Redneck term for

niggers. Short for nig-*GAR*.

**14. Ghetto hamster:** Nigger children. A disposable pet.

**15. Halfrican:** A Black/White mix.

**16. Hotel:** Derived from Ebonics. As in, “I gave the bitch crabs and the hotel everybody.”

**17. J.J.:** A goofy nigger. From the character on the television show *Good Times*.

**18. Jigaboo:** Very dark-skinned niggers. From the 1975 movie *Cooley High*.

**19. Jungle bunny:** Reference to the jungle origins of most niggers.

**20. Kaffir:** Afrikaner word for blacks. Used in the 1989 movie *Lethal Weapon 2*.

**21. Kunta Kinte:** Nigger character in the 1976 Alex Haley novel



*Roots.*

**22. Lawn jockey:** Most lawn jockeys are black, just like most niggers are black.

**23. Lucius:** Reference to poor niggers. During the period prior to the Civil War, many niggers named their children after famous Romans. (E.g., Lucius, Marcus, Scipio, etc.)

**24. Moolie:** Short for *melenzane*, or “eggplant” in Italian.

Eggplants have very dark purple skin, making them appear almost black.

**25. Mud people:** Only White people have souls. God made everyone else – including the niggers – out of mud.

**26. NAGA:** North American Ground Ape. Used by LAPD police officers during the 1960s Watts riots in Los Angeles.

**27. Nigger:** Most likely derived

from “niger”, the Latin word for black.

The most politically sensitive of all racial slurs.

**28. NOG:** “Nigger out of gas”.

Used by white police officers to refer to niggers who run out of gas, then wait by the side of the road for the authorities to supply them with some, which by law they supposedly must do.

**29. Octoroon:** A person who is one-eighth nigger. Used in 14<sup>th</sup> century

Spain to classify a person's worth in society.

**30. Pickaninny:** Origins in the days of slavery. Three possible definitions:

a) Slave owners would “pick a nincompoop” from the lineup of slaves;

b) Slave children who couldn't pick cotton, “Ain't pickin' any”; or:

c) In some parts of the South,

breasts are referred to as “ninnys”. Therefore, pickaninny may refer to nigger women who were used as wet nurses for White children.

**31. Point-Six:** Reference to the Three-Fifths Compromise of 1787, in which the North and South agreed that blacks would count as three-fifths of a person for census purposes. ( $3/5=.6$ )

**32. Porch monkey:** Niggers sit on their porches to cool themselves off

in the summertime, since they're all too goddamn poor to afford air conditioning.

**33. Quadroon:** A person who's one-fourth nigger. Coined during the Civil War as a measurement of how "white" you needed to be in order to serve.

**34. Reggie:** Common name of famous nigger sports stars. (E.g., Reggie Jackson, Reggie Miller and Reggie

“Ain’t” White.)

**35. Shine:** Many niggers worked as shoeshines in the 1920s.

**36. Shitheel:** Reference to the color of a nigger’s feet. Southern origins.

**37. Smoke:** Reference to a nigger’s skin color.

**38. Spade:** The spades in a standard deck of playing cards are black, just like most niggers are black.

**39. Spoda:** More Ebonics.

Reference to how niggers speak. As in, “We ain’t spoda be here.” (“We aren’t supposed to be here.”)

**40. Spook:** Niggers blend in at night, much like ghosts. Watch for their smiles while trying to run them down.

**41. Tar baby:** Reference to a nigger’s skin color.

**42. Terence:** From the nigger



singer Terence Trent D'Arby, who famously claimed that his debut album marked the most important album since *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, then proceeded to bore the shit out of his audience with his self-important lyrics.

**43. Webe:** Pronounced *wee-bee*. Refers to the inability of niggers to conjugate the verb “be”, thus resulting in “we be” instead of “we are”.

**44. Wikki wikki:** A DJ turntable

scratching noise often heard in rap

music, which all niggers love.



## CHAPTER 92

The Race Master finally returned home to Massachusetts after the vicious and thoroughly enjoyable dogfight down in Virginia just as the clock neared three a.m. A hundred thousand dollars richer now, he knew that the extra money would be put to an *extremely* worthy cause.

Slipping beneath the heavy covers on his comfortable, king-sized

Tempurpedic bed, he soon fell into a deep sleep with Bane doing the same at the foot of the enormous bed six feet away.

That was when the dream came again.

\*\*\*

*In his dream, the Race Master is seventeen years old again.*

He and his buddies are raising

hell in the streets of East Berlin, just like they always do, drinking heavily and enjoying their newfound status as first-tier officers in The Fourth Reich, the neo-Nazi organization to which they'd all belonged since childhood.

The police had picked up his older brother at the end of the night, but they'd spring him out first thing in the morning, just as soon as their hangovers cleared. Surely the nigger that his

brother had beaten to within an inch of his life would survive the brutal attack.

The Race Master is extremely intoxicated as he walks back to his family's palatial home on the outskirts of the city. Fumbling with his keys, he drops them twice before finally managing to slide the correct one into the lock on the massive set of double doors out front.

## *Blood.*

The blood is everywhere. His father is hanging upside down from the crystal chandelier in the marble-tiled foyer. The old man's throat has been slit open like a kosher hog. A huge puddle of red shimmers on the expensive tile below.

In a daze, he makes his way slowly up the winding staircase to his



parents' bedroom. There he finds his mother.

She is completely naked and lying on her back in the bed. Only the shiny silver handle of the decorative sword from his father's SS uniform is still visible between her spread thighs.

On the north wall of the bedroom, a chilling message has been scrawled in the beautiful woman's precious Aryan blood:

*LEAVE GERMANY NOW.*



## CHAPTER 93

The plastic handles of six overloaded Wal-Mart shopping bags dug deep into the fingers on Dana's left hand and cut off her circulation as she stepped inside her apartment and headed immediately for Bradley's bedroom in the northeast corner of the modest six-room setup – the same space that had previously been known as her home office.

She dropped the bags onto the floor in Bradley's bedroom – infinitely thankful to finally offload the shoulder-snapping weight – and turned around just as Oreo sauntered into the room behind her. The cat rubbed his fat body against her legs and started up his generator-purr – letting her know he was happy his mama had finally made it back home while she looked around laid out the

scene in her mind.

Bradley's bed would go where her desk was now, right next to the single window in the room. That way the sun could warm his little face should he ever get cold. His nightstand would go in the area currently taken up by her printer setup. Close enough to his bed for easy access but still far enough away to ensure that he wouldn't bump his fragile skull against one of its sharp

corners should he ever fall out of bed. The beanbag and Bradley's own little desk would go where her bookshelves were now.

Dana resisted the urge to clean her hands of imaginary dust. There. Simple enough, right? This mother stuff was fun already.

Smiling, she went over to the closet and placed the tiny hangers she'd

purchased at Wal-Mart onto the metal rod stretched across the small space. The new clothes she'd bought for Bradley would need to be washed first before they moved into their new home in his closet. Wouldn't want any of the dyes to irritate his sensitive skin, after all.

Dana shut the closet door and widened her smile. She was feeling confident at the moment – maybe a little



*too* confident, she knew – but what the heck, right? Still, being a mother no doubt had a *slew* of problems that she hadn't even considered yet. Right now, though, she really didn't care. Because before she knew it, Bradley would be here with her, and after that her life would never be the same again. And thank God for that.

Because for the first time in her

life since she'd been four years old, Dana could actually envision a future for herself that wasn't filled with blood. Instead, for the first time in her life since she'd been four years old, she could finally see a future for herself that would be filled with *love*. And who in their right mind wouldn't be feeling just a tad bit confident about *that*?

She leaned down and stroked Oreo's soft fur, praying she were still in

her right mind. Because after everything she'd been through her in life – after all the murders, blood and *loss* – no doubt that particular subject still remained the source of highly spirited debate in some quarters.

Still, if all went well for her and Bradley, two broken people just might get the chance to make each other whole again. And any way you sliced the

bread, that wasn't a bad payoff, now was it?

Nope, wasn't a bad payoff, at all.



## CHAPTER 94

Angel snapped shut the disgusting book, unable to comprehend the hateful garbage she'd just read.

Her heart raced. Her skin felt clammy. Her stomach swam with nausea. A weird, indefinable shame blushed across her cheeks and throat.

Was it really *that* bad out there? That fucking *vile*? Angel had been subject to racism before in her life, of

course – like just about every other black person in the world – but never before with words as ugly as some of the ones she'd just read.

She spent the next twenty minutes staring blankly out at the waves on Lake Erie. A jogger hustled past, followed by a young mother pushing a stroller. The jogger was white; the young mother black. What was the difference between

them, she wondered?

They looked to be about the same age, shared approximately the same level of physical attractiveness. They probably would've been best friends if they'd met in a society even a *fraction* less fucked-up than theirs. But out here in the real world, where black and white just didn't mix, the two women didn't even glance at each other as they passed one another, didn't even acknowledge



each other's existence.

Angel opened up the book again, her insides still churning with a dull, aching frustration that was spreading out to the rest of her body from the pit of her stomach. Directly following the racist dictionary was a selection of one-liner jokes. She didn't find any of them in the least bit funny, of course.

How could *anyone*?

There were twenty-two of these  
– also a multiple of eighty-eight, making  
the authors two for two in their cleverly  
coded messages.

Heil fucking Hitler.

## **NIGGER ONE-LINERS**

How do you stop a nigger from  
drowning?

*Take your foot off the back of*

*his head.*

How do you get a nigger out of a  
tree?

*Cut the rope.*

What did the Alabama sheriff say  
about the nigger who'd been shot fifteen  
times?

*Worst case of suicide he'd ever  
seen.*

What's a nigger's idea of  
foreplay?

*“Don't scream or I'll cut your  
fuckin' throat, bitch.”*

How do you baby-sit a nigger?

*Wet his lips and stick him to the  
wall.*

How do you get him down?

*Teach him to say,*

*“Motherfucker”.*

What’s long and black and  
smells like shit?

*The welfare line.*

What are the worst three years of  
a nigger’s life?

*First grade.*

What's long and hard on a  
nigger?

*First grade.*

How do you know that Adam and  
Eve weren't black?

*You ever try taking a rib from a  
nigger?*

How many niggers does it take to  
pave a driveway?

*One, if you spread him real  
thin.*

What's the difference between a  
nigger and a bag of shit?

*The bag.*

What do you call a nigger in a  
three-piece suit?

*The defendant.*

Why is Stevie Wonder always  
smiling?

*He doesn't know he's a nigger.*

Why are chimps always  
frowning?



*They know that in a million years they're going to turn into niggers.*

Why are niggers like sperm?

*Only one in a million actually work.*

Why do police dogs lick their own asses?

*To get the taste of nigger out of  
their mouths.*

What can a pizza do that a nigger  
can't?

*Feed a family of four.*

How do you get five niggers to  
stop raping a white woman?

*Throw them a basketball.*

How do you stop a nigger from going out?

*Pour more gas on him.*

Did you hear about the bumper sticker that says, “Run, Obama, Run!”?

*You put it on the front of your car.*

What's the difference between a  
nigger and a snow tire?

*A snow tire doesn't sing when  
you put chains on it.*



## CHAPTER 95

The Race Master was jerked awake from his dream by the noises coming from outside his bedroom door, causing him to bolt upright in bed. At the foot of the bed, Bane lifted his own massive head and growled.

The sound of two voices, low and furtive, filtered into the room. The Race Master reached beneath his pillow and cocked the Walther.

*A mutiny?*

He strained his ears to catch their words. No use. They were speaking even *softer* now, a sure sign of murderous traitors, cowards creeping in the night.

The Race Master's thoughts flashed to Claus von Stauffenberg, the German military officer who'd led a failed assassination attempt against

Adolf Hitler on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1944. The bomb had gone off, but Hitler had survived, leading to the arrest of five thousand people and the deaths of two hundred more in retaliation, effectively smashing the rebellion to smithereens.

The Race Master's mind raced quickly through all the possible scenarios. Swiftly, the decision was made.

Motioning for Bane to remain



very still, he lifted the pistol and aimed it through the darkness at the closed bedroom door twelve feet away. Outside, feet shuffled against the hardwood floor as the murderous traitors finally made their move.

The thunderous sounds of gunshots filled the room a split-second later, causing a confused Bane to raise his enormous head and let out an eerie,

mournful howl that echoed throughout the entire house like the plaintiff wail of a thousand tortured demons.

And then there was only a silence so complete that it sounded positively *deafening*.



## CHAPTER 96

Dana slipped under her covers an hour later; Oreo curled up beside her like a furry, purring hot-water bottle. After floating off into unconsciousness, she dreamt about her childhood. After all, as badly as everything had turned out in the end, it hadn't been bad *all* the time. Not even close. There'd been plenty of *good* times, too.

Right up until the bitter, bloody

end.

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*In Dana's dream, she is four years old again. The date is July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1976 and dusk has begun to darken the summer sky in the West Park-section of Cleveland while James Whitestone barbecues hot dogs and hamburgers on a rusty outdoor grill.*

\*\*\*

Dana's father flipped a burger expertly with a quick flick of his right wrist before using the spatula to motion to the sandbox where Dana was playing quietly. He spelled out the word to his wife so that their only child wouldn't know what they were talking about.

Although a precocious and highly intelligent little girl, Dana had yet to completely master the tricky art of

spelling.

“Think we could let her hold a *S-P-A-R-K-L-E-R* when it gets all the way dark out?” he asked. “She’s been bugging me about it for weeks now.”

Sara Whitestone slid her sunglasses down the bridge of her slender nose and raised one perfectly groomed eyebrow in her husband’s direction. “Yeah, right, James. *You’re* the one who’s been bugging me about it

for weeks now and you know it.”

Her husband grinned at her. He looked absolutely ridiculous in his *Kiss the Chef* apron, which was par for the course for him. James Whitestone was easily the world’s biggest dork – but then again that was *precisely* what Sara loved him so much.

“C’mon, honey,” he whined.  
“Whaddya say? It’ll be a lot of fun.



Don't pretend it won't."

Sara let out a soft sigh, knowing she'd lost the argument already. Dana was the apple of her daddy's eye, and he never denied her that wasn't unsafe to her. Probably the result of his growing up as the youngest of five sons of a strict Presbyterian minister, a stern man who probably would've been happy if playtime had been classified as the Eighth Deadly Sin. "Fine, you big

goofball.” Sara finally relented. “But you’re the one taking her to the emergency room when her hair catches fire.”

Her husband’s lopsided grin exploded into a full-blown smile as he easily covered the fifteen feet between the grill and the lawn chair where she was sitting in three long, graceful strides. He leaned down and planted a

kiss on the top of her head. “That anything like when my mom told me to not come running to her when I broke my leg?”

Sara laughed and punched him on one tree-trunk thigh. “Damn straight it is. Moms always know what we’re talking about. It’s hard-wired into our psychology.”

James groaned theatrically as he straightened back up, as though the strain

of leaning down to kiss his wife had been enough to throw his back out of alignment.

Sara Whitestone was a remarkably small woman, a trait Dana would inherit as she herself grew into womanhood. Standing a shade under five feet tall, Sara tipped the scales at just below a hundred pounds, though those she went up against in court as a

litigating attorney for the law firm of Smith, Frey and Bogner never seemed to mention anything about her size. Her diminutive stature simply didn't register with them when she was in front of a jury, more often than not whipping their tails and looking for all the world exactly what she was: an intellectual giant with a brilliant legal mind. Whenever people would ask her if it were nice always being the smartest

person in the room, she'd always smile politely and reply, "Well, no. Actually, it's hell."

Sara pouted and punched her husband on the leg again, harder this time. "Hey, be nice to me, you oversized gorilla. Be nice to me or no dessert for you tonight."

James smiled and dropped down to his knees in front of her. His weight

dented the soft grass as he wrapped his strong arms around her slender body and leaned forward to press his face into her breasts, which were braless and straining hard against a tattered Abba concert T-shirt. “Just exactly what kind of dessert are we talking about here, Mrs. Whitestone?”

Sara laughed and pushed his face away. “Nip it, lover boy. Nip it right in the bud. There’s a time and place for

everything, and this is certainly neither the time nor the place for this little conversation. If you're a good boy, though, maybe we'll revisit this subject later on tonight when our little angel is in bed sleeping. Play your cards right and anything's possible, I suppose."

James favored her with a comically lecherous wink and rose to his feet, returning to the grill by way of the



sandbox and stopping just long enough to ask Dana what heinous and unforgivable crime her Holly Hobby doll had committed to warrant the extreme punishment of being buried up to her neck in sand. Sara smiled at them as she watched them talk before turning her attention back to the legal brief she'd brought home from work.

Fifteen minutes later James announced that the food was ready and

that Dana needed to go into the house to wash before they could eat.

“Why do I have to?” Dana asked, turning up her enormous blue eyes to meet his.

“Well, you have to because your hands are all dirty from playing in the sandbox, silly goose.”

Dana stood up with a dramatic sigh. Tiny granules of sand cascaded

down from her Barbie T-shirt as she wiped her hands across the butt of her previously clean white shorts and held them up for inspection. “There. That should do it. All clean now. See, Daddy?”

James threw back his head and roared with laughter. It was a deep, joyful sound. “Sorry, kiddo, not good enough.”

He paused and grinned down at

his daughter. “Now, I could be wrong about this, but I’m pretty sure it’s just about time for *this* plane to take off.”

And with that he ran over and swept her small body into his strong arms, swinging her out wildly to his side in a horizontal position five feet above the ground. Dana’s eyes lit up brighter than the runway lights at Hopkins airport as he held her suspended in the air.

They'd played this game many times before and it had always been one of her all-time favorites.

Winking at Sara again, James began humming loudly to imitate the rumbling of a plane's engines. The sound came from deep within his chest and Dana could feel the vibrations as they tickled her body. "The pilots are ready for take-off in the cockpit!" James boomed. "Are the passengers ready?"

“Ready!” Dana giggled. “All the passengers are ready for take-off, Daddy!”

Engines rumbling joyfully, the impromptu summertime flight taxied quickly down the runway of the backyard and into the house, where it banked sharply to the right in the foyer before finally touching down at the kitchen sink to complete its vital hand-

washing mission with a fresh bar of Ivory soap.

When father and daughter had returned and they were all seated around the wooden picnic table covered by a red-and-white plastic tablecloth in the middle of their backyard, the young family began eating and fell into an easy conversation centering on Dana's trio of imaginary friends: Lula, Pano and Mr. Sunday.

“And just what is Mr. Sunday up to on the fine Fourth of July?” Sara asked, dabbing with a paper napkin at a smear of mustard that had found its way onto her daughter’s left cheek.

“He’s working today. No fireworks for him. And, boy, is he ever sad about that.”

“That’s too bad.” James empathized. “Seems pretty darn unfair



that he has to work when everybody else is out there having a good time. What line of work is he in, anyway, sweetheart?”

“He’s a filthy prostitute,” Dana mumbled through a mouthful of half-chewed hot dog.

A shocked look flashed across Sara’s delicately pretty face. “*What* did you say?”

“I said Mr. Sunday is a filthy

prostitute and he's gotta work today," Dana repeated nonchalantly, her attention now squarely focused on the tiny army ant that was steadily marching its way across the table and toward her plate.

James arched an inquisitive eyebrow at his wife before turning back to his daughter. "Where on *earth* did you learn a word like that, honey?"

“From that movie you were watching last night, Daddy. You know, the one with all the filthy prostitutes in it. Did you forget about it already?”

Sara shot her husband a look that could have frozen water. “That’s it, James. That is *it*. No more late-night television for you until this little girl’s been in bed and sawing logs for at least an hour. You ever hear the saying about

little pitchers having big ears? Well, there you go. There's your proof right there, buster."

"But, Mom!" Dana whined.

"But, Mom!" James echoed in the same tone.

Sara held up a hand to silence them. "Don't *But, Mom* me, you two. That's final. I mean it, James. Only PBS until she's in bed and lost in dream world, you hear me? The only words

she needs to be learning are the ones they teach her on *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company*.”

Turning back to Dana with a frown, she added, “And I don’t *ever* want to hear that word out of your mouth again, little lady. It’s a bad word and if I ever hear it again you’re getting the soap. You didn’t like it very much the last time, remember?”

Dana rolled her eyes and took a long drink of her Kool-Aid before smacking her red-stained lips once. “Fine, Mommy. I heard you the first time, you know.”

It took everything Sara had to hold back the laughter she felt coming on. In some ways her daughter seemed so advanced for her young age that she often had to remind herself that Dana

wasn't even five years old yet. "I only said it once, Little Miss Smarty Pants."

"I know you did, and that's the same time I heard you say it."

"Hard to argue with that logic," James chimed in helpfully.

Sara shot him another look. "You stay out of this, James. Stay out of it or you can consider the dessert menu off-limits to you tonight, if you catch my drift."

James turned back to his daughter with a grin and held up his large hands, shrugging his broad shoulders in good-natured defeat. “Hard to argue with that logic, too. Sorry, kiddo, but Mom’s definitely got the trump card on this one. Daddy’s not the smartest guy in the whole world, but he sure as heck knows when he’s been beat. Only PBS on that television from



now on.”

By the time they'd finished eating, cleared the table and brought the leftovers inside to the kitchen, the sun had set fully and the moonless sky above had sufficiently darkened for the Whitestone family festivities to begin at last. Off in the distance, they could hear the booming of the fireworks downtown as they streaked deep into the night to the accompaniment of the Cleveland

Orchestra.

With an air of ceremony that made both Sara and Dana giggle, James switched off the back porch light and lit a sparkler from a box of ten with a cheap plastic lighter before handing it solemnly over to his daughter. Taking his wife's hand in his own, they watched Dana run gleefully through the yard waving it around in figure-eight patterns. Little

sparks of fire jumped off the stick in all directions, illuminating both a small circle of the night and the unadulterated joy on their only child's smiling face.

“I’m a fairy princess!” Dana squealed with delight. “I’m a fairy princess and this here’s my magic wand!”

Sara smiled and slipped an arm around her husband's waist, gently rubbing the small of his back. “You

know what?” she said softly. “This is as good as it gets. I really think it’s moments like this that we’ve worked so hard for all these years.”

A single tear formed silently in the corner of her right eye, wavered there for a moment as though unsure what to do next, then slowly spilled out onto her smooth cheek.

“You know what?” James

answered, pulling his wife closer and gently kissing away the tear. I think you're absolutely right.'

Sara Whitestone's slender shoulders started to shake as she began to cry harder then, once again asking herself how she could continue keeping such a huge secret from this man who so obviously loved her more than he loved life itself.

But James Whitestone just held

his wife tighter and kissed her again.

Even softer this time.



## CHAPTER 97

Angel snapped shut the vile book again, her ears burning with that awful, nameless shame that she just didn't understand.

Was she ashamed of being black? Or ashamed of being *human*?

An electric jolt of rage ripped through her muscles. There were people around – almost all of them white – but she didn't give a shit. Standing up, she



hurled the book over the cliff and out into the water as far as she possibly could, shocked and angry to realize that she had tears in her eyes.

*Motherfucking piece-of-shit racists!*

She took a deep breath through her nostrils and tried to calm down, but it didn't work. Was it any fucking wonder that black people found it hard

to trust even the white people who acted decent to them, though? Was *this* what they were all thinking? Calling them “nigger” behind their backs when they thought no one was listening?

The anger boiled inside Angel’s stomach, chest and throat before finally expressing itself as even *more* tears of rage and frustration.

But were they really tears of rage? Of frustration? Was Angel *really*

angry? Or was she really just fucking *hurt*? Hurt all the way down to the goddamn bone?

As God as her witness, she just didn't know.

Gathering up her things, she headed back toward her car. She just couldn't be alone right now.

She needed to be with *Malachai* right now.

She needed to be with one of her

own.



## CHAPTER 98

A high-pitched scream of agony broke the deafening silence in the house a split-second after the echoing gunshots faded away, causing Bane to launch into a fresh round of ear-splitting howling. The splintered bedroom door twelve feet away eased open with an eerie creak, a portion of the jamb completely blown away.

Outside in the hallway, Richard

Patton lay convulsing on the floor in a bright red pool of his own blood, shot once through the left side of his neck, blood gushing from his throat with every powerful beat of his badly laboring heart.

Patton's watery eyes glazed over as he looked up at the Race Master in utter *disbelief*. His voice emerged from his destroyed vocal cords as little more

than a whisper, his blue lips struggling to form the one-word question:

“*Why?*”

The Race Master towered over the man and lifted the Walther again. The sharp report of another gunshot filled the hallway, exploding Richard Patton’s skull all over the hardwood floor.

The Race Master then turned the gun on the young blonde man quivering



in fear three feet away as a dark circle of urine spread slowly across the front of the man's trousers.

“What's the meaning of this, Gregory?” the Race Master demanded, cocking the hammer on the Walther again.

Gregory Mellon's eyes flooded with the terror. His voice shook like a dead leaf on a tree. “Patton wanted to

make his report to you, sir. I told him that it was much too late to bother you, but he wouldn't listen to me."

The Race Master slapped Gregory Mellon so hard across the face with his free hand that it left finger-marks on the man's right cheek. "Settle down, Gregory!" he snarled. "Get a hold of yourself, man! What was Richard going to tell me?"

Mellon shook his head and cast

his ashamed gaze down to the floor. “I don’t know, sir,” he blubbered. “I swear to God I don’t. He wouldn’t tell me. He said it was between you and him. Please, sir...”

The Race Master held up a hand to silence him. “Shut the fuck up, Gregory. Just shut the fuck up. I need a moment to think.”

Several long moments passed

before the Race Master finally said, “Bring Richard’s cellphone to me, Gregory. Do it immediately.”

As Mellon scampered away, the Race Master put a hand to his aching temple in an effort to quell the headache that was threatening to split his skull wide open. He took in a deep breath through his nostrils and forced himself to calm down. He’d worked far too damned long and far too damned hard to

go off half-cocked like this at this late stage of the game. He'd was much too close to finally accomplishing his sacred mission, much too close to taking the final step that would spring his older brother from his cold prison cell in Germany. So above all else he needed to remain calm here, he knew that, to remain collected and see things all the way through to the bitter end. That was

key, his only chance for success.

The Race Master's thoughts flashed to Stefan, jailed these past thirty years in his cold German prison cell. Stefan had surely endured far more unspeakable horrors than these, so if he could keep things together, the Race Master could, too. *Had* to, really. There was no other choice.

Mellon appeared again a moment later and handed him Patton's cellphone

before scurrying away again like a diseased rat deserting a sinking ship.

Shaking his head in disgust, the Race Master flipped open the phone and tapped the dialed-calls key while Bane licked Richard Patton's bright red blood off the hardwood floor five feet away, a contented growl coming from deep within his thick throat.

The Race Master narrowed his

striking blue eyes as his gaze ran over the phone's history log. Then he looked back down at Patton's motionless body.

“What the fuck were you up to, Richard?”

Patton didn't answer him. Then again, dead men didn't usually tell too many tales, now did they?





# CHAPTER 99

*Dana's beautiful dream continued into the wee morning hours. Upon waking, she'd wonder why the heck her cheeks felt so darn sore. The answer would be simple enough to understand:*

*The answer would be because she'd been smiling.*

\*\*\*

*In Dana's dream, she is four*

*years old again.*

It is the Fourth of July and she and her parents have just come back into the house after having enjoyed a wonderfully exciting holiday picnic in their backyard.

Still all wound-up from being allowed to play Fairy Princess with a magic-wand sparkler, there is another hour of frantic play before the first signs

of sleep begin to creep into the corners of her enormous blue eyes.

She finally curls up in her father's lap as he sits on the living-room couch watching the evening news on their cabinet-style television. As usual, her mother is at the kitchen table reviewing a large pile of legal briefs that she has brought home from work, periodically jotting down notes on the yellow legal pad at her side.

As Dan Rather signs off for the night, Dana stretches her arms over her head and lets out a loud yawn.

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“Getting sleepy, honey bear?” James Whitestone asked, lightly scratching his daughter’s back over her Barbie T-shirt.

Dana nodded and yawned again.  
“Mmhmm. I think I’m ready for bed

now, Daddy.”

Hearing this declaration, Sara stood up, crossed into the living room and plucked Dana from her father’s lap.

“Well then, let’s go brush your teeth and get you ready for bed, sleepyhead. Then I’ll tuck you in and read you a bedtime story. How does that sound?”

“Sounds good, ’cept why do I gotta brush my teeth again? I brushed them this morning, remember? They’re

still pretty clean.”

Sara laughed and rapidly kissed the soft hollow of her daughter’s neck.

“You have to brush them again, silly, so that the Cavity Creeps won’t invade Toothopolis while you’re sleeping tonight.”

Dana squirmed in her mother’s arms. “OK, OK, already! Just stop that already – you’re tickling me, Mommy!”

When they'd finished up in the bathroom, they got Dana dressed in her pajamas and into bed. Pulling back the Big Bird covers, Sara tucked them in gently around her daughter's small body. "What shall we read tonight, sweetheart?" she asked.

Dana screwed up her face in concentration. Important decision here. "Hmm. How about we just do the story



of Dana and the Three Friends again instead of reading from a book?”

Sara smiled. It was their own personal version of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, and over time and with Dana’s considered input, the story changed slightly with each telling.

Switching off the overhead light left only the soft glow of Dana’s bedside lamp. Clearing her throat dramatically, Sara began this night’s version of the

tale.

“Once upon a time there lived a delightful group of three friends, and their names were Mrs. Lula, Mr. Sunday and their precious baby – the wonderfully cute and adorable little Pano. They all lived together in a cozy little cottage in the forest and they enjoyed their peaceful lives there very much.”

“Nope,” Dana corrected.

“That’s not right. They live in a gingerbread house in the forest now, Mommy. They moved last week.”

Sara laughed and tickled her daughter’s belly. “Okay, smarty-pants, they moved last week. I think I can live with that. Anyway, the Three Friends all lived together in a cozy gingerbread house in the forest and they enjoyed their

peaceful lives there very much.”

The story progressed from there with the Three Friends deciding to take a walk in the forest in order to give their chocolate-cake breakfasts time to cool down. When they’d finally made it back home, Dana suggested they get James to do the voices.

“He does them best,” she explained.

When James had been summoned

and had taken a seat next to his wife on the bed, Sara continued the story, leading him into his lines.

“The Three Friends had just returned home,” she prompted. “Pano could hardly wait to eat!”

“What’s this?” James asked in his Mr. Sunday voice. “Somebody has been nibbling on my cake!” Switching to his feminine Mrs. Lula voice, he said,

“And somebody had been nibbling on my cake, too!” Finally, Pano’s high-pitched and deeply wounded voice.

“And somebody’s been nibbling on my cake too, and they’ve eaten it all up!”

“Uh-oh,” Dana cut in.

“Somebody’s in a shitload of trouble.”

Sara slumped her shoulders in defeat, much too tired to correct her daughter’s language again. Glancing over at her husband, she gave him a

long, meaningful look before continuing.

“Looking around the room, Mr. Sunday noticed the chairs,” she said.

“Somebody has been sitting in my chair,” James growled as Mr. Sunday. “And somebody has been sitting in my chair, as well!” he offered in his Mrs Lula voice.

“But it was Pano who was the most upset, the tears coming from his

eyes.”

“Somebody has been sitting in my chair, too, and they broke it all to pieces!” James thundered. “This is total bullshit!”

“*James Allen Whitestone!*” Sara cried out. “It’s no wonders she talks like a trucker!”

James tried to choke out an apology but couldn’t do it through the waves of laughter racking his body.



After several long moments, he finally took a deep breath and wiped at his misty eyes. “Let me try that again,” he said. “Somebody has been sitting in my chair and they broke it all to pieces.”

Sara paused and looked at him expectantly. She knew he wouldn't be able to resist.

“They broke my favorite chair, the inconsiderate little bastards,” James

muttered underneath his breath.

Dana giggled happily, but Sara just ignored him. “Don’t listen to him, Dana. Don’t listen to a single thing he says. I don’t know why they ever let him out of the Bad Boys’ Home in the first place. I’m calling them first thing in the morning so they can come pick him up.”

She stared at her husband for several measured beats before turning her attention back to her daughter.

“Now, where was I before we were so rudely interrupted?”

“The Three Friends had just found out their chairs were all busted up,” Dana answered helpfully.

“Oh, yes. That’s right. Thank you, honey. The Three Friends did not know what they would find next, so they dashed upstairs lickety-split. Mr. Sunday was the first to look into the

bedroom.”

Sara paused and looked over at her husband, who obediently took his place back in the story.

“Somebody has been sleeping in my bed!” James bellowed as Mr. Sunday. Switching to his Mrs Lula voice, he added, “And somebody has been sleeping in my bed, too!”

“Pano rubbed his eyes in disbelief.”

“And somebody has been sleeping in my bed, and there she is now!” James cried out.

Dana’s big blue eyes went saucer-wide as she peeked out from beneath the covers.

“Suddenly,” Sara said, her voice taking on a sense of urgency now, “Dana opened her eyes and shrieked at the sight of the Three Friends glaring down at

her. But the friends never had a chance to do anything to her, for Dana jumped out of bed, ran down the stairs and was out of the house in the blink of an eye.

“Needless to say, the Three Friends never saw Dana anywhere near their cozy little gingerbread house in the forest ever again. And as for little Dana, well, let’s just say that she became a lot more careful in her future adventures.

“The End,” Sara pronounced.

“Mommy?” Dana asked quietly, rubbing slowly at her eyes with a tiny balled-up fist.

“Yes, honey?”

“Maybe tomorrow the Three Friends can call Dana up on the phone and ask her to come over to watch TV with them. That way they could be the Four Friends from now on.”

She paused and looked up at her

mother. The innocence in her big blue eyes nearly broke Sara Whitestone's heart. "Don't worry, Mommy. We'll only watch PBS, I promise."

Sara smiled. "I think that would be just fine, but it's time for bed now, my little princess."

She leaned forward and kissed her daughter softly on the forehead. "Sweet dreams, my darling little baby girl. I love you with all my heart."



Somehow, Dana managed to mumble her reply just a moment before promptly falling asleep.

“I love you too, Mommy.”



# CHAPTER 100

At exactly eight p.m. that night, Angel met Malachai for dinner at John Q.'s Steakhouse downtown.

John Q.'s was the most expensive restaurant in all of Cleveland. Real linen napkins. Substantial silverware. Muted lighting. A tuxedoed piano player softly producing beautiful music over in one corner.

A *black* piano player, Angel couldn't help but notice. Just another performing monkey for all the white people to stare at? Just another example of how awesome "they" were all supposed to be at entertaining?

Angel tried to keep the conversation neutral over their salads, but by the time their steaks had arrived she couldn't hold it back any longer,

finally breaking down and telling Malachai all about the disgusting book she'd read just a few hours earlier.

Malachai put down his fork and looked around the place. He and Angel were the only black people in the restaurant other than the piano player, and don't think they didn't know it. Knew it with every pair of eyes that had burned holes through the backs of their skulls just as soon as they'd walked in

through the front doors.

“You know they all fucking hate us, right, Angel?” Malachai asked in a low voice. “There’s no use in pretending about it anymore. They think we’re all gangsters and drug dealers and thugs, and pieces of shit like Razor Diggs only perpetuate that kind of thinking, that kind of belief. Whenever they look at us, they see him, you know.

It's true. It's just how it is, and it's never going to change. Not in a million fucking years."

He wiped irritably at his mouth with a heavy linen napkin and went on. "You think I don't see it every single day at work? I make eighty-five grand a year at the law firm, but do you think I'll ever even *sniff* partner? Highly fucking unlikely. I'm just a little nigger errand boy to them, just a token black face to

smile out from the front of their goddamn Christmas cards.”

Malachai lowered his gaze and fidgeted with the tablecloth. Angel could see that he felt hurt by what he was saying, but also that he believed every single word of it.

She reached out a hand and placed it lightly on top of his. “It can’t be that bad, can it, Malachai?”



He raised his stare to meet hers.

“It’s worse, Angel. A *lot* worse.”

“And it’s never going to change?”

“Not in a million fucking years.”

Angel took away her hand before she and Malachai finished their steaks in silence. What else was there left to say? Should they just remind each other again that they weren’t shit in the eyes of

the white world? That they weren't  
even *human*?

No fucking thank you.



# CHAPTER 101

The Race Master leaned back in his comfortable leather chair inside his exceedingly fine den the following morning while Bach's *Adagio in G Minor* played softly on the antique record player over in the corner and he absentmindedly polished the bones from Richard Patton's right arm for use as kindling in the barbecue pit. Tonight he'd move their base of operations out to

the Brotherhood's headquarters in Creek Run, Mississippi. It was a little sooner than he'd anticipated, of course, but he needed to stay fluid here and adapt his movements as the situation dictated.

Richard Patton's cellphone had contained several untraceable calls that worried him. It seemed highly unlikely that any of them would have been made to the authorities, but the Race Master

simply couldn't afford to take that chance at this late stage of the game. He had safeguards in place to ensure the swift deaths of any of his operatives who might deviate from the plan, naturally, but he hadn't gotten this far in life by *not* playing things safe, and he didn't see the logic in changing that strategy now. Certainly not when he found himself this close to finally accomplishing his sacred mission.

Gregory Mellon, who by default had now become his Number Two, stood in the center of the room, looking panicked.

The Race Master laughed and reached out a comforting hand, clasping it onto the younger man's shoulder. "No need to be afraid, Gregory. You're among the lucky few who will be at my side for the culmination of our sacred

mission. The realization of our *dream*.

When that time comes, be assured that you will hold a special place within our ranks.”

Mellon swallowed hard. “Is it time, sir?”

An electric jolt of adrenaline ripped through the Race Master’s veins.

“Yes, Gregory,” he said. “The time is finally right. You may make the final arrangements now. Bring the senator’s



daughter to me in Mississippi. Make sure she is not harmed in any way. I have important plans for her, and we need to keep her in good health – at least, for the time being. She’s worth nothing to us as a bargaining chip otherwise.”

Gregory Mellon snapped off a stiff Nazi salute and pivoted sharply on his heel before exiting the room to go do

his master's bidding.

“Consider it done, sir.”



## CHAPTER 102

The ringing of Dana's cellphone awoke her early the next morning.

Lying on her stomach, she squinted her eyes and focused her blurry vision before reaching over to her bedside table, flipping open the phone and placing it to her ear. "Hello?" she said, groggily.

Bruce Blankenship's own voice came across the line clear and strong.

He sounded like he'd been awake for *hours* already. "Dana," he said. "I hope I'm not calling too early. Did I wake you?"

Dana flipped herself over and pushed herself up straighter in bed. Oreo shot her an irritated glance over his right shoulder; annoyed that she'd disturbed his warm nest of blankets at her side. "No," Dana lied. "I was

already up. What's going on?"

Blankenship chortled. "Liar.

Anyway, listen to this. The cat finally let go of Janice Wiley's tongue. Same setup as the other murders, only the execution – so to speak – wasn't quite as successful this time. Wiley's an African-American woman who's pregnant by a white guy. Her assailant attacked her in a deserted classroom at the state university and told Wiley that

she was fucking up the country with ‘that mutant’ inside her stomach. Wiley disagreed with him – vehemently, I’d say – by jamming a steel letter-opener into his thorax. Pretty effective way of shutting someone up, right? Anyway, perp’s name was Walter Gibbons. Thirty-four-year-old ex-Marine who was discharged for his, quote, extremist political views. Gibbons then hooked

up with one of those paramilitary groups where a bunch of guys dress up in camouflage clothing and run around the woods on the weekends in order to get ready for the big race war they're always saying is coming. Gibbons was married three times, then subsequently divorced three times. No big shocker there, though, huh? No kids."

Dana stretched her neck.

"What's the Brotherhood connection?"



she asked.

Blankenship cleared his throat.

“None that I could find, unfortunately.

Unlike Lee Jarvis, nothing in Gibbons’s apartment connected him in any way, shape or form to any white-power hate-groups, and nobody in his neighborhood seemed to know him very well.

Anyway, we’ve got a twenty-four-hour guard covering Janice Wiley at the

hospital now, and the guard will accompany her when she goes home, too. Maybe in a day or two, according to the docs. Still, something tells me that these Brotherhood assholes aren't stupid enough to come back to the scene of their failed crime. If they were, we probably would've caught them by now."

Dana frowned. "So, where does that leave us then?"

"Exactly where we started."

Dana shook her head. “I was afraid you might say that. Absolutely nowhere.”

Blankenship laughed without humor. “Yup. ‘Fraid so.”

Dana glanced over at the small digital alarm clock sitting on her bedside table. Six fifty-three a.m. Figuring in the two-hour time-zone difference in New Mexico – Mountain Standard as

opposed to the Eastern Standard Time used in Cleveland – she puzzled out the hour in New Mexico. “Jesus Christ, Blankenship,” she said. “Did you even *sleep* last night?”

“Not a fucking wink.”

“Well, why don’t you try to go get some now? You probably need it.”

“Can’t.”

“Why’s that?”

“Have you talked to Krugman

yet?”

Dana extracted her legs from the tangle of covers on the bed and put down her feet on the floor. “Nope, not yet. Why?”

“Because *I* just did. Long and short of it: I’m coming home today, per his orders. Krugman says there’s no use in pumping a dry well. Anyway, can you pick me up at Hopkins at ten a.m.?”

“Of course. My time or yours?”

“Yours. So, I’ll see you at ten a.m.?”

“Yep. I’ll be there with bells on.”

“Better than that white-power outfit you were wearing the other day.”

“What wouldn’t be? Anyway, I’ll see you at ten.”

“Thanks, partner.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Switching off with Blankenship a moment later, Dana immediately punched in the number for Bill Krugman down in DC. After fifteen rings, the Director’s cellphone switched over to voicemail. Dana pursed her lips and cut the connection without leaving a message before trying his office line next. No answer there, either. Weird,

considering the fact that Krugman had always started his workday at exactly five a.m. on the dot.

Dana sighed and headed toward the bathroom to go take a shower. Hell, *everything* in her life was just plain weird, though, wasn't it? Damn right, it was.

Always had been ever since she'd been four years old.





## CHAPTER 103

By the time Angel and Malachai finally made it back to his condo in Avon, it was nearly midnight.

They didn't say a word to one another as they walked through the front door and he placed his car keys on the dining room table. They'd already said enough to each other back at the restaurant, hadn't they? Damn right, they had. Besides, what was *left* for them to

say? Should they just remind each other again that they weren't shit to the white world but soulless mud people?

Once again, no fucking thank you.

Not having been there for a while, Angel paused and looked around the place. Everything still looked pretty much the same as she'd remembered from her last visit, the living room designed in the same bachelor *chic*: a

couple mismatched pieces of furniture; a secondhand coffee table; a brand-new flat-panel TV hanging on the northeast wall near a bubbling tank filled with a variety of colorful and exotic-looking fish; an old leather recliner in the corner, Malachai's favorite.

Malachai came up behind her and wrapped his strong arms around her waist. "Everything you remembered?" he asked in a throaty voice.

Angel turned around to face him, immediately knowing what was thinking. Mostly, she guessed, because she was thinking the exact same thing.

“And then some.”

He took her face in his hands and kissed her softly on the mouth. “I never thought I’d see you again, Angel,” he said. “I’m so happy, so goddamn *thankful* that you’re here. I missed you

so much.”

Angel just let things happen from there. His bedroom was down the hall just off the living room, his king-sized bed neatly made up with plenty of comfortable pillows and a down comforter. His sheets smelled of him as she sank deep into the bed. It was a smell she'd always adored. A smell s h e ' d *missed*. Woodsy, manly, comforting.

Just what she needed right now.

She sank deeper into the bed and felt a flutter of anticipation in her stomach as Malachai climbed on top of her, just like she'd felt their first time together. Hell, maybe this *was* their first time together. Could be, if she really wanted to look at it that way.

She did.

Malachai's warm breath tickled

her ear. “I missed you so much, Angel,” he repeated, running a hand over her heaving breasts. “So goddamn much.”

Angel’s nipples hardened into diamond points beneath his familiar touch. She ached for him as he kissed her passionately on her neck, and not just in her nipples, either. Farther south, too.

“You already mentioned that,” she breathed.



Any other words they might've spoken were lost as Malachai's mouth again covered hers.

Angel reached down and fumbled with his belt buckle while he undid the buttons on her blouse. His need was palpable and growing more apparent with each passing second, more apparent than she'd ever remembered before.

Their movements became faster then, more choreographed, both of them longing to revisit the places they hadn't visited for so long. The places they'd missed when they'd been away from each other.

When they were both naked, Malachai entered her gently, brushing the hair lovingly out of her face with the back of his left hand as their heavy

breaths quickened and became one.

They moved together like that for what seemed an eternity then, but also in a place where the concept of time was simply an abstract device, an ethereal invention of the earthly world whose surly bonds they'd just slipped.

When it was over, Malachai brushed the back of his hand against her cheek and looked down into her eyes. His own brown eyes were so warm, so

full of life, so full of *love* that Angel could hardly stand to look up into them.

“Everything you remembered?”  
he asked.

She nodded and felt a single tear slip down her right cheek. “And then some.”



## CHAPTER 104

When Gregory Mellon had finally exited the room with his silly little Nazi salute, the Race Master leashed Bane to a heavy steel chain and brought the dog out to the clearing in the woods along the edge of his sprawling Massachusetts property. They had just one more thing they needed to accomplish before they left for Mississippi tonight.

Ten minutes later, Bane was mounting the purebred pit bull bitch, his huge tongue lolling out of the corner of his mouth as he pumped himself in and out with wild abandon. The bitch's owner, a breeder from a nearby town, stood by the Race Master's side as they watched their dogs go at it.

“He's certainly an animal in the sack,” the blonde woman said, laughing

obnoxiously at her own incredibly stupid joke. “Does he get that from his master or what?”

The Race Master turned to face the woman and looked her over from head to toe. About five-four. Blue eyes. Cut-off jean-shorts featuring ragged fringes hanging over plump thighs. Maybe forty years old. Perhaps a bit on the heavy side for his liking, but the extra weight on her frame filled out



her bra quite nicely, straining her ample bosom against her tight white t-shirt.

“Why don’t you be the judge of that?” he said, more of an order than a request.

The blonde woman smiled at him. “It’ll cost you extra. Another thousand bucks on top of the breeding fee. Deal?”

Ever the businessman, The Race

Master considered the proposition for a moment. “And the puppy is guaranteed as part of the transaction?” he asked. “The pick of the litter?”

Still smiling, the blonde woman took him by the hand and led him behind a stand of trees twenty feet away. Her throaty voice tickled the tiny hairs in his left ear as she pulled him down to the forest floor.

“That’s not the only thing that’s

guaranteed,” she breathed. “Now just lie back and relax.”



## CHAPTER 105

Dana's cellphone sounded from out in her bedroom just as she emerged from her shower in thick, billowing clouds of steam.

Wrapping a soft white cotton towel around her dripping body, she hurried into the bedroom, flipped open the phone and placed it to her ear with her hair still soaking wet. "Hello?"

"Dana, it's Bill Krugman."

Dana took the phone away from her face and wiped some of the moisture from her left cheek before placing the phone quickly back to ear. “Yes, sir. How are you? I’ve been waiting to hear from you. I was starting to get a little bit worried. Is everything OK?”

Krugman paused. Finally, he sighed and said, “Professionally, yes. Personally, no. Marie’s cancer has

come back. I'm calling you from Georgetown University Hospital right now."

Dana cringed. "Oh my God, sir," she breathed. "That's absolutely *devastating*."

Krugman sighed again, even more deeply this time. "Yeah, it is, but Marie's strong. The strongest woman I've ever known in my life. She's going to beat this shit again, I just know it."

Dana nodded. “Of course she will, sir. There’s not a doubt in my mind about that.”

Krugman cleared his throat. “Anyway, I’ve had some time to think here in the hospital, and I’ve decided that the best course of action would be for you and Blankenship to hook up with the private investigator again.”

He hesitated momentarily,



probably while he looked down at some notes. “This Angel Monroe woman. Seems to me that she might be the key to pulling back the curtain on the Brotherhood. For the life of me, I just can’t figure out why they didn’t kill her when they had the chance – at the same time they killed her grandmother.”

Dana frowned. She’d wondered the exact same thing. “I think that’s a great idea, sir,” she said. “I’ll call

Angel Monroe just as soon as I get off the phone with you here, see if I can't set up a meeting for us after I pick up Blankenship at the airport."

A disembodied voice sounded in the background of the call. *Code 723, fifth floor. Code 723, fifth floor. All available surgeons, please report immediately to the fifth floor.*

"Sounds good to me, Agent

Whitestone,” Krugman said when the voice in the background cut off in an abrupt rumble of static. “Just keep me posted on all the details as they become available, OK?”

“Yes, sir. I certainly will.”

Switching off with Krugman, Dana punched in the number for the Cleveland-based private investigator, Angel Monroe. No answer after fifteen rings. No voicemail on which to leave a

message, either.

Dana hung up the phone and sighed. Out loud, she said, “Where *are* you, Angel?”



## CHAPTER 106

Angel left Malachai's condo early the next morning, being very careful to not wake him. She wasn't sure *how* to feel about what had happened between them, but she also knew she'd needed it. They both had.

The day had broken sunny and bright across the cloudless blue sky, the birds singing in the warm air all around her as Angel made her way through the

parking lot with her panties wadded up in a ball in the middle of her purse. Thankfully, nobody was around to see her, so she guessed what she was doing at the moment couldn't *technically* be considered "The Walk of Shame". Thank God for small favors.

Angel sighed. She knew that she should probably be glowing in the aftermath of the lovemaking experience

– wasn't that how it was supposed to be when a girl was in love? Butterflies and fairy dust and all that good stuff? But the anger she'd experienced the previous day had bubbled up inside her chest again, scalding her throat like a bad case of acid reflux. She could barely keep it down as she drove back to her and Granny Bernice's place on the west side of Cleveland.

She shuddered, knowing that she



was starting to hate white people. *All* of them. And that scared her.

*A lot.*

She left the car running in the driveway when she reached their house and ran inside before jumping into a pair of white jogging shorts and a faded grey Cleveland Browns T-shirt, slapping her New Balances onto her feet before heading out the door again. If nothing

else, she needed to run this ugly hatefulness out of herself before she fucking *exploded*.

She hit the cement jogging path at Edgewater Park hard twenty minutes later, not even bothering to look out at the lake. Hungry seagulls screamed angrily in the sky above at the top of their healthy lungs, *demanding* something to eat. The wind whipped hard through her long black hair as she

raced along with the volume on her iPod turned up full-blast. The frenetic sounds of Menace Clan thumped wildly in her ears:

*Niggas in the church say kill whitey all night long! The white man is the devil... the Crips and Bloods are soldiers I'm recruiting with no dispute; drive-by shooting on this white genetic mutant... let's go and kill some*

*rednecks!*

*Menace Clan ain't afraid... I  
got the .380; the homies think I'm crazy  
because I shot a white baby; I said; I  
said; I said: Kill whitey all night long!*

*A nigga dumping on your white  
ass; fuck this rap shit, nigga, I'm  
gonna blast... I beat a white boy to the  
motherfucking ground!*

Running as hard as she could  
now – much too hard for her furiously

pumping legs to keep up with her upper body – Angel suddenly tripped and skidded across the cement, skinning her knees and the palms of her hands in the process, her flesh peeling back in long strips. Bright red blood seeped from her wounds, and Angel prayed to God that it was taking some of the hatefulness out of her right along with it.

Still, she knew that it probably

wasn't.

Hot tears of rage and shame spilled from her eyes. Sobbing, she curled up into a tight little ball right there in the middle of the jogging path, not even caring that a small group of white people had stopped to stare at her.

None of them asked her if she was OK.

Not a single, goddamn one.



# CHAPTER 107

Eight hundred miles south of Cleveland, Ohio, Jasmine Pepperton strolled along the lush green campus of George Washington University in the nation's capital on the last day of summer classes, pretty much just enjoying the pure *summerness* of it all. Birds circled high overhead in the clear blue sky above, their elegant wings spread out in glorious displays of feather



while they rode the gentle breeze fifty feet up without even the *slightest* effort. Jasmine's sleek black hair was tied back into a ponytail, and the warm sun smiled down on her bare shoulders as her boyfriend, John Mullins, ran to catch up with her.

“That psych test was a fucking killer,” John sputtered, breathing hard as he finally caught up to her. “I’d be

surprised if I got more than three questions right. The five stages of grief: *DABDA* – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. I think I’ve reached the fifth stage, Jasmine. I accept the fact that I failed that goddamn test.”

Jasmine looked over at her boyfriend and smiled. Five-foot-seven and no more than a hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet. Messy blonde hair that looked like it hadn’t been washed in

a week. A rumpled blue dress shirt that appeared as though it had been rolled hard and put away wet – which, considering *his* laundry skills, probably *had* been.

Coupled with her own six-foot frame, Jasmine and John made quite the odd couple, to say the least. She was black; he was white. She'd come from money; he'd grown up dirt poor on a

cattle farm in Indiana. But John made her laugh, and that was all that mattered to her.

Coming from a family as deeply entrenched in Washington politics as Jasmine's had always made dating somewhat of a tricky proposition. She never *could* tell if her suitors were making a play for her because of her sparkling personality, or simply because they were looking to gain a foothold in

the politics game. With John Mullins, though, she'd never needed to worry about that.

She playfully hip-checked him into a stand of landscaped bushes along the walkway two feet away. "C'mon, honey," she said. "You probably aced the damn thing. Hell, we stayed up all night studying for it."

John smiled up at her

mischievously. “Oh, is that what you call what we were doing? Studying? Hell, if that’s the case, sign me up for some more of *that*.”

He paused and knitted his eyebrows together thoughtfully, an overdone look of concentration coloring in his face. “Maybe I’d have done better if they had let me take off my pants during the test.”

Jasmine laughed and rolled her

eyes. “That’s quite enough out of you, lover boy. Keep it up and you’re cut off from here on out.”

An insincere look of pain etched John’s interesting face. He wasn’t classically handsome, but he wasn’t all that hard to look at, either. His clear blue eyes had been the first thing she’d noticed about him in Freshman Biology three years earlier.

“You’d cut off your *baby daddy?*” John asked incredulously. “A little too late to be pulling that crap now, Jazzy.”

Jasmine giggled and put a finger to her lips to hush him. “Hey, keep your voice down, dummy. I didn’t even tell my parents yet.”

“Well, when are you going to do it?”



Jasmine sighed. With her mother up for reelection again in the fall, an illegitimate grandchild probably wasn't at the top of her list of campaign bragging points. "Not sure yet," she said. "Maybe tonight."

John stopped suddenly and grabbed her by the hand. The look of pure *love* in his eyes was almost more than Jasmine could bear.

“Marry me, Jasmine,” he said.

Jasmine’s breath caught in her throat. “*What?*”

Before she knew what was happening, he was down on one knee in the middle of the walkway and opening up a small, hinged box. A tiny diamond sparkled inside, winking up at her brilliantly in the bright sunlight overhead.

“Marry me, Jasmine,” John repeated, more urgently this time. “I love you with all my heart and soul and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. With you *and* our baby. I want us to be a real family.”

Hot tears rolled down Jasmine’s cheeks. Her boyfriend looked ridiculous, just like he *always* did, but that was *precisely* what she’d always

loved so much about him. She tried to speak, but no words would come out. The tightness in her throat made even simple speech impossible.

Swallowing away the huge lump of emotion lodged in her throat, she tried again. “Yes,” she whispered.

“What was that?” John said loudly, cupping a hand to his ear. “I couldn’t hear you all the way down here. Could you please repeat that?”

Laughing and crying at the same time, Jasmine pulled him up to his feet and threw her arms around his shoulders. “I said *yes*, John Mullins, you big dummy. I’ll marry you.”

He smiled and looked up into her glistening eyes. “Does this mean that you love me, too?”

Jasmine nodded. “Yes, you big goofball. I love you with all my heart

and soul.”

John Mullins smiled again, showing off the tiny dimples in each of his cheeks. “Good. That’s exactly what I needed to hear. Now let’s get the hell out of here and go make a life together, sweetheart.”

They held hands all the way out to the crowded parking lot, swinging their arms back and forth in unison as visions of bottles, rattles and cute little

plastic baby booties danced gleefully in their heads. As they walked, Jasmine wished that she could somehow bottle this moment and save it for all eternity. This was it. This right here was the happiest moment of her entire life. At least until the baby came. And they were going to be a *family*. A *real* family. Her, John and the tiny little person growing inside of her that was

probably no bigger than a pea yet. It was everything she ever could have asked for.

And quite a bit more, too.





## CHAPTER 108

Dana pulled up to the arrivals lane at Hopkins airport at precisely ten a.m. Blankenship was already waiting for her on the curb.

“Hey there, good-lookin’,” he said, pulling open the back door to the Protégé and tossing his carry-on bag inside before slamming shut the door again and sliding into the passenger seat up front. “Miss me?”

Dana smiled and checked her side-view mirror before pulling away from the curb, easing her vehicle into the slow-moving traffic. “You know it, handsome. Get any sleep on the plane?”

Blankenship shook his head. From the corner of her eye, Dana could see that his dark brown eyes looked puffy and bloodshot. “Nope, still not a wink,” he said. “And, like it or not, I

need to crash. *Hard*. I'll probably be out like a light just as soon as my pretty little head hits the pillow. Anyway, what's new in your world, girlfriend? Talk to Bill Krugman yet?"

Dana nodded as she took the entrance ramp for I-90 West and headed toward Blankenship's hotel downtown. Pressing down her foot against the accelerator, she merged with the traffic on the highway and brought her partner

up to speed on Krugman's directive that they should reconnect with the Cleveland-based private investigator, Angel Monroe. "But since you'll be off in La-La Land very shortly," Dana finished up, "I guess I'll make the initial contact myself."

Blankenship frowned and cracked a window to let some fresh air into the car. "Krugman won't like that,

Dana. You should probably wait until I'm available to act as your backup. These are some pretty dangerous assholes we're dealing with here."

Dana shrugged. "True, but Angel Monroe isn't one of them. Besides, like you told me back at Lee Jarvis's apartment in Yonkers: I won't tell if you don't. Anyway, I don't plan on getting into any especially dangerous situations today. Just gonna have lunch with the

lady and talk things over, see what else she might know. And with you not around to gum up the works, I'll probably be able to strike up more of a womanly bond with her, anyway. It's the right thing to do, Bruce, and you know it. I can't just sit on my hands and wait for these pricks to murder another pregnant woman."

Blankenship nodded. "Fine, but

call me if you need anything. I'll sleep with my cellphone next to my head."

"I'm not going to need you for anything."

"You sure about that?"

"Positive."

"Just call me, Dana."

"Dana."

"Hilarious, Seinfeld. Just call me."

"Is that an order?"



“Do you *take* orders?”

Dana smiled. “Nope.”

Blankenship rolled his eyes. “I didn’t think so.”



## CHAPTER 109

Two full minutes passed before Angel finally scraped herself off the pavement and returned home from Edgewater Park.

She soaked in the bathtub for a solid hour, punishing herself, letting the soap burn deep into her wounds and relishing the exquisite pain.

She hated herself for doing it, but she dressed in an African-style dress

before heading out the door to pick up a newspaper at the 7-Eleven down the street. Dana Whitestone had promised revelations in today's edition, and Angel was itching to find out what they were.

As she walked to the store, Angel asked herself why she'd worn the dress. Was it because her people were from Africa?

No, it wasn't. Her people were

from Cleveland.

Was it because she was trying to identify with people who shared the same skin color as her?

Maybe, but there were still *plenty* of black people out there that she hated, too, with Razor Diggs at the very top of that list.

Angel shook her head, trying to reason herself out of her ignorance, out of her utter *stupidity*. No good. She just

wasn't listening to herself. She knew that her thought patterns were illogical – *dangerous*, even – but she just couldn't seem to stop herself. A rage that had lain dormant her entire life had reared up its ugly head with a ferocity that scared the living shit out of her. She *knew* that hating an entire group of people based on the color of their skin made absolutely no sense whatsoever,

knew that only a fucking idiot could ever think it did. Knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was no different from people hating *her* based on the color of her own skin.

So why the hell had Angel worn the goddamn dress?

She just didn't know.

But she did know that it felt good.





# CHAPTER 110

Five minutes after John Mullins had puttered off in his dilapidated Chrysler (but not before he'd stolen several more hugs and kisses and the quick cop of a feel under her shirt that she'd quickly batted away with a good-natured laugh), Jasmine tossed her schoolbooks onto the nylon canvas covering her mother's campaign signs in the backseat and slid behind the wheel

of her silver BMW.

Angling the luxury car out of the parking lot, she waved goodbye to the security guard as she passed through the wrought-iron gates of the venerable university. Ten minutes later, she was on the freeway and headed for home to face what she *hoped* wouldn't be the second coming of the Spanish Inquisition.

Jasmine sighed. Maybe her mother would look more kindly upon her unexpected pregnancy now that she and John would be getting married. One could always hope, right? And wasn't that the old lady's campaign slogan, anyway?

*Keep hope alive!*

Jasmine smiled and looked down at the tiny rock sparkling on her finger.

A million dollars couldn't have bought a more beautiful stone, and good thing, too, because John couldn't have afforded even a *fraction* of that amount. His ever-dwindling guitar collection now made perfect sense to her. She was probably wearing a few of his favorite Fenders and Stratocasters on her left hand right now.

Jasmine almost laughed out loud when the song came on over the radio.

Reaching out a hand, she turned the volume all the way up and sang along with Michael Jackson at the top of her lungs while he worked his way deftly through a live version of *Black or White*. The appropriateness of the tune was almost too much to take.

*“But if you’re thinkin’ about my baby, it don’t matter if you’re black or white...”*

When the song wound down, Jasmine leaned forward again to lower the volume. Then she froze in her seat as she straightened back up and felt the cold metal of a gun barrel press firmly into the soft flesh at the base of her neck.

“Nice song, nigger. I’m a Waylon Jennings fan, myself, but let’s go see how that shit plays down South.”



# CHAPTER 111

Ten minutes after dropping off Blankenship at the Wyndham, Dana's cellphone sounded again. She dug it out of her purse and flipped it open. "Dana Whitestone."

"Agent Whitestone, I'm so glad I reached you. It's Shelley Margolis. How are you doing today?"

Dana's heart stopped beating dead in her chest. "I'm just fine, Dr.



Margolis. And you?”

“I’m doing just fine, as well,” the child-care advocate answered. “Just fine, indeed.”

Margolis paused and corrected herself. “Actually, that’s not quite true. As a matter of fact, I’m doing quite a bit *better* than just fine at the moment. I’m doing absolutely *great*. I’ve got some very happy news for you, ma’am.

Pending the completion of the necessary paperwork, your adoption of little Bradley Taylor Thomas has been approved. The Board just finished its voting. It was unanimous all the way down the line – ten ‘ayes’ to zero ‘nays’. Congratulations. You’re officially going to become the little boy’s mother.”

Dana stopped breathing. Her heart flipped over in her chest. Hot

tears flooded into her eyes, blurring her vision. “So, it’s sure thing then?” she squeaked.

Margolis laughed. “Yes, Agent Whitestone, it’s a sure thing. Congratulations again. The board is convinced that you’ll make an absolutely fabulous mother.”

Somehow, Dana managed to choke out her thanks through the painful

sobs of joy racking her body. After all of this time of being alone in this world, she'd never be alone again. Even after she was dead and gone and buried, she'd still live on in her son's heart, and then through her *grandchildren's* hearts. The realization was almost too much to take. It was the closest that anyone could come to being truly *immortal*.

It took her a full hour to calm down enough to get her reeling mind

back to work. Punching in Angel Monroe's cellphone number again, she took a deep breath through her nostrils in an effort to get some oxygen flowing through her system; still stunned completely stupid by the exhilarating news she'd just received. She was going to be Bradley's *mother*.

Blissfully, this time the Cleveland-based private investigator

answered her phone. Things were going swimmingly already today, weren't they? They sure as hell were. And that would have been putting things *extremely* mildly.

Dana took another breath.

So far, so good, and things could only improve from here on out, right?

*Right?*

She supposed that only time would tell.







## CHAPTER 112

Angel had planned on waiting until she got back home to read the newspaper, but the headline on the front page grabbed her hard by the throat and wouldn't let go.

Sitting down on the curb in front of the store, she read through the entire shocking article in just under five minutes, having trouble breathing the entire time while her reeling brain tried

desperately to process the horrible words wavering in front of her eyes.

## DIGGS MURDER MAY BE LINKED TO OTHERS

BY PETER GALLOWAY

Plain Dealer Correspondent

Twenty-two-year-old Sasha Diggs was all set to leave the country on a Rhodes scholarship when her murdered body

washed up on the banks of the Black River in Elyria on Wednesday. Diggs was four months pregnant. Her breasts had been carved off and her uterus removed.

Three thousand miles away, Betsy Campbell of Elk Run, Wash., had just won a national flute competition when she too became the victim of brutal murder. The 24-year-old woman was six months pregnant. Her breasts had

been carved off and her uterus removed.

Two hundred miles down the Pacific coastline, 35-year-old bank president Marjorie Trimble didn't show up for work in Sacramento, Calif., on Thursday. Trimble's murdered body was discovered in her home the next day. She was two months pregnant. Her breasts had been carved off and her uterus removed.

Twenty-five-year-old lawyer Laura Settle suffered the same grisly fate earlier this week in New York City. The sensational murder of 26-year-old professional basketball player Kimberly Anderson down in Houston brought the death toll to five.

Young, black, successful and pregnant. It was a death sentence for all five of these women.

And for their unborn babies, as well.

Still more chilling, information has recently come to light that there may be more to come. The *Plain Dealer* invoked Sunshine Laws to obtain a copy of a hate-filled letter sent to the Cleveland Police Department following the discovery of Sasha Diggs's body. The text of the letter – sent by a white-supremacist group calling itself “The

Brotherhood” – follows in its entirety:

To Whom It May Concern:

This is for all the nigger-lovers, race-traitors, nation-destroyers and the niggers themselves. We are The Brotherhood. We are legion. We are everywhere. We are *everyone*.

We are a group of concerned White citizens who hail from all walks of life.

We are lawyers and doctors, scientists

and politicians, policemen and women. We are truck drivers and auto mechanics. Firefighters and construction workers. We live in huge metropolitan cities and small towns across America alike, and we've banded together to put an end to what we consider a very disturbing trend.

Decades of race-mixing have led to an upheaval in society that is entirely



unacceptable to our ranks. Where once there was civilization, now there is only chaos. Where once there was natural order, now there is only an ugly hodge-podge of mutants, animals and other soulless freaks intermingling with proud White America.

This problem stems from a mixing of genes. It has come to our attention that the niggers have been adding the genes of race-traitors in an effort to create a

more powerful people, a mutant creation capable of accomplishing things that the niggers never could have accomplished solely through their own inferior DNA.

Race-traitors are equally responsible for this ugly trend. Rest assured, they will be dealt with in the appropriate manner when the time is right. But for now we are concentrating our efforts on the niggers, specifically the ones with

aspirations of more completely  
infiltrating proud White America.

Let it be known then that it is our solemn  
vow to eradicate as many of these  
viruses as possible before they can be  
brought to term. To do this, we must  
destroy the very environment that  
harbors them. A nigger woman's uterus  
is a profane place by nature, but when  
joined with pure White seed it becomes  
even more shameful still.

Enough is enough.

It is time for proud White America to stand up for what is rightfully ours, for what has been given to us by God Almighty Himself.

Let the murders of these five women serve as our warning to you. These exterminations will continue until the natural order of the world is restored. In the meantime, our group has taken

custody of Sue Lynn Pepperton's daughter. The Alabama senator will be given exact instructions on how to get her pregnant daughter back alive when the time is right for our purposes.

Signed,

The Brotherhood

Angel's pulse crashed in her wrists. Her mouth went dry. Her skin turned clammy despite the merciless sun

that was beating down hard on her head from high overhead in the clear blue sky above. That weird, indefinable shame blushed across her chest and throat again.

The warm summer wind whipped hard down the street, wrapping her thin dress around her legs as she walked back to her house in a daze with the newspaper folded beneath her left

arm. Just as she'd feared, *this* was why the FBI had been called in to investigate the murder of Sasha Diggs. Sasha had been just one in a long string of women brutally butchered so far.

And the Brotherhood had promised more to come.

And *soon*.

Angel was still walking home on unsteady legs when her cellphone rang in her purse. Cursing, she dug it out, even

though she really wasn't in the mood to talk with anybody right now.

“Hello?” she said, wearily.

“Hey, Angel. It's Dana Whitestone. How are you doing today?”

Angel stopped walking in an effort to minimize the sound of the wind blowing into the mouthpiece. “Special Agent Whitestone,” she said. “I'm fine. How are you?”



“It’s Dana, Angel, remember?”

Angel shook her head. She *had* remembered. But even considering the strong kinship that she already felt with this woman, somehow calling her by her first name right now just didn’t fit into her current worldview of white people. Cracker, honky or ghost, maybe, but certainly not something as familiar as *Dana*.

“What’s up?” Angel asked, deflecting the question.

The sound of wailing horns echoed in the background of the call. After a moment or two, Whitestone came back on the line. “Sorry about that, Angel. I’m stuck in a bottleneck on I-90 right now. Anywhere, do you think that maybe we could meet up in an hour or so for a quick bite to eat? I’ve got some

things I'd like to talk over with you – to chew over, if you will.”

The lighthearted joke was completely lost on Angel as her first instinct was to think that Dana Whitestone had somehow found out about the computer and sex gear she'd taken from Sasha Diggs's bedroom.

Her next instinct was to slap herself upside her own head just as hard as she possibly could for allowing the

ugly anger she felt inside to pervade every facet of her life now, even something as simple as having lunch with a woman who was clearly going so far out of her way just to be friendly with her that it wasn't even funny.

Angel took a deep breath through her nostrils and let out the air again in a slow rush over her teeth. "How do you feel about Mexican food?"

The FBI agent laughed. “*Si, si, seniorita.* Good call. Mexican food sounds just about right to me.”

After agreeing to the details of their lunch meet-up, Angel flipped off her phone and tucked it back into her purse, not knowing then about the pure *hell* that was about to break loose. Still, she'd find out about that pure hell soon enough. And she'd find out about it in

much the same way she'd been finding out about everything *else* in her life these days:

The *hard* way.



# CHAPTER 113

Six hours later, Jasmine Pepperton recoiled in horror from the huge black dog that was barking furiously at her feet.

Jasmine wrists sang with pain. Her hands had been tied behind her back to a sturdy wooden chair in an elaborately decorated den. She pulled hard against the ropes but they wouldn't budge an inch. Her mind felt woozy.



She'd been drugged, obviously, had absolutely no idea where the hell she was right now. Somewhere down South, the man in her car had said.

The sounds of Debussy's *Rhapsody for Clarinet and Piano* filled the room as Jasmine looked up at the large blonde man who was seated across from her on the other side of a massive mahogany desk – a different man from

the one in her car.

The man lit up a huge cigar before blowing out an enormous cloud of blue smoke. “One word from me and he’ll happily tear open your throat with his teeth,” he said, nodding to the huge dog. “Please don’t test me on this. Just be a good girl and listen to everything I have to say and you’ll remain in perfect health.”

Jasmine stared at the man through

the veil of hot tears blurring her vision.

“Who *are* you?” she sputtered.

The Race Master leaned back in his chair and blew out a second huge cloud of fragrant smoke before waving a hand in front of his face to disperse the thick blue fog.

“Who I *am*, precisely, is none of your concern at the moment, my dear. The *important* thing here is that your

mother does everything she's instructed to get you back alive. Tell me, Jasmine: Do you think she'll find those terms acceptable?"

Stomach acid bubbled up in Jasmine's gut and seared the thin lining of her esophagus. "Am I a *political* hostage?" she asked, incredulously. "Is *that* what this is about?"

The Race Master rose to his feet and stared down at her.

“I assure you it’s nothing quite as pedestrian as that, Miss Pepperton. I simply want to exchange your life for the life of my brother. A fair trade. Even Steven, as you Americans might say. Surely even you can understand the parameters of that kind of deal, can’t you?”

Jasmine gritted her teeth and resisted the urge to kick the incessantly

yapping dog hard in its mouth. “My mother will never negotiate with a terrorist,” she said. “She’s not *allowed* to, for Christ’s sake. It’s against the *law*.”

The Race Master smiled, his thin lips peeling back smoothly from very white teeth. “Oh, she’ll negotiate with me all right, Jasmine. She’ll negotiate with me or else you will surely die. It’s as simple as that. What sort of mother

could refuse those terms?”

Jasmine's thoughts flashed to the unborn baby inside of her, probably no bigger than a pea yet.

The blonde man seemed to read her mind. “Yes, Jasmine, that means your baby will die, too. That unclean life growing inside of you right now is entirely dependent on you for its survival. Try to remember that when I

get your mother on the phone, would you? It'll help you see this through to what I *hope* isn't the bitter end. Think about your baby and maybe – just *maybe* – you'll both survive.”

Reaching down and pressing a button hidden beneath the lip of his desk, the Race Master took another long, hard pull on his cigar. Moments later, three large young men wearing blue coveralls entered the room and carried Jasmine



Pepperton out of his den, chair and all.



# CHAPTER 114

Angel pulled into the parking lot of the La Mexicana restaurant in Shaker Heights forty-five minutes later.

Swinging the Cabriolet into an empty space, she exited the car and slammed shut the door before clicking the keychain-control alarm. The twelve-year-old car honked once as though it were saying goodbye.

Angel had always liked the food

at the La Mexicana, mostly because it had always been so authentically *Mexican*, whipped up and served to you by authentic Mexicans, which was just an added bonus in her book.

Going there on your birthday, however, could prove to be a big mistake. A *grande* one, actually – something she'd learned the hard way when Malachai had brought her there for

her thirtieth.

Because in addition to the authentic Mexican food whipped up and served to you by authentic Mexicans, La Mexicana also forced all the idiot gringos to wear ridiculously huge sombreros while the entire wait staff gathered around to sing *Feliz Cumpleanos*. Happy birthday, her ass. While it had been happening, Angel had been pretty sure that it would be the *last*

birthday she'd ever be celebrating, seeing as how she was about to die of embarrassment and all.

“Hey, Angel!”

Angel turned toward the sound of Dana Whitestone's voice. Dressed in a cream-colored business suit, silk blouse and a pair of sensible two-inch heels, the FBI agent was striding briskly across the busy parking lot toward her. Just as

Angel had done when the woman had visited her office the previous day, she mentally complimented Whitestone's taste in clothing. She identified the fed's outfit as Chanel even from twenty paces away.

Whitestone grinned as she approached. "Hey there, Angel," she repeated.

Angel grinned back. "Hey there, Dana."

*Goddamn!* A breakthrough!

She'd called Dana by her first name. And it had felt good. *Damned* good, as a matter of fact. And why not? Hate really could be such a tiring emotion – something she'd been finding out firsthand for herself lately. She had absolutely no idea in hell how the Brotherhood maintained it at the intense level they did. Then again, she highly



doubted that any of them were having any trouble getting to sleep at night these days, either. Hate could be a tiring emotion, sure, but it could also be a pretty goddamn *energizing* emotion, too. It all depended on your perspective, Angel supposed.

Stepping inside the restaurant a moment later, they were led immediately to a booth by their waiter, a kid named Juan who couldn't have been any more

than sixteen or seventeen years old and who seated them next to a large plate-glass window overlooking the parking lot full of cars.

The lighting inside the restaurant was dim, and the cushions in the booth *whooshed* a little bit as they sat down, the air trapped inside escaping beneath their weight and sinking them low into their seats.

The table itself was absolutely *humongous* and carved out of very solid wood. *Mahogany?* Angel didn't know. But she *did* know that she felt completely ridiculous as she sank even lower into her seat, like a little kid who'd refused an offer of a booster seat and who was regretting the hell out of that decision.

The benches themselves were set

high enough off the floor that Angel's feet barely scraped the carpet below. She doubted that Whitestone's feet had made it even that far, but resisted the urge to peek under the table for a closer look.

Dana Whitestone was a remarkably tiny woman – no debating that obvious fact – but it wasn't the first thing you noticed about her. Something about the way the woman walked and

talked, something about the way she *carried* herself in general, made the FBI agent seem a whole lot bigger than she really was. Almost larger than life.

“We could float this thing all the way down to Cuba and say ‘fuck you’ to Castro if we really wanted to,” Whitestone said, leaning forward to test the sturdiness of the oversized table with her tiny palms before settling back down

into her seat. “Anyway, I’ve got tell you, Angel, that dress you’re wearing is absolutely stunning. I noticed it right away out in the parking lot.”

Angel’s cheeks flushed hot as she remembered the reason why she’d worn the dress that day in the first place. To thumb her nose at people like Dana Whitestone. To show them that she didn’t need their kind, that she had people of her own.

Sure seemed to make a whole hell of a lot of sense right now, didn't it? Whitestone really was such an ogre underneath it all, wasn't she?

Angel forced a smile onto her lips, hoping it reached her eyes and praying that Whitestone wouldn't see the shame hiding behind it. "I was thinking the exact same thing about your outfit, Dana. Chanel, right?"

The other woman smiled happily. “Ah, a fellow clotheshorse, eh? Perfect. There’s a big sale going on downtown at Macy’s on Saturday. You, me, clothes and lunch. I won’t take no for an answer, so don’t even try, OK? So, whaddya say?”

Angel widened her smile. “Sounds just about right to me. Always in the mood to pick up a few new



skirts.”

Juan arrived a moment later and set down a basket of homemade nachos on their table. Still warm with little lines of steam coming off them, the nachos smelled absolutely *wonderful*. He also set down bowls of three different kinds of salsa.

He pointed to a muted-red bowl first. “This one is mild,” he said in an accent cute enough to make Angel want

to take him home with her, “this one is medium, and this one is hot.”

“*Caliente*,” Angel said.

Juan raised a bushy eyebrow at her and shook his head. “No, no, seniorita. Es *muy* caliente.”

When Juan had scampered away, Angel looked across the massive table at Whitestone again. “You heard the man, Dana. Es *muy* caliente. You go first.”

Whitestone laughed and shook her head. “I don’t think so, Angel. My stomach handles that crap just about as well as it handles a bottle of castor oil.”

Angel nodded, knowing the feeling all too well for herself. Spicy food had never been *her* thing, either. “So, what’s the plan, then?” she asked.

Whitestone lifted her eyebrows on her smooth forehead. “Well, I guess

we'll just have to wait for our Southwestern chicken salads to arrive.”

The conversation progressed easily from there, with Angel telling Dana how badly it had hurt when Granny Bernice had died – how badly it *still* hurt – and Dana telling her all about the Cleveland Slasher, the serial killer who'd murdered her parents when she'd been just four years old.

Angel was shocked to learn that

the man had been Whitestone's very own half-brother, given up at birth by their mother – and obviously none too happy about that fact, either.

Angel had followed the story closely in the papers, of course – like just about everyone else around Cleveland – but none of the articles had ever mentioned anything about Whitestone and Nathan Stiedowe being

related. She felt honored that the FBI agent felt comfortable enough with her to share that detail, but the woman's pretty face had gone very pale while she recounted the horrible story, so Angel steered the conversation around to a pleasanter direction.

“What's the story with Bruce Blankenship?” she asked. “Helluva partner you've got there. Hell, he's practically Mark Harmon's twin

brother.”

Whitestone smiled. “Yep, Bruce is definitely a great guy – and not too hard on the eyes, either. But he’s married. Two adorable kids and a beautiful and loving wife – the whole nine yards. Still, *all* the good ones married, aren’t they? Anyway, what about you? Anything interesting going on in your love life these days?”

Angel's cheeks suffused with blood as she remembered her *very* intimate encounter with Malachai the previous night. Though it had never been her style to kiss and tell, she took a deep breath and told the FBI agent all about it. Every. Last. Graphic. Detail. The FBI agent was smiling the entire time.

Twenty minutes later, their



salads finally arrived. Picking at them with no real interest, they then fell into the topic of the five murdered pregnant women.

“What do you think the significance of dumping Sasha Diggs’s body into the river was?” Whitestone asked.

Angel pursed her lips. She’d given the matter a lot of serious thought ever since reading the shocking

newspaper article that detailed the deaths earlier that morning, so she shared her theory with Whitestone. “To me, it’s some kind of ritual cleansing,” she said. “Some kind of baptism, maybe. The symbolism of it all doesn’t exactly seem subtle to me.”

Whitestone nodded and chewed on a tiny piece of chicken. “That’s a good point,” she said. “About as subtle

as a baseball bat across the fucking forehead, now that I think about it.”

The FBI agent fell silent for a long moment then, lost in her own little world, so Angel brought her back. “What do *you* think it means?” she asked. “Dumping Sasha’s body in the river, I mean. What was that all about?”

Whitestone wiped at her mouth with a heavy cloth napkin and took a quick sip of her lemon ice water. “I’m

thinking it has something to do with forensics,” she said. “The water washed away most of the trace evidence, which made it a hell of a lot harder to come up with any clues. The Green River Killer did much the same thing back in the 1970s. It was a big part of the reason why it took so long to catch him.”

Angel took a sip of her own

water and found herself agreeing with Whitestone's theory. The woman had a wonderful head on her shoulders for investigative details – that much seemed clear – and she wanted to hear more. “What about the website?” Angel asked.

“What website's that?”

Angel's ears rang as she suddenly remembered that she hadn't yet shared her recent discovery with Whitestone. As quickly as she could,

she brought the FBI agent up to speed about having found the Brotherhood's homepage listed in Sasha Diggs's browser history.

Whitestone leaned back in her seat and frowned when Angel had finished. "I'm going to need to look at that computer, Angel," she said. "Well, *my partner* will need to look at it, anyway. In any event, Blankenship tried

to hack into the Brotherhood's website to see who was paying all the bills, but just this morning he found out that the site had been taken down completely."

"Can't you still trace it, though?"

Angel asked. "Wouldn't there be a record?"

Just then, Juan came back around and Whitestone asked for more ice water before turning her attention back to Angel.

“He *tried* to trace it, but the server was set up in Nigeria, of all places, which means that it’s basically untraceable without cooperation from the authorities over there. And I’d say the possibility of something like *that* happening is about as good as a snowball’s chances of surviving a summer vacation in hell.”

“Nigeria?”      Angel      asked,



incredulously.

Whitestone nodded. “Yeah, I know. Ironical, ain’t it? A white-power group setting up shop in an African country. Truth really *is* stranger than fiction, my friend.”

Another ten minutes passed before Juan came back around to gather their plates. As he leaned over their table and piled up the dirty dishes, a tremendous explosion suddenly ripped

directly through the plate-glass picture window to Angel's right, raining a shower of broken glass down on their heads.

A microscopic shard entered Angel's right eye, blurring her vision. A larger shard caught Whitestone on the left cheek, opening up a nasty-looking gash that immediately started gushing bright red blood. Still another shard

caught Angel on the right forearm, slicing deep into a vein.

Everyone in the restaurant started screaming then, diving to the floor and cowering under their tables, seeking some sort of protection from the terrifying assault.

A horrible squeal of tires sounded out in the parking lot. Whipping out a gun from the inside pocket of her cream-colored Chanel

jacket, Whitestone leapt on top of the table and kicked away huge pieces of broken glass from the window frame before jumping down into the busy parking lot below.

Angel followed a split-second later, scrambling up onto the table and out the window. Following closely at the FBI agent's heels, she watched a huge Ford pickup truck on monster tires

careen wildly around the corner of the building.

Just then, a hot jolt of pain abruptly zipped through Angel's right ankle as the heel on her right shoe snapped. Vomit flooded into her mouth. Bright white stars danced in front of her eyes.

Whitestone skidded to a halt three feet away and aimed her gun at the truck while terrified pedestrians ducked

behind parked cars, fear and confusion coloring in their horrified faces. The FBI agent lowered her gun to her side and cursed sharply a moment later when it became apparent that there were too many people were around to get off a clean shot.

Gunning the engine hard, the driver of the truck roared out into the busy traffic, nearly causing a deadly

pileup at the intersection before speeding down the street, cutting dangerously close in front of a school bus carrying a full load of children. The bus driver slammed down hard on the air brakes, tipping the long yellow crazily left to right and then back again before finally coming to a gentle, upright stop. Angel blew out a grateful sigh of relief that sagged her chest three inches; her heartbeat hammering so wildly in her

chest she feared it would crack a hairline fracture deep into her sternum.

Whining into a higher gear, the truck picked up even *greater* speed as it roared through yet another busy intersection.

And then it was simply *gone*.





# CHAPTER 115

The sounds of Wagner's *Das Liebesverbot* filled the den as Gregory Mellon described the final target to the Race Master – the target that would finally convince Jasmine Pepperton to cooperate fully with them in their quest to spring Stefan von Waldenberg from his cold German prison cell.

“Julie Ragnozzi, sir,” Mellon said. “An FBI psychologist down in

Quantico, Virginia. Twenty-eight years old and pregnant by a man who works in the same office.”

Jared von Waldenberg, known to the great majority of his minions simply by his intimidating title of “the Race Master”, lifted up his eyebrows in surprise. “A psychologist, Gregory?” he asked.

Mellon nodded. “Yes, sir. The

man, too. He's at least twenty years older than the woman. Bob Taggart is his name. Married with three kids and having an affair with Ragnozzi that I wouldn't exactly describe as *discreet*."

The Race Master nodded.

"Perfect. And the video equipment? Is it ready to go, Gregory?"

Mellon nodded again. "Yes, sir.

Our operative has been outfitted with everything he needs and is prepared to

make his move just as soon as he receives his final instructions from you.”

The Race Master walked over to the record player over in the corner and raised the volume, closing his eyes and letting the beautiful music carry him away. Waving a finger in the air in perfect time to the heartbreaking sound of a single violin, he cleared his throat in delicious anticipation of what would

come next.

“Very well, Gregory. You may proceed with the final execution.”



# CHAPTER 116

“Fucking hillbilly spaceship,”

Dana Whitestone muttered, referring to the huge pickup truck that had just left a trail of utter *chaos* in its powerful wake. “Real goddamn sophisticated. Doctors and lawyers, my ass.”

The FBI agent was still bleeding badly from the wound on her cheek, a flap of skin hanging from her face like a piece of melted cheese covered with



pizza sauce. Angel looked down at her own forearm and suddenly realized just how badly she'd been cut herself.

The flashing blue lights showed up less than three minutes later. Police cruisers. Two fire engines. Five ambulances.

A team of EMTs pulled up next to them in the parking lot and three men scrambled out of the cab holding clean

white towels. “We’ve got to get you to the hospital right away, ma’am,” one of the EMTs told Whitestone, studying the ugly gash on her cheek. “You’ve been cut pretty badly.”

Whitestone gave him a look that could have frozen water. “Like hell you do, buddy. I’m not going anywhere. If you’ve got some needle and thread in that old rig of yours, take it out and let’s get on with it. If not, then please find

somebody who does.”

The man looked over at Angel with pleading eyes. He couldn't have been any more than twenty-five or twenty-six years old. Just a baby, really. “Ma’am?” he asked.

Angel looked at Whitestone, then back at the EMT. “That goes double for me,” she said. “You can stitch us up right here. It’s not that bad, really. Not

for me, anyway. Take care of Agent Whitestone first.”

Whitestone stared at her. “Just a flesh wound, right, Angel? What the hell is this, *Monty Python and The Holy Grail*?”

The FBI agent stumbled around the parking lot acting like she was clanging an invisible bell. “Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!”

Angel burst out laughing. She

just couldn't help herself. "I'm gonna start biting off the kneecaps of some goddamn cowards around here if I don't start seeing some results soon."

The young EMT looked at both of them like they were crazy, but he opened up the back of his truck and began stitching them up right then and there.

As Angel watched the man

expertly close Whitestone's wound with his nimble fingers, she couldn't help but think about the old saying about how a friend was someone who'd always come bail you out of jail, but a *best* friend was someone who'd be sitting right there next to you saying, "*Goddamn, that was a lot of fun!*"



# CHAPTER 117

*Television really is a wonderful medium,* the Race Master thought, drawing long and hard on a fat Cuban cigar. If you wanted to share an event with the rest of the world, or in this case just a tiny fraction of the world, all you needed to do was broadcast it on the boob tube. So simple, yet so utterly fucking *brilliant* at the same time.

He wished he'd thought of it



sooner.

In the darkened den, Jasmine Pepperton trembled in terror as her captor adjusted the tuning on a large, flat-screen TV. The picture flickered briefly for a moment, then cleared up suddenly in a brilliant flash of color. What it showed froze the blood in her veins.

A young black woman had been

strapped down to a large medical table, her wrists and ankles secured tightly in a “jumping-jack” position by thin, ragged ropes that were causing her naked body to make an “X” on the steel surface of the table. The look of absolute *horror* on the woman’s pretty brown face was enough to make Jasmine want to throw up her guts all over the hardwood floor.

A moment later, a large blonde man entered the picture from the left side

of the frame and held up a long knife in his right hand. Looking directly into the remote viewfinder, he smiled perfect white teeth at them before making his way over to the long metal table and digging the sharp blade deep into the young woman's distended belly.

On the television screen, the young woman's face exploded into a mask of excruciating pain, her

bloodcurdling screams echoing in Jasmine's eardrums while the sharp knife pierced her womb viciously and repeatedly in a circular, sawing motion.

A moment later, Jasmine's own screams drowned out the other woman's as an unborn baby was pulled from the woman's stomach in a nauseating tangle of purple umbilical cord.

Five feet away, the Race Master turned off the television set and

motioned for Gregory Mellon to flip on the light switch next to the door.

Bright light stabbed deep into Jasmine's brain through her eyeballs. Hot tears spilled down her cheeks, streaking her mascara in thick rivers of dirty water. She could barely choke out the words around the painful lump of rage lodged in her throat. "That woman was pregnant, you fucking asshole!" she

screached.

The Race Master threw back his head and laughed maniacally, the sound one only a completely *insane* person could ever produce. “The same fate awaits you and that nasty little virus growing inside of you if you don’t do *precisely* as you’re instructed, Jasmine.”

Jasmine stared up at him, dumbfounded. “How the fuck do you

know I'm pregnant?" she whispered, hoarsely.

The Race Master waved a hand in the air. "Again, none of your concern, my dear. None of your concern, at all. What you need to concentrate on *right now* is dealing with your mother."

Jasmine shook her head. "But I already *told* you. She's not *allowed* to negotiate with terrorists. It's against the

fucking *law*.”

The Race Master lifted his eyebrows. Then he drew back his right hand and slapped her so hard across the face that he nearly broke her cheekbone. “Shut the fuck up, nigger!” he hissed. “*You*’re not in charge here. One more disrespectful word from you and I’ll gladly cut out that mutant from your stomach so goddamn fast that your fucking head will spin. Call me a



terrorist again and I'll gladly cut out your disgusting little tongue for you, too, while I'm at it. What I'm doing here is a *righteous* thing. More righteous than your feeble little nigger mind could ever possibly comprehend."

Taking a deep breath that expanded his muscular chest six inches, the Race Master then slipped an untraceable cellphone from the inside

breast pocket of his expensive suit and took one quick step forward, firing it into Jasmine Pepperton's heaving chest with all his might like a baseball pitcher dialing up the speed on his very best fastball. The hard edge of the Motorola Razr slammed violently into her sternum and cracked a hairline fracture deep into the bone.

The Race Master's eyes exploded with a wild fury, bulging with

a hatred so intense that it overpowered even the searing pain that was spreading out to the rest of Jasmine's body from her shattered breastbone. His enraged voice exploded from deep within his thick throat.

“Now call your mother and make the arrangements *this instant!*”



# CHAPTER 118

After the young EMT had finished stitching them up in the parking lot of the La Mexicana, a uniformed cop approached with something in his hand.

“Special Agent Whitestone?” the man asked, looking at Angel.

“That would be that pretty little lady over there,” Angel answered, motioning to Whitestone with a nod of her head.

The cop looked embarrassed, but to his credit he recovered quickly. He didn't seem quite a rookie, but not quite a grizzled veteran yet, either. Angel guessed he'd been on the force for about six or seven years now.

The man cleared his throat loudly and turned to Whitestone, handing her a large rock wrapped in a sheet of paper and secured by a thick rubber

band. “We found this on the floor inside the La Mexicana, ma’am. I told the boys inside that we should bring it out to you right away.”

Whitestone looked down at the rock, then back at the officer. “Thank you.”

When the man didn’t immediately leave, she cleared her own throat and made her meaning more clear. “Thank you very *much*, officer.”

Finally understanding the dismissal, the cop's face reddened as he pivoted on his heel and walked away quickly. "You're welcome, ma'am," he mumbled over his shoulder.

When the officer had finally cleared out, Whitestone looked over at Angel. "Let's see what we've got here, shall we? A romantic little love note perhaps?"



Angel watched as Whitestone freed the sheet of paper from the rubber band with a loud, elastic snapping noise. Then the FBI agent held up the note so that they could both read it at the same time:

ANGEL MONROE: YOUR  
GRANDMOTHER WAS YOUR FIRST  
WARNING. THIS IS YOUR

SECOND. THERE WON'T BE A  
THIRD. BACK OFF.

DANA WHITESTONE: RACE-  
TRAITORS WILL BE DEALT WITH  
IN THE APPROPRIATE FASHION  
WHEN THE TIME IS RIGHT. YOUR  
TIME IS COMING SOON ENOUGH.

Not surprisingly, this note, too,  
had been signed by the Brotherhood.

“Looks like somebody’s starting to get a little bit scared,” Whitestone said, using the rubber band to reattach the paper to the rock.

Angel let out a deep breath.

“Yeah, and they’re not the only ones, Dana. I think I might need a change of underwear after that little episode.”

“Join the club, sister.”

Even though the parking lot was

full of people, Angel felt like she and Whitestone were the only two people in the world right now. Unbelievably – despite everything that had just happened to them – she actually felt herself *smiling*.

Funny how finding yourself a new friend could energize the muscles around your mouth, wasn't it?

Whitestone touched Angel's shoulder and held her gaze. "What

we've got here are a bunch of bullies, Angel, and there's only one way to deal with bullies, you know."

Something about the tone of the FBI agent's voice gave Angel's *own* confidence a sudden boost. And why not? Whitestone seemed so confident in everything she did, so self-assured, that Angel couldn't help but feeling like some of that confidence was rubbing off

on her.

When Angel spoke again, even *she* could tell that her voice sounded stronger now, because it *was* stronger. Maybe even a little bit stronger than Whitestone's.

“The only way to deal with bullies is to give them a nice big taste of their own medicine,” Angel said.

Whitestone nodded. “Exactly what I was thinking. So, what do you

say you and I go give one of those bullies a nice big taste of his own medicine right now?"

Angel squared her shoulders and nodded. "Sounds just about right to me."

Whitestone nodded again. "Great. So, c'mon already. Let's get the hell out of here and go do this shit."





## CHAPTER 119

Sue Lyn Pepperton's heart slammed violently in her chest as she flipped off her cellphone in the study of her fine Georgetown home and looked over at her husband in horror.

“That was Jasmine, Robert. She said they're going to kill her if we don't get a man convicted of murder in Germany freed from prison within seven days. They said they'll let some female

private investigator in Cleveland transport Jasmine back to us if we get it done. If not...”

Sue Lyn’s face went very white.

“If not, they’ll *disembowel* her. She’s *pregnant*, Robert.”

Robert Pepperton leapt from his chair across the room. “What’s this man’s name?”

Sue Lyn shook her head in

irritation. “Goddamn it, Robert, I don’t *know* his fucking name. Jasmine doesn’t, either. It’s a fucking *kidnapping*, for Christ’s sake.”

Robert Pepperton waved a hand in the air. ‘No, I mean what’s the name of the man they want freed from prison?’”

The junior senator from Alabama sat down in the oversized leather chair behind her massive desk. Her knees just didn’t feel strong enough to support her

own weight anymore. She took a deep breath and fought back the overpowering urge to throw up her stomach up all over the desk blotter. “Stefan von Waldenberg. He’s been jailed over there since 1978.”

Five feet away, Robert Pepperton’s face melted away into a mask of utter *horror*. He went over to the far corner of the room and sank down

into an overstuffed leather armchair with a heavy moan. “Stefan von Waldenberg?” he asked, weakly. “You’re absolutely *sure* that’s his name?”

Sue Lyn glared at him. “Of *course* I’m fucking sure,” she snapped. “That’s what she fucking said.”

Robert Pepperton rose to his feet on shaking legs. Then he took a deep breath of his own and told his wife all

about the night that he'd always known he'd never escape. The night he'd been stupid enough to think he could somehow outrun. The night that still haunted his dreams each and every time that he closed his eyes and tried to fall asleep.

“Do you remember when I was stationed in Germany?” he asked.

Sue Lyn's hands wouldn't stop shaking. She channeled the excess

energy into her quaking voice. “What’s your fucking point, Robert? I was a city councilwoman and pregnant with Jacob while you and your Army buddies were over there fucking around and having a good old time of it all.”

Robert Pepperton took another deep breath. “We killed two people over there in 1978, Sue Lyn. We killed Stefan von Waldenberg’s parents.”

Sue Lyn’s jaw dropped. She

couldn't have been any more stunned if the President of the United States had just punched her hard in the stomach on the steps of the Capitol building. “What the fuck do you mean you *killed* them?”

Her husband sank back down into the leather armchair and put a hand to his forehead. “We were drinking in East Berlin one night when Stefan von Waldenberg beat Private First Class



Dmitrius Allen to death with a beer bottle,” he said. “Von Waldenberg beat Allen to death because Dmitrius was *black*, Sue Lyn. Later on that night, we found out his address and killed his parents. We were drunk, but they were all fucking Nazis, anyway. Nobody ever even came to *question* us about it. I thought it was all over.”

He paused and lifted his gaze to her. His eyes were filled with tears.

“Obviously, I was wrong.”



# CHAPTER 120

Angel and Whitestone took the FBI agent's car downtown, a sleek, silver Mazda Protégé that seemed to fit the woman perfectly, right down to the sporty-but-not-too-flashy racing stripes painted alongside the body of the vehicle on either side.

As they drove, the two women began discussing the cases of the murdered pregnant women again.

“So I’m pretty sure that Randy McMichael is the father of Sasha’s baby,” Angel said. “But what do we know about the other women? Do we know who fathered *their* babies? Anyone as famous as McMichael? Were they all white guys, too? The gene-mixing the Brotherhood’s talking about?”

The FBI agent nodded and

brushed a lock of short blonde hair out of her pale blue eyes. “Yep,” she said, “all of the fathers are white. Laura Settle was pregnant by a novelist. Marjorie Trimble’s lover out in California is a bank president. Betsy Campbell’s man up in Washington is a sales executive of some sort, a regional account manager for a good chunk of the state, I believe. Kimberly Anderson was expecting with a club DJ down in

Houston, and Jasmine Pepperton is in a relationship with a white student at George Washington University. The fathers all came back clean as a whistle, though. Airtight alibis for each of them. Nothing even *close* to incriminating.”

Angel shook her head in frustration. She knew that they were bound to catch a break sooner or later, but she'd already grown sick and tired

of waiting for it. They needed something – *anything*, really – to give them a better idea of just whom exactly they were dealing with here in the Brotherhood. Something to level the playing field a little bit. They were *due*, for Christ's sake.

Angel tried to quiet the little voice inside her head that was telling her that she had absolutely no business inside the same car as Dana Whitestone,



that the FBI agent was so far out of her league on any number of different levels that it wasn't even funny.

No good. The voice wouldn't shut the hell up.

So when the familiar song came on over the radio, Angel reached out a hand and turned the volume all the way up to drown it out.

She and Whitestone sang *Come*

*On Eileen* at the top of their lungs all the way downtown.



# CHAPTER 121

The Race Master turned to Gregory Mellon inside the elaborately decorated den. “Call off O’Reilly and Collins in Cleveland,” he said. “I’ve just made an adjustment to our plans. I want the private investigator alive.”

Mellon’s face blanched. “I still haven’t been able to reach them, sir.”

The Race Master glared at him. “Try *again*, Gregory. Reach them and

tell them to pull out now or you'll pay for it with your fucking life. I need Angel Monroe *alive*, goddamn it. At least, for the time being. Do I need to make myself any clearer about this?"

Almost as if to underscore his master's chilling message, Bane lifted up his enormous head and bared his sharp white fangs at the nervous young blonde man as he turned and exited the

room.

When Mellon had gone, Jared von Waldenberg lit up a fresh cigar and blew out a huge cloud of smoke. All of the pieces were falling into place more quickly now. Not only would his brother soon be freed from his cold prison cell in Germany, *he'd* also finally have a chance even up the score for their dead parents with that murdering bastard Robert Pepperton.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a  
tooth. Two lives for two lives.

It was only fair.





## CHAPTER 122

From the look of things, jail hadn't been treating Randy McMichael especially well.

McMichael's handsome face looked drawn and haggard, his healthy sun-kissed glow replaced by a sallow, jailhouse pallor now. His usually perfect blonde hair looked as though it hadn't been washed in a week and his light blue eyes were ringed with red.

His huge wrists were encircled by a pair of silver handcuffs secured to a heavy chain that ran across his waist. Outfitted in an ugly orange jumpsuit, he huddled across the table from Angel and Whitestone in Interview Room Seven of the Cuyahoga County Jail.

Whitestone spoke first. “Randy, Randy, Randy,” she said, clucking her tongue against the roof of her mouth.

“You were a bad boy, weren’t you? Got all mixed up in something you couldn’t handle, didn’t you?”

McMichael looked up at Whitestone, seemingly too weary to protest. Angel almost felt *sorry* for him as she watched his Adam’s apple bob up and down in his throat, but then she remembered the horrific sight of Sasha Diggs’s brutally murdered body, remembered how Sasha’s unborn child

had been cut from her stomach with a long knife and how McMichael had shoved an eight-inch-long souvenir baseball bat into the poor girl's traumatized vagina.

Suddenly, she didn't feel quite so sorry for him anymore.

“Why'd you do it, Randy?” Whitestone asked. “Just tell me the truth and I'll make all the bad things go away

for you.”

McMichael screwed up his handsome face into a mask of sheer incredulity. “Do *what*, lady? Kill her? I didn’t fucking do it, for Christ’s sake. I’ve already told you people that a million goddamn times.”

Angel stared at him. Although it wasn’t exactly textbook procedure, Whitestone had pulled a few strings to allow for her presence here in the

interview room, effectively conscripting her into the role of a *de facto* deputy of sorts. “Keep singing that song and it’s the last one you’ll ever hear before taking a ride on ‘Old Sparky’,” she said, slipping into her pre-arranged role in the “goodcop/badcop” routine. “It’s all over for you now, so you might as well just come clean with us while you’ve still got the chance.”

Randy McMichael glared at her across the table, and Angel noticed something in his pretty blue eyes that she hadn't seen while they'd been sitting together in his home.

*Hatred.* Pure, undiluted hatred.

“Miss Monroe, right?” he asked coldly. “Are you the one telling them that I had something to do with Candy’s murder?”

He paused and shook his head in disgust. “It *was* you, wasn’t it, you worthless nigger?”

Springing to her feet in a flash, Whitestone slammed her hand down on the table hard enough to make McMichael flinch. Time to double up on the “badcop” part of the equation, Angel supposed. “Shut the fuck up, asshole!” Whitestone hissed. “You



don't get to ask the questions here. You gave up that right when you decided that it was perfectly OK to slice your unborn baby out of your twenty-two-year-old lover's pregnant stomach."

She paused and held his stare.

"And if I *ever* hear you talking like that to my friend again, I'll split open your goddamn skull with the butt of my gun so fucking fast that you won't know what hit you. But not before I use a nice, dull

pair of scissors to snip out that vile, disgusting little tongue of yours. And that's a fucking promise, dickhead."

McMichael tried holding Whitestone's blazing gaze, but pretty soon found that he simply *couldn't*. *Nobody* could've held Whitestone's eyes right now. They looked hot enough to burn right through six inches of solid steel.

Angel lifted her eyebrows,  
impressed.

*God, she loved this woman.*



## CHAPTER 123

Miles O'Reilly looked down at the caller ID on his cellphone in disgust.

“Who the hell was that?” Seth Collins asked when the phone had finally stopped ringing.

“Headquarters,” O'Reilly answered as he wheeled the huge pickup truck into a busy parking lot across the street from the Cuyahoga County Jail.

“Why didn't you answer it?”

O'Reilly twisted up his face.

“Because I’ve got plans of my *own* for this little nigger bitch, that’s why.”

Collins leaned forward in his seat and turned down the country music station that blaring from the stereo speakers. “I don’t think that’s a very good idea, Miles.”

O'Reilly waved away his partner’s concern. “Why the fuck not,

Seth? You afraid of that big bad wolf  
Jared von Waldenberg? The man's a  
putz, for Christ's sake. Lost in a  
goddamn time warp where he thinks it's  
still 1944. All this fucking Nazi shit.  
Give me a fucking break. If you're going  
to kill a nigger, then kill a fucking  
nigger, but do it on your own goddamn  
terms. Don't copy some little Austrian  
faggot who didn't even have the balls to  
face up to the Allies when push came to

shove.”

Collins sighed. O'Reilly was obviously going off the deep end now, but it had never been a very good idea to disagree with the man. Besides, Collins really didn't give a shit *who* died, just so long as he got his money out of the deal.

“So, what's the plan then?”

O'Reilly stared at him. “What the fuck do you mean, ‘what's the plan’?”



We're going to kill this little nigger bitch and we're going to kill the federal pig she's with, too. *That's* the fucking plan. Any questions?"

Seth Collins leaned forward in his seat again and turned the radio back up. The sounds of Patsy Cline's *Crazy* floated softly over the speakers.

"Nope, Miles. No questions, at all."



# CHAPTER 124

Angel left the interview room five minutes into the intense grilling of Randy McMichael, knowing that her presence, her mere *blackness*, represented a deterrent to the former baseball star spilling his guts.

Angel frowned. McMichael had called her “nigger” right to her face, but for some reason or another it hadn’t hurt *half* as much as reading the racial slurs

in the book had.

She shook her head in confusion as she walked down the long hallway of the Cuyahoga County Jail, the same long hallway she'd traveled so many times in the past while she'd still been a member of the Cleveland police force. Though her progress had been slow up to this point, Angel was finally starting to understand that "nigger" was just another

word – an extremely ugly and *hateful* word, of course – but one that possessed no real power unless *she* gave it that power. It might have been a hard lesson to learn, but it was also one she thought worth learning for black people everywhere.

Sitting down in a plastic chair in the lobby of the jail, she began to think about how blacks and whites related to each other in America. The only thing

she could come up with was that they all sucked at it. Really fucking hard.

The white-power hate groups were ignorant, of course; so ignorant that they almost weren't worth thinking about. But they were also dangerous, so you *had* to think about them. And Angel was starting to understand just *how* dangerous they could be.

On the black side of the ledger,

militant groups like The Black Panthers weren't much better. Lumping all white people together was just as stupid as lumping all black people together. Each race had good and bad examples to offer; didn't anyone *understand* that? It was the message Martin Luther King Jr. had been trying to convey when he'd asked people to judge him not by the color of his skin but by the content of his character. The content of your character

could be good, or it could be completely fucking rotten. Still, it had absolutely nothing at all to do with the color of your skin.

To Angel's mind, though, the media tended to play up the rotten examples of black people more often than it did with the whites. Every time you turned on the nightly news there was another black face screaming out about



the injustice of having their relative held accountable for robbing someone, or beating them, or even *murdering* them. It made *all* black people look bad.

Then there were the current crop of civil rights leaders, most notably Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton. Angel admired the spirit of their efforts, of course, but she cringed each and every time they jumped up screaming bloody murder whenever a black person had

committed some heinous crime. The Jena Six. Lloyd Williams in Tucson. Sherilee Foster out in San Diego. What kind of *sense* did that make? Was that judging a person by the content of their character, or by the color of their skin?

She thought the answer to that one rather fucking obvious.

And just how exactly did Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton make all their

money, anyway? How could they *afford* to jet all over the country – all over the *world*, for that matter – defending these black criminals?

Speaking fees, that was how. Big, fat, fucking corporate speaking fees. Sometimes Angel thought that Jackson and Sharpton were nothing more than hypocrites prostituting the cause for their own selfish ends. And why not? She'd always found it *extremely* hard to

listen to these multimillionaires telling black folks just how *deeply* they felt their pain. Hell, whatever pain Jackson and Sharpton might have once felt was so far in the past now that it wasn't even funny.

Pathetic substitutes for Martin Luther King Jr. and W.E.B. Dubois, to say the least.

Angel wasn't especially fond of

people like the Clintons either; white politicians who she thought exploited black people for votes. She'd thought the Clintons had shown their true colors – for lack of a better term – while Hillary had been duking it out with Barack Obama for the Democratic nomination in 2008.

And what about Dennis Kucinich? Angel loved the guy, of course – an entertaining little firebrand

and from Northeast Ohio, to boot – but the Ohio congressman's passionate diatribes against racial injustice rang hollow to her ears. What did *he* know about being black? About the struggle? Absolutely nothing, that was what. And if a black politician had ever dared to rage against the machine with even *half* of Kucinich's fervor, racists all over the country would have immediately jumped

up and accused him or her of “chimping out”.

Angel shook her head disgustedly, ashamed with the state of race relations in the United States. What in the hell was *wrong* with her country? Land of the free, home of the brave, her ass. More like land of the weak, home of the sniveling, ignorant coward.

When Whitestone still hadn't come out of the interview room twenty

minutes later, Angel headed down the hall again and bought a soda from the snack room while thinking about gangbangers like Razor Diggs. Nothing more than human pieces of garbage, she knew, but somehow it had become *uber* cool in the black culture to glamorize their “gangsta” lifestyles.

There wasn't shit glamorous about their disgusting, at all!



Rap music played a big part in it, of course. No matter what any of the rappers said about how they weren't to blame, Angel knew that they had a tremendous influence on black youths. And listening to idiots like the Ying Yang Twins trying to defend themselves on national television with their tired old protests of how it was the parents' responsibility to raise their own children

enraged her. At best, their protests were disingenuous. At worst, it was prostituting black peoples' collective misery just as shamelessly as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton did.

After all, it took a *village* to raise a child, now didn't it?

Goddamn right, it did.

Just ask Hillary Clinton about that much.

You might have to buy her book

before you got an answer, though.



## CHAPTER 125

Miles O'Reilly lit up a smoke and offered one to Seth Collins. "Coffin nail?"

Collins didn't laugh. "Are you sure about this, Miles?" Collins asked, shifting in his seat to face his partner. "Jared von Waldenberg's a pretty ruthless bastard. "What's the internal body count within the Brotherhood up to now? Ten? Twelve?"

O'Reilly waved a hand in front of his face. "Quit being such a fucking pussy, Seth. I know what I'm doing."

Collins leaned back in his seat and let the opening chords of *A Country Boy Can Survive* by Hank Williams Jr. wash over him, not wanting to continue the brief conversation any further. What was the point? He supposed he'd find out soon enough if the song he was

listening to at the moment had any truth to it.

He turned in his seat to face O'Reilly again. "Give me one of those goddamn cigarettes."





# CHAPTER 126

Another hour passed before Dana Whitestone finally emerged from the interview room and found Angel sitting in the jailhouse lobby. “Hey there, good-lookin’,” she said. “Miss me?”

Angel looked up at the FBI agent and smiled. “You know it, girl.”

Whitestone smiled back. “Good. I missed you too. Anyway,

how'd you pass your time while I was back there playing Dirty Harriet with Randy McMichael?"

Angel sighed. "Just trying to solve America's racial problems in my head, that's all."

"How'd that work out for you?"

"Does Randy McMichael back there still think I'm a worthless piece of nigger shit?"

Whitestone lowered her eyes.

“Yes.”

“Not too well, then.”

Whitestone frowned. “We’re not *all* like that, Angel. You do know that, right?”

Angel sighed again. “Yeah, Dana, I do. At least I’m trying my best to understand it.”

Three minutes later, they stopped

off at the front desk before leaving the jail.

“You got my package back there, Smitty?” Whitestone asked the man stationed behind the desk.

Chubby and in his late-fifties, a desk sergeant with deep-set brown eyes and a pockmarked face featuring a huge bulbous nose courtesy of one too many belts of gin said, “I’ve got a package back here for *both* you gorgeous ladies,

if you wanna come on back and check it out.”

Angel and Whitestone looked at each other, then burst out laughing. It was starting to become a habit with them, and Angel couldn't deny that it felt good.

“Maybe later, Smitty,” Whitestone said. “For now, I'll just take what I called you about earlier.”

The desk sergeant slid a brown paper bag across the desk and made Whitestone sign for it before finally releasing the mysterious package.

“Thanks, big guy,” Whitestone said, handing back the pen to the man and motioning with her head for Angel to follow her.

The sergeant grinned happily as they left. “*Big* guy is right. Hell, you

two beautiful ladies don't even know the  
*half* of it."





## CHAPTER 127

Miles O'Reilly sat up straighter in his seat as the nigger woman and the FBI agent exited the downtown jailhouse. He watched them make their way to the federal cunt's silver Mazda Protégé in the parking lot before slipping the huge pickup truck into gear and following at a safe distance behind as the women pulled out of the lot.

“Looks like it's show time, Seth

old boy,” O’Reilly said. “You ready for this shit or what?”

Collins blew out a huge lungful of smoke and stared straight ahead, his pale blue eyes steely and unblinking. Cocking the double-barreled shotgun laying across his lap, he racked two high-gauge bullets into the chambers.

“Yep. Let’s go get this shit over with already.”



## CHAPTER 128

“Charming fellow,” Angel said, ten minutes after she and Whitestone had exited the Cuyahoga County Jail. “Smitty back there a friend of yours? I don’t think I remember him from my days on the force. Is he new?”

They were having coffee at Arabica, a local chain that was in the process of being bought out by Starbucks. Then again, what coffee shop

in the continental United States *wasn't* in the process of being bought out by Starbucks these days? The Wal-Mart of the coffee world.

“No idea,” Whitestone said, taking a small sip of her coffee and sliding the brown paper bag she'd signed for back at the jail across the table. “Anyway, here ya go, Angel. Little present for you inside.”

Angel frowned and took the bag before opening it up and looking inside.

Her .45 – the one that Razor Diggs had appropriated from her right before he'd smacked her in the temple with the heavy butt of a smoking machine gun.

Her mouth dropped wide open. Looking back up at Whitestone, she asked, “Isn't this... evidence? Is this

even *legal*?”

Whitestone waved a delicate hand in front of her face. “Yes, of course it’s evidence. But it’s evidence in the same way that a snowflake is part of a blizzard. No worries, Angel. There’s still plenty left over to nail Razor Diggs to a fucking cross.”

The FBI agent paused and held Angel’s gaze. “And as far as it being legal, I really don’t give a shit about that

right now. I don't want you running around out there without protection. We could have been killed today, you know."

Hot tears welled up in the corners of Angel's hazel eyes as she asked herself why the hell this woman seemed to *care* about her so goddamn much. What had she done to *deserve* it?

Whitestone answered the



unmasked question in her misty eyes.

“Because you and me have to stick together, Angel. *That’s* why. It’s a dirty fucking world out there.”

Angel cleared the lump of emotion from her throat and amended the woman’s statement. “You mean it’s a dirty fucking *man’s* world.”

Whitestone nodded. “That’s absolutely right. It’s a dirty fucking *man’s* world.”

Whitestone dropped her gaze down to the table. When the FBI agent lifted her stare again a moment later, Angel thought that the woman's own pale blue eyes looked a bit glazed over now, if only slightly. "Besides, Angel, I consider you my *friend* now. Probably one of the only friends I've got in the world right now."

Angel tried her best to answer,

but the words wouldn't come out. So instead, she simply stood up and went around to Whitestone's side of the table before leaning down and giving the FBI agent a quick-but-meaningful hug.

Straightening back up and wiping at her eyes, she looked down at her new friend and said, "You're probably the only friend in the world I've got right now, too, Dana."



## CHAPTER 129

Miles O'Reilly drank his hot black coffee no more than twenty feet away from the women that he and his partner would soon kill.

From across the table, he watched Seth Collins dump three containers of cream into his cup and swirl it around with a little plastic swizzle stick before finally blowing off the steam and raising it to his lips.

Fucking pussy.

In O'Reilly's mind, the Guns and Roses song that had long ago become the soundtrack to his life started playing.

He might not be in the bush any more, but the thrill of the hunt remained just as exciting to him as it had ever been. Raising his own steaming cup to his lips, he drained the entire thing in one quick pull, letting the scalding

coffee burn the back of his throat and  
*relishing* the exquisite pain.

*Welcome to the jungle, we've  
got fun and games...*





## CHAPTER 130

Returning to her side of the table in the coffee shop, Angel asked Dana how things had gone with Randy McMichael after Angel had left the interview room.

The FBI agent frowned. “That asshole could some take charm-school lessons from old Smitty back at the jailhouse,” she said. “McMichael spent most of his time denying that he had

anything to do with Sasha Diggs's murder, but I finally broke the motherfucker down."

"How'd you do that?"

Dana took another sip of her coffee. "Let's just say that he was more than just a little bit concerned about losing his ability to father any more illegitimate children in the future."

Angel winced. "We should be

so lucky.”

Finishing up their coffees a moment later, they left Arabica and agreed to head over to Angel’s house on the west side of Cleveland in order to examine Sasha Diggs’s computer.

“I’ll tell you what McMichael said on the ride over,” Whitestone said, slipping the Protégé into gear and pulling out of the busy parking lot before glancing down at the silver Rolex watch

strapped around her delicate left wrist.

“Bruce Blankenship’s probably gotten enough sleep by now, so I’ll give him a call and ask him to meet us over at your place. If there’s anything worth seeing on that hard drive you’ve got over there, he’s definitely gonna find it. Any objections to that plan?”

Angel shook her head. “Nope, not the slightest objection, at all.”

She paused, then added, “So, c’mon. Let’s go do this shit, sister.”



## CHAPTER 131

Through the large picture window of the busy coffee shop, Miles O'Reilly watched the nigger woman and the FBI agent pick their way through the parking lot before hopping inside the sleek silver Mazda Protégé and pulling away.

Smiling, he crumpled up his paper cup and took a hook shot at the garbage receptacle ten feet away.

*Nothing but net.*





## CHAPTER 132

Angel and Whitestone were lost in easy conversation as Canadian singer Allison Crowe belted out a beautiful cover of Joni Mitchell's *River* on the stereo and they streaked down I-90 ten minutes later.

“So,” Whitestone asked, “any wedding plans for you and this Malachai guy in the near future?”

Angel blushed. “I don’t think so,

Dana. Malachai's a great guy, but he's also got a wandering eye."

"Better than something else wandering."

Angel bit down hard into her lower lip. She wanted to tell Whitestone about Malachai's recent infidelity, but somehow she just couldn't quite bring herself to do it. That would have almost seemed like cheating, too,

so she just changed the subject instead.

“What about you?” she asked.

“Any hot prospects in your dating world these days?”

Before Whitestone could answer her, a huge pickup truck suddenly came roaring up along their right side, its powerful engine whining like the starving howl of a mongrel dog. A Confederate flag snapped wildly from a stationary post in the back. Same truck

from the restaurant earlier in the day.

“Jesus Christ!” Whitestone yelled, fumbling for the Glock in the inside pocket of her suit jacket. Angel jammed her hand inside the brown paper bag laying across her lap and cocked the hammer on the .45, but by then it was already too late.

A man wearing a black ski mask leaned out the window on the passenger

side of the truck and fired a sawed-off shotgun at the Protégé. A split-second later, a horrible explosion sent the FBI agent's vehicle skidding into the shoulder of the highway, its front tire completely blown away.

Angel held on for dear life. The shrieking sound of metal scraping against pavement filled the car. Then the Protégé went airborne before slamming back down to earth and beginning to

roll. Once, twice, three times.

Sparks flew. The entire world shook. The passenger side of the car crumpled like a cheap aluminum can. A jagged piece of sharp metal pierced Angel's side.

On the fourth roll, Angel's seatbelt broke. For the briefest of moments, she felt completely weightless.

And then her head slammed so violently against the roof of the car that it plunged her world into a blackness so complete that not even paying the goddamn bill would have been enough to switch the lights back on.





# PART V

“Send us your broken toys and we’ll fix them for you.” – Bill Riccio, leader of the Aryan Youth Front, a Birmingham, Alabama white-power hate group featured in the 1992 HBO documentary, *Skinheads, USA*.



## CHAPTER 133

Sue Lyn Pepperton glared at her husband across the den of the couple's fine Georgetown home. Scalding tears burned her eyes. "You're a fucking *murderer*, Robert! You're a fucking murderer and now our daughter is going to die for your goddamn crimes! She's *pregnant*, you fucking asshole!"

Robert Pepperton buried his face in his hands and cried bitter tears of

shame. “I’m sorry,” he sobbed. “I’m so goddamn sorry.”

Sue Lyn fought the urge to lunge across the room and claw out his eyeballs with her sharp fingernails. “Shut up!” she screamed. “Just shut the fuck up, you simpering wimp! Your apologies aren’t going to do a goddamn thing to help Jasmine now. You’ve doomed her, Robert. You’ve doomed

her to a horrible death because you're a fucking murderer! I fucking *hate* you, you son of a bitch!"

Robert Pepperton rose to his feet and looked at his wife with pleading eyes filled with tears. He opened his arms and took a step in her direction. "Please, Sue Lyn, we can fix this..."

Sue Lyn held up her hands to keep him away. Her knees shook. Her stomach churned. Her world swayed.

“Stay right the fuck where you are, Robert. I’m a goddamn *senator*, for Christ’s sake! You think I’m not going to turn you in for this? I *have* to.”

She watched in horror as her husband’s gaze found the decorative gun case in the corner of their den. It was unlocked.

Sue Lyn slid open a drawer in her desk and took out her loaded .32,

leveling it directly at her husband's chest while picking up the phone with her free hand. "I'm sorry, Robert, but this is just the way it has to be."

Ten minutes later, Capitol Police led Robert Pepperton away in handcuffs. Sue Lyn's eyes glazed over as she watched her husband of thirty-five years being placed into the back seat of a cruiser before they slammed shut the door and began filling out the



paperwork.

She shook her head violently to clear it when the patrol car finally pulled off five minutes later, its blue-and-red lights flashing, with escort vehicles sandwiching the car in both the front and back.

However hard it might be for her to do, Sue Lyn needed to think only of Jasmine now. Jasmine and her unborn

grandchild.

One life in exchange for two.

It was only fair.



# CHAPTER 134

Angel groaned as she came awake sometime later, her head throbbing so badly that it felt as though someone had wedged a piece of burning-hot steel between her eyes.

She tried to turn her head, but found she couldn't. She'd been strapped down to a bed with her neck immobilized in a brace. High-pitched computerized beeps filled the room. She

coughed hard, gagging on the thick plastic tube jammed down her throat.

Panic set in when a series of painful spasms suddenly wracked her body, her empty stomach trying desperately to crawl up her esophagus and out her mouth. Distant voices murmured, but Angel couldn't understand what they were saying. Something about a seizure, something

else about how it was perfectly normal for a victim with a serious brain injury.

A moment later, a sharp needle entered a vein in her right arm.

“Just a flutter of the central nervous system,” a faraway voice said.

“Nothing to get excited about.”

Slowly, Angel’s already-fuzzy world faded away into complete blackness once more.



## CHAPTER 135

When Dana came to, she found herself standing in the doorway of her parents' bedroom in the West Park-section of Cleveland and watching Nathan Stiedowe terrorize her mother with the long, sharp butcher's knife balanced in his powerful-looking right hand.

Sara Whitestone widened her panicked blue eyes in horror when she



caught sight of Dana standing there. Turning around, Nathan Stiedowe followed Sara's gaze to the doorway.

And then he smiled.

“Mommy, what’s happening?”

Dana asked, her small voice quiet and shy. “Who’s that man on top of you? Where’s my daddy?”

When Dana locked gazes with her half-brother for the first time in their

lives, she froze in his stare. Abruptly, though, her four-year-old body grew to its full adult height right there in the doorway.

Bolting into the bedroom, Dana caught Nathan Stiedowe's strong right wrist just as he began to whip it like a silver lightning bolt across Sara Whitestone's slender throat.

She twisted hard, hearing the bone snap in two. The knife fell from

the monster's trembling hand. A mask of excruciating pain covered his handsome face.

“You can't do this to me,” the monster sputtered, glaring up at her as he held onto his badly injured wrist. “This isn't how the story *goes*.”

Dana retrieved the knife from the bed and jammed it deep into the monster's stomach before wrenching the

sharp steel blade violently upward.

“Tough luck, motherfucker,” she spat, watching Nathan Stiedowe’s body disintegrate into a pile of choking gray ashes right in front of her confident adult eyes. “I’m *changing* the goddamn story this time.”



## CHAPTER 136

Back in the den of her fine Georgetown home, Sue Lyn Pepperton dialed the number she'd been given to reach Jasmine's abductors.

She'd been instructed to tell no one about the phone number – that it was a *secret* – but there was no way in hell she'd let a terrorist dictate her moves. She'd been just a young girl when George Wallace had run roughshod all

over the state of Alabama in the 1960s, but Sue Lyn had been old enough even then to understand that there was only one way to deal with bullies. Stand up to them. Punch them in the nose a couple times. Bloody them up a little bit and pretty soon they'd understand that you meant business. As soon as this call was completed, her next call would be to the FBI.

A man answered the phone on the fourth ring. “Have you begun negotiations for Stefan von Waldenberg’s release from prison yet, Senator?”

Sue Lyn gritted her teeth. “Before I do anything, I need to know that my daughter is still alive. Put her on the phone immediately.”

The man laughed without humor



on the other end of the line. “Sorry, Senator, I can’t do that. If you’d like, though, I’ll send my Presa after her so that you can hear her screams. He seems to have developed quite the taste for human blood lately.”

Sue Lyn’s insides flipped inside out. She found it difficult to breathe out the words around the painful lump of fear lodged in her throat. “Who *are* you?”

The man laughed again. “Hasn’t your husband told you about his extracurricular activities in Germany during the late-1970s yet, Senator? What he and his Army buddies *did*? How they murdered two innocent people in cold blood in their own *home*?”

Sue Lyn took a deep breath. “Yes, Robert told me all about it. As a matter of fact, I turned him over to the

authorities not ten minutes ago.”

“Liar,” the man hissed.

“It’s true. Turn on the national news if you don’t believe me. I’m sure it’s all over CNN by now.”

“Hold, please.”

Sue Lyn heard the man place the phone down on some sort of hard surface. A moment or two later, he picked up the phone again. “Not what I wanted at all, Senator,” he growled.

“You’ve done a *very* bad thing here.”

Sue Lyn gasped. “What the fuck are you talking about? Robert’s going to pay for his crimes now. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

The man drew in a sharp breath, and Sue Lyn could tell that he was talking to her through clenched teeth now. “I wanted him for *myself*, Senator. For myself! Now I’m going to

have to rearrange all of my plans because of what you've done, you stupid, arrogant little cunt. You'll hear back from me within the hour. If you're lucky, your daughter might even still be alive."

Sue Lyn's entire body trembled in the empty den as the line went dead.

*Sweet Jesus. What had she done?*



## CHAPTER 137

The distant voices again, closer now but still speaking a foreign language.

“Massive brain trauma, left temporal lobe. She’ll probably be a vegetable for the rest of her life.”

From the prison of her own body, Angel screamed out silently to them that it wasn’t true. *Couldn’t* be true.

She tried to scream out for real but no sound emerged. She wondered if this was what *all* brain-injury victims experienced. Trapped inside their own minds and completely aware of everything going on around them but powerless to speak out about it. Powerless to tell everyone they were still there, that they were still *alive*.

*I'm still here, goddamn it! I*



*can hear you! I'm still alive!*

Angel willed the sound around the thick tube jammed down her throat.

“Mmgrh.”

The voices around her got excited. She heard the scurrying of feet. Then she felt a flurry of hands flutter over her prone body. Tubes were yanked out of her arms. Another needle stabbed deep into a vein.

“We’ve got brainwaves! Thirty

cc's of polyethylene glycol stat! Prep  
her for surgery *now!*”



## CHAPTER 138

Dana came around the corner of her childhood home, slipping past the freshly trimmed hedges and into the backyard.

Thirty feet away, James Whitestone was barbecuing hot dogs and hamburgers on a rusty outdoor grill. Not too far away from him, Sara Whitestone sat in a collapsible nylon lawn chair, studying a legal brief that she'd brought

home with her from work.

Dana smiled, feeling her heart explode with pure *joy* inside her badly constricted chest at the sight of her beautiful and beloved parents. “Hi, Mommy,” Dana said quietly. “Hi, Daddy.”

Sara Whitestone looked up and smiled, rising from her chair as though she’d been *expecting* to see Dana.

James left the grill and came to stand next to his wife. “Hello, Dana,” they said in unison. “We love you, sweetheart. We’ve *always* loved you.”

Hot tears spilled from Dana’s eyes, blurring her vision. She took a step in their direction, but her mother held up one small hand to stop her. “Not yet, honey,” she said softly. “You’ve got to let go first, baby. Then you can be with us forever.”

Dana froze in her tracks and lifted up her eyebrows in confusion. “What do you mean I’ve got to let go first?”

James Whitestone smiled at her gently. “Just let go, pumpkin. That’s all you need to do. Just let go.”

Suddenly understanding their meaning, Dana nodded and took a deep breath through her nostrils before letting

out the air again in a slow exhale over her teeth.

Then she leaned back her head on her shoulders, closed her eyes and did what they'd told her to do.

She just let go.





## CHAPTER 139

Sue Lyn Pepperton walked over to the sideboard in her fine Georgetown den and poured five fingers of Kettle One vodka into a cut-glass tumbler.

Her hands shook as she raised the thick glass to her lips and gulped down the clear liquid in two quick swallows.

The strong drink burned like hell as it slid down her throat before hitting

her stomach like an atom bomb. For a split-second, she feared the drink might explode up her esophagus again in a disgusting rainbow of projectile-vomit, but then the vodka finally settled in her stomach.

Sue Lyn poured some more vodka. No matter what the man on the other end of the line had said, she knew what she needed to do. She was an

official of the United States government, for Christ's sake, and she'd taken a sworn oath to uphold the law.

She let out a deep breath. Her heart felt heavy in her chest, of course, but she knew the hardest choices to make in life were the choices that had never really been yours to make at all.

Settling down into the leather chair behind her massive desk, she picked up the phone and punched in the

number.

A moment later, a woman answered on the other end of the line.

“FBI.”

Sue Lyn cleared her throat.

“This is Sue Lyn Pepperton,” she said, “junior senator from the great state of Alabama. I need a team of agents sent over to my house immediately. It’s literally a matter of life and death.”



# CHAPTER 140

The thick plastic tube that slid out Angel's throat felt like a fat snake covered in blood and guts, making her gag hard. It felt like giving birth, or at least what she *imagined* giving birth must feel like. Her eyes fluttered open briefly, then fell closed again. It was all too much too soon, the bright lights too piercing, stabbing her brain, too agonizing to bear.

The sound of feet leaving the room filled her ears.

And then, “Angel? Can you hear me, honey?”

*Malachai.* His voice sounded tiny, scared, like that of a terrified child’s.

“Mmrgh.”

Angel felt his hand cover hers. His other hand went to the side of her



face. Both were shaking.

She opened her eyes slowly, a newborn baby taking in its strange new world for the very first time.

Malachai tried to smile at her, but it was a smile that didn't quite reach his beautiful brown eyes. He was just too scared.

“Don't try to talk, Angel,” he said. “Everything's going to be OK. The doctors said that you're going to

make a complete recovery. Just rest up now, baby. Close your eyes and rest up. I'll be right here waiting for you when you wake up again.”

Angel did as she was told. A moment later, her world faded away again.



# CHAPTER 141

Sue Lyn Pepperton's heart leapt up into her throat when her cellphone rang again thirty seconds later.

She fumbled to pick it up off the desk. "Hello?"

The man on the other end of the line sounded *very* angry. "You've been extremely disobedient, Senator. You were clearly instructed to keep our business private. Now you'll have to

pay for ignoring those instructions. At exactly ten a.m. tomorrow morning, tune your television into the emergency-services channel on your local cable system. Your set has already been wired so that it will be the only one able to pick up my broadcast.”

Sue Lyn’s mouth went dry. Her ears rang. Her stomach swam with nausea. “What the hell is this about?”

“Just do as you’re told, Senator.

You’ll find out exactly what it’s about at ten o’clock tomorrow morning. Do not defy me again. When the FBI agents reach your house, send them away. Tell them that you were just scared with all of the events surrounding your husband. They’ll understand. After you watch my program, make contact with Angel Monroe in Cleveland, Ohio. She’s a

private investigator and the only person who can save your daughter now. In the meantime, make discreet calls to the German government and arrange for Stefan von Waldenberg's release from prison.”

The phone clicked dead in Sue Lyn's ear.

A moment later, the doorbell sounded at the front door of her beautiful Georgetown home.







## CHAPTER 142

Angel awoke the next morning to bright shafts of sunlight streaming in through the windows of her room at Fairview General Hospital, fifteen miles west of Cleveland.

Snoring in a chair next to her bed, Malachai was still fast asleep. A thin blanket lay in a tangled ball on the floor at his feet.

He came awake with a start a

moment later. “Angel!” he said, rising from his chair and rubbing at his tired eyes. Angel smiled at him, knowing that he’d probably stayed up most of the night watching over her. That’s just the kind of man Malachai was. The kind of man he’d *always* been. It was what had drawn her to the jerk in the first place.

“Thank God!” Malachai went on. “How are you feeling, honey?”

Angel groaned. It hurt like hell to talk. Her esophagus had been rubbed raw from the thick plastic tube. “My throat is killing me,” she croaked.

Malachai went to her bedside table and poured her a glass of water from the pitcher there before holding it up to her lips with a trembling hand. Angel drank deeply, the lukewarm liquid tasting sweeter to her than the finest

French champagne in the world.

“Dana,” she asked, weakly.

“How is Dana?”

Malachai frowned. “Last I heard the woman you were with at the time of the accident was still in surgery. The doctors don’t know if she’ll make it yet.”

The tears came from Angel’s eyes then, but she was much too exhausted to cry fully. She tried to sit up

in bed, badly tweaking a tendon in her neck in the process and sending a hot jolt of pain bolting down her left arm. She ignored it. “I’ve got to out of here,” she said, again trying to straighten in the bed. “I’ve got to check on Dana.”

Malachai’s hands went to her shoulders and pushed her lightly back down into the bed. “Not now, honey. You need to get better first. You need to

rest up and get your strength back.”

He smiled at her mischievously.

“For you *and* our baby.”





# CHAPTER 143

Sue Lyn Pepperton stared at the snowy white image on Comcast Channel 404 for a solid hour before the antique grandfather clock in her living room finally struck ten and the picture blinked on.

A man in a black ski mask adjusted the viewfinder on the opposite end of the connection, bringing the picture into sharp focus. What Sue Lyn

saw on the screen made her want to throw up.

Naked and strapped down to a chair with a dirty rag stuffed into her mouth; Jasmine's quivering thighs had been tied three feet apart with thick ropes. A large white bed sheet had been spread out on the hardwood floor at her feet. A look of sheer *terror* was frozen on her beautiful face. Turning her misty

green eyes to the viewfinder, Sue Lyn's daughter mouthed a single, heartbreaking word.

*Mommy.*

Hot tears streamed down Sue Lyn's face. A moment later, the man in the ski mask reentered the picture from the left side of the frame and inserted a long needle deep into a vein on her daughter's right arm before depressing the plunger.

The spontaneous abortion began almost immediately.

The picture blinked off again suddenly. Five seconds later, Sue Lyn's cellphone rang in her hand.

“One down, one to go, Senator. Have you begun negotiations for Stefan von Waldenberg's release from prison yet?”

Sue Lyn felt dizzy, her thoughts

frozen on the gruesome scene she'd just witnessed: her unborn grandchild dead on a madman's floor.

*One down, one to go.*

Her voice shook uncontrollably. She swallowed hard and tried to pull herself together for Jasmine's sake. She *needed* to. It was her only chance of saving her life. "They said it would take at least a week to arrange for an exchange – von Waldenberg for my

daughter. Please, sir, don't hurt my baby. I can pay you. Any amount of money you'd like. Just name a price and I'll have it to you within twenty-four hours, I swear it."

The man on the other end of the line laughed harshly. "*Pay* me? What makes you think that I want your money, Senator? No, you pompous nigger, I assure you that I won't make things *that*

easy on you. I want you to *suffer*, just as your family made my family suffer. Now listen to me very carefully. You have exactly two days to arrange for Stefan von Waldenberg's release. In the meantime, I'm e-mailing you very specific instructions on where I want the private investigator stationed. She must be alone, Senator. If I even *think* anyone else is with her, your daughter will be executed at once."







# CHAPTER 144

Angel looked up at Malachai in complete shock.

“ O u r *baby*?” she asked, incredulously.

Malachai smiled gently at her.

“That’s right, honey. We’re going to be parents. Me and you. Can you believe that shit? They ran some tests on you when they brought you in after the accident. Routine procedure, they said.

They needed to make sure you weren't pregnant before giving you any drugs that might hurt a baby."

Angel didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so she did a little of both at the same time. "Oh my God, Malachai," she said. "Just, *oh my God*."

Sinking back into the bed, she let out a deep breath and tried to process the stunning news.

*There was a tiny little life growing inside of her!* A tiny little life growing inside of her that would depend on her for *everything*. It was almost too much to comprehend. Angel's jumbled thoughts bumped into one another inside her reeling brain before melting away into an indecipherable jumble of useless letters. Then she took another deep breath.

She and Malachai were going to be *parents*.

Her head was still spinning from the news when a distinguished-looking black woman in her mid-sixties knocked on the door a moment later. The woman was wearing a black suit jacket, a black skirt and black heels. Dark sunglasses covered her eyes.

The woman pushed back the

sunglasses on her head and stepped inside the room. “Miss Monroe?” she asked. “My name is Sue Lyn Pepperton.”



## CHAPTER 145

Jared von Waldenberg leaned back in his chair and lit up a huge Cuban cigar while the sounds of Brahms' *Scherzo* filled his den in Creek Run, Mississippi.

Miles O'Reilly and Seth Collins were kneeling on the floor on the other side of his massive desk. They were handcuffed and naked, blood dripping down from faces that had been violently



transformed into ugly masses of purple bruises. Two lead pipes and a bicycle chain had gotten the job done, something of an unsubtle homage to one of the Race Master's all-time favorite movies, *Cape Fear*.

Von Waldenberg rose from his chair and made his way around the desk, clucking his tongue in disappointment.

"This is *very* unfortunate, my friends,"

he said. “You two were among my finest men. What the hell *happened*?”

A series of indistinguishable grunts came from the purple mess that had once been Miles O'Reilly's face. For his part, Seth Collins had been beaten so savagely that it rendered even the *facsimile* of speech quite impossible.

Von Waldenberg sighed and blew out a huge cloud of fragrant smoke. To purify his race, a few of its

best members would have to die for the cause. A hard truth, perhaps, but a simple enough one to understand nonetheless.

There was no joy in his voice as he turned to Bane and gave the order to finish them off.

Snarling angrily, the dog immediately did what it had been raised to do since birth.



## CHAPTER 146

“Absolutely not,” Malachai snapped. “She’s not going to be used as human *bait*, lady. She’s recovering in the *hospital*, for Christ’s sake!”

Angel held up a hand to quiet him. Shaking her head in confusion, she looked over at Sue Lyn Pepperton. “What does this Jared von Waldenberg want to do with *me*?”

The Alabama senator lowered

her eyes. “I don’t know, Miss Monroe. All I know is that he specifically demanded you.”

When Pepperton lifted her gaze again a moment later, Angel saw that the woman’s eyes were with tears. “Please, Miss Monroe. You’re my only hope.”

Malachai slammed his hand down onto the food tray next to Angel’s bed hard enough to rattle the silverware

in a nerve-jarring cacophony of jangling metal. “No, lady! She’s *pregnant*! Listen to me very carefully: the answer is *no*! No once and no a million fucking times! I don’t give a shit if you *are* a senator.”

Angel turned to Malachai and let out a slow breath. “Settle down, honey. Why don’t you let me talk to the senator in private for a minute?”

Malachai’s eyes flashed with

anger as he stormed to the doorway of the hospital room.

“Don’t you do it, Angel,” he said, turning around to face them and holding her stare before slamming shut the door behind him. “Don’t you *dare* fucking do it.”





# CHAPTER 147

Jared von Waldenberg stacked the traitors' bones calmly in a neat pile next to the barbecue pit behind the Brotherhood's white-supremacist compound deep in the woods of Creek Run, Mississippi.

Dried in a kiln for three hours at four hundred degrees, the bones had been treated with a special accelerant so as to be ready for tonight's festivities.

Von Waldenberg took a deep breath to steady his nerves. The end game was finally upon them. Either his brother would be freed from his cold German prison cell to take his rightful place at the head of their organization, or both the nigger women would die very violent deaths here tonight. It was as simple as that.

Plucking      Miles      O'Reilly's

bashed-in skull off the top of the pile, von Waldenberg held the steady flame of his gold Zippo lighter beneath it. After a moment or two, the skull began to smoke.

Twenty seconds later, it burst into bright orange flames.



# CHAPTER 148

Twelve hours later, Angel shivered uncontrollably in the cold night air at Edgewater Park in Lakewood.

The sound of the waves lapping against the Lake Erie shoreline competed with the drumbeat of her hammering heart to provide the eerie soundtrack for the scene. Directly above her head, a single, angry seagull called out in its screeching voice before

suddenly flapping away into the distance over the lake in a heart-stopping explosion of furiously pumping wings.

Angel's thoughts flashed to Malachai and to the unborn child inside her womb. Malachai had been livid with her for agreeing to help out the senator, of course, but Angel hadn't really had a choice in the matter. Mothers throughout the world shared an

unshakable bond, a bond formed from loving someone else so much that you thought it would make you *die*. And now Angel had become a part of that very special sisterhood. Would be a part of it for the rest of her life.

Besides, there were FBI agents stationed all along the perimeter of the park to protect her – including a *very* angry Bruce Blankenship. Nothing could go wrong.



*Could it?*

Angel shook her head violently to clear away the troubling thought, fighting off another body-racking shiver. Of course nothing could wrong. She was perfectly safe here, with all of the resources of the United States government marshaled around her to make sure of that.

In the branches twenty yards to

her right, the wind rattled like dry bones in a cloth sack. A moment later, the tiny transmitter equipped with a GPS tracking system sounded in her left ear.

“Angel, can you hear me?” Sue Lyn Pepperton asked.

Angel put a finger to her ear.

“Yes, can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” Pepperton answered. “We’ve got the place surrounded. Is there any sign of them

yet?”

Angel squinted her eyes into the darkness and toward the entrance of the park a hundred yards away. “No,” she said. “Nothing yet.”

But the words had no sooner left her mouth before a pair of bright white headlights pierced the pitch-black night like a dragon’s glowing eyes, bobbing up and down from the front of a huge

pickup truck that was careening wildly over a series of foot-high speed bumps spaced fifteen feet apart. Almost immediately, the sharp reports of automatic gunfire shattered the stillness of the night from seven different directions.

Everything was sheer *chaos* after that. A man screamed in the distance as a bullet ripped through his throat. The huge pickup truck burst into flames as

yet another bullet slammed directly into the full tank of gas.

From there, Angel felt as though she were watching something out of an action movie. Stunned, she tried desperately to process the unbelievable scene unfolding in front of her eyes, much too preoccupied with the events going on right now to notice the huge blonde man dressed in black who'd

slipped up behind her in the darkness.

Clamping a large, gloved hand over her mouth, the man stabbed a sharp needle deep into her jugular vein.

“Let’s go, nigger,” the blonde man whispered into her ear. “I’ve got someone who’s just *dying* to meet you – and he ain’t exactly the kind of man who likes waiting, if you know what I mean.”

Angel’s eyelids fluttered briefly

as the potent drug took effect. A moment later, the familiar blackness closed in on the edges of her vision as the huge blonde man threw her limp body over his powerful right shoulder and carried her down to the waiting speedboat fifty feet below.





# CHAPTER 149

Angel moaned groggily as she came awake sometime later in a beautifully appointed den.

She looked down in horror to see that she'd been tethered to a wooden chair by thin lengths of rope that were cutting off the circulation in her wrists and ankles, turning the skin around the ropes a sickening purple.

Her skull felt like it might

explode from the intense pressure building up behind her eyes. She vaguely remembered being driven to an airport somewhere after the chaotic abduction at Edgewater Park, but then she'd slipped back into unconsciousness when the large blonde man had stabbed another sharp needle deep into her neck.

Another huge blonde man —

different than the one from the park – sat behind a massive desk five feet away, frowning darkly at her. On his desk, the tiny transmitter she'd been wearing in her left ear had been smashed into a hundred little pieces of destroyed technology.

The man came around the desk while the sounds of Phitzner's *Palestrina* floated out of an antique record player over in the corner.

Angel's breath caught in her throat when his gaze locked onto hers.

Jared von Waldenberg's bright blue eyes bulged wildly from their sockets. "It's all fucked up, Miss Monroe," he said, clearly panicked. "They haven't released my brother from prison yet – *and they're not going to*. Word just came from Germany that it's not going to happen."

Angel stared up at the man. She tried to keep her voice even as she choked out the words. “You don’t have to do this,” she said, trying to soothe his obviously jangled nerves. “It’s not too late to let Jasmine Pepperton go. You still have time to do the right thing.”

The man lowered his stare and shook his head. “No. I need to follow this thing all the way through to the end.

I'm *much* too far along to just stop now.

Surely you can understand that, can't you?"

The man stepped back and motioned to a young blonde man who was standing next to the door. The muscular young blonde nodded and stepped forward before slipping another needle deep into a vein in Angel's right arm.

Jared von Waldenberg's face

was the last thing she saw before her world melted away.

“Not the abortion drug, Miss Monroe,” he said softly. “Just a little something to help you sleep.”

In Angel’s drugged mind, she was playing with her baby in a beautiful park on a perfect summer’s day. A gorgeous little girl with jet-black hair and bright hazel eyes who was looking

up at her and cooing softly. The sound was enough to shatter Angel's heart into a million tiny little pieces right inside her badly constricted chest.

*So this was what true love felt like.*





## CHAPTER 150

Twenty minutes later, Angel's eyelids fluttered open again.

She gave a start when saw that she was now tied to a sturdy wooden cross constructed of reinforced I-beams that was cemented into a barbecue pit behind the Brotherhood's white-supremacist compound deep in the woods of Creek Run, Mississippi, which was positioned on the map some forty

miles south of Tupelo and a million miles in any direction from anything that might reasonably be considered civilization.

A dozen white hoods flanked the fat one in front of her on either side, angled off in a *V* like a flock of oversized Canada geese. Most of them were holding torches.

The one they called Buck leaned

down and placed a match against the kindling made of human bones at Angel's bare feet. Femurs, ulnas, and vertebrae shaped like tiny horse-collars. Something that looked like part of a broken clavicle. Something else that looked suspiciously like a shard from a bashed-in skull.

After a moment, the bones began to smoke.

Just then, though, the sharp sound

of a gunshot suddenly pierced the pitch-black night and the one they called Buck staggered backward, clutching at his massive neck where the bullet had ripped through his thick throat. Drowning on his own blood with a sickening gargle, the obese man collapsed to the ground three feet away.

Angel looked up at Jared von Waldenberg as he emerged from the

darkness with the huge black dog at his side. Von Waldenberg nodded to the white sheets all around them, then stepped forward and slipped a sharp knife through the restraints on her wrists and ankles.

He held her gaze and motioned to the woods on their right. The tight-lipped smile never left his handsome face. “I’ve decided that this one will be Bane’s kill, Miss Monroe. You have a

five-minute head start. If I were you, I'd use it wisely.”





# CHAPTER 151

Angel's heart slammed painfully in her chest as she plunged deep into the thick underbrush.

Sharp brambles tore at the skin on her arms and legs, ripping open the flesh and drawing hungry little creatures of the night to the fresh feast of oozing blood. Huge insects buzzed loudly in her ears, drowning out her jumbled thoughts. Just *breathing* proved damn

near impossible.

Bleeding badly from twenty different cuts on her body, she stumbled on a large rock in the darkness, almost poking out her left eye on the branch of a huge dogwood tree in the process. Her addled brain raced while her shaking hands groped frantically for moss along the massive trunk of the tree.

*What the fuck was she doing?!*

What the hell *difference* did it make what direction she was going? Angel needed to keep running here, to keep moving, to put some real distance between herself and Jared von Waldenberg and his huge dog.

She took a deep breath through her nostrils and forced herself to calm down. Picking a slight clearing in the trees thirty yards to her right, she tried to

imagine that she was running along the Lake Erie shoreline. Slow and steady until she needed a sudden burst of speed.

Her strides became more even then as her mind flashed back on everyone in her life. Granny Bernice – dead now, shot once between the eyes, maybe even by Jared von Waldenberg himself. Dana Whitestone – a woman who'd gone so far out her way just to be friendly with her that it wasn't even

funny. Malachai – a flawed man, sure, but one who's face had lit up like a giddy child's on Christmas morning when he'd told her that they were going to have a baby together.

Hot tears slid down Angel's cheeks as her thoughts then focused on the most important person in her life: the tiny little thing growing inside of her womb that depended on her for its

survival now; the tiny little thing growing inside her womb that would depend on her for its survival for many, *many* years to come.

A cold splash of water under her feet jerked her mind back into the present. A stream of some kind, not too deep. On the other side, she took another steadying breath and plunged ahead into the blinding darkness.

Then, the sound of something

rustling in the woods suddenly came from no more than a hundred yards to her left.

Angel strained her gaze into the blackness while she continued to run. No use. The night was too dark for her to see anything, pitch-black, like the inside of a coffin.

*Time for a sudden burst of speed.* Breathing in ragged gasps, she

took it, tearing down a slight dip in the earth with the thundering sound of her own heartbeat slamming madly in her ears and again drowning out everything else.

*Searing pain.* The sharp crack of a thick branch snapping beneath her feet.

Only it wasn't a branch.

Bright white stars danced in front of Angel's eyes as her ankle sank even



deeper into the gopher hole, snapping the bone clean in half in a dizzying rush of unbearable agony.

She knew then that she'd never be a mother, after all.



## CHAPTER 152

Angel writhed in agony on the forest floor, trying her best to keep silent as she clutched at her badly broken ankle. Wasn't easy. Sharp pine needles dug into the small of her back, opening up even *more* cuts for the endless insect buffet. Sweat rolled down her face as though poured from a bucket.

A moment later, Jared von Waldenberg and his huge black dog

emerged from the darkness. The harsh glare of a flashlight landed on Angel's face.

“You should have stayed out of it when I sent you your little warnings, Miss Monroe,” von Waldenberg said, shaking his head and holding back the growling dog with a thick steel chain.

“It was a courtesy that I didn't extend to anyone else.”

Angel looked up at von Waldenberg in horror, the pain in her ankle melting his face into some sort of surrealistic Dali painting. “Please, sir,” she sobbed. “I don’t want to die. I want to live. I want to be a *mother*.”

Jared von Waldenberg shook his head again, more firmly this time. “No, Miss Monroe. I’m very sorry, but I need to do what I need to do. It’s all I have

left now.”

Leaning down, he unhooked the dog’s heavy steel chain and pointed in Angel’s direction. “*Angriff*, Bane!”

The dog’s fierce, luminescent green eyes blazed through the darkness as it came for Angel in a snarling flash of sharp white teeth. In a daze, her mind vaguely recognized the command von Waldenberg had spoken in German. *Angriff*.

Attack.

Angel squeezed shut her eyes and frantically sought the word from her college days. Suddenly, her mind seized upon it.

*“Stoppen, Bane!”* she screamed.

Stop. So fucking simple, yet so fucking difficult when your life and the life of your unborn child hung in the balance.

Confused, the huge dog skidded to a halt three feet away. Angel lifted a shaking hand and pointed back to Jared von Waldenberg. “*Angriff*, Bane!”

In the blink of an eye, the Presa bolted back into the darkness from the same direction it had just come.

A moment later, the Race Master’s terrified screams of pain and disbelief echoed throughout the deep



woods all around them as the enormous  
dog leapt at his throat.



## CHAPTER 153

When it was all over thirty seconds later, Angel pulled herself across the forest floor to Jared von Waldenberg's bloody corpse.

Slipping out the Walther from the holster on his belt, she pointed it directly at Bane's massive head while the enormous dog licked his master's bright red blood hungrily off of its thick black lips three feet away.

Closing her eyes, Angel pulled the trigger.

Bane never knew what hit him.

The next four hours were spent dragging herself through the dense woods on a makeshift crutch that she'd crafted from the branch of a fallen dogwood tree. Finally reaching a little-used highway ten miles away, she collapsed in a heap, much too exhausted

to even *think* straight.

Fading in and out of consciousness for the next two hours, Angel somehow lifted up her head and managed to flag down the first car that passed her way.



## CHAPTER 154

Three days later, Angel held a bouquet of bright summer flowers and a small clutch of colorful helium balloons as she hobbled into Dana Whitestone's private room at Fairview General Hospital – this time on a pair of *real* crutches.

The FBI agent lifted her gaze and smiled mischievously at her, the woman's enormous pale blue eyes

twinkling like glittering sapphires in a face carved out of the purest ivory. “No big deal, right, Angel?” Whitestone said. “Just a flesh wound, right?”

Angel laughed and leaned over the bedrail to hold the other woman close. “Thank God, Dana,” she said, fighting back tears. “Just, *thank God*.”

Both women cried for two solid minutes before Angel settled down



gingerly into the chair next to her friend's bed.

The FBI agent sat up straighter and nodded down to the hard plaster cast encasing Angel's left ankle. "I'd be more than happy to sign that thing for you, but I guess this means we won't be going jogging together anytime soon, huh?"

Angel shook her head. "Six to eight weeks is what the doctors say."

She paused and wrinkled her face, waving a hand in the air. “Anyway, enough about me already. How are *you* feeling, Dana?”

Whitestone waved her own delicate hand in front of her face. “I’m fine, partner, ready to get the hell out of here, that much is for sure. Ready to get the hell out of here and finally go be with my *son*.”

Leaning forward, Whitestone took a careful sip of water through a straw poking out of a blue plastic cup. “Anyway, I hear all hell broke loose after your little field trip down to Mississippi. Tell me about it.”

Angel smiled. “Well, your compatriots in the FBI came swooping down on the Brotherhood’s compound like a plague of fucking locusts after I

gave them a general idea of where the hell it was, with Bruce Blankenship leading the way, of course. They got Jasmine Pepperton out of there alive – thank God – but now the poor thing’s on a psychiatric hold at Sibley Memorial down in DC.”

Whitestone was silent for a long moment then. Finally, she said, “It was horrible what they did to her, Angel, but thank God *you*’re OK.”

Angel didn't know what to say.

Thankfully, Whitestone alleviated that problem by gesturing to Angel's slightly distended belly. "I heard the wonderful news," she said. "I've always wanted to be a godmother, you know. Just throwing that out there."

Fresh tears sprang into the corners of Angel's hazel eyes as she struggled to her feet and leaned over the

bedrail to hold the other woman close again.

“Consider it done, Dana.”



# CHAPTER 155

Malachai waited on Angel hand and foot for the next six weeks straight. He'd given her a little silver bell to summon him whenever she needed him last week, and Angel had used it to terrorize him mercilessly ever since.

Smiling down at Angel, Malachai handed her a large glass of orange juice. "So," he said, "since we're having a girl, do you have any



baby names picked out yet, honey?”

Kicked back on the bachelor-*chic* leather couch in the living room of his condo in Avon, Angel looked up at her man and smiled back. “How does Bernice Dana Grimes sound to you?”

Malachai leaned over and kissed her softly on the lips. “That sounds like the most *beautiful* name I’ve ever heard

in my entire life, sweetheart.”



# CHAPTER 156

It was another sunny day in Cleveland one month later as Angel strolled up to the ticket office outside Progressive Field and bought the two best seats they had left. She had started to show a lot more now, and her hand went unconsciously to her belly.

*Had to protect the baby.*

*Always had to protect the baby.*

As she made her way through the

stadium to Section 101 – past the college kids and happy families all fired up about today's game – she smiled to herself. She was going to the game with her best friend, too.

Angel descended the concrete aisle until she reached Row H, just eight rows behind home plate. The view from here was fantastic, the green leaping off of the field like a sudden, brilliant flash

of color in an old black-and-white movie.

When the vendor came around, she ordered two frosty cups of Coca-Cola and placed them into the cup holders on the seat backs in front of her; not even minding that they cost six dollars apiece.

As the first hitter dug his cleats deep into the dirt of the batter's box five minutes later, Angel turned to the empty

seat beside her.

“This is it, Granny Bernice,” she  
whispered softly. “This is the day we’re  
finally gonna beat those goddamn  
Yankees.”

And they did.





## CHAPTER 157

They finally released Dana from Fairview General Hospital six long weeks later, holding her pretty much against her will the entire time as a precautionary measure to make sure that she hadn't sustained any permanent brain damage.

Dana smiled as she stepped through the sliding front doors of the hospital and directly out into the bright

sunlight that was shining down from high overhead in the clear blue skies above. Behaving like the perfect gentleman he'd clearly been raised to be since birth e, Bruce Blankenship had dropped off her Protégé in the hospital's parking lot so that she wouldn't need to take a cab today. God bless his heart. Because Dana didn't want to put off what she was about to next for a single moment longer.

Dana widened the smile on her face as she walked toward her car. The good news hadn't stopped with Blankenship dropping off her car, though. Not even close. Bill Krugman's wife, Marie, had gone back into remission following her most recent round of cancer treatments, and the Director had been so overjoyed by the exhilarating turn of events that he hadn't

even *mentioned* the fact that Dana had broken protocol – *smashed* protocol, actually – by investigating the Brotherhood on her own and by dragging Angel Monroe into the deadly mix. Good thing, too. Because an angry Bill Krugman wasn't the kind of man you wanted to deal with. On *anything*. Not if you cared about a career of any length with the FBI, at least.

Reaching her car a few moments

later, Dana unlocked the Protégé with the keychain-control and slid behind the wheel before cranking the engine to life.

After all this time spent waiting, the time had come for her to take advantage of the most joyful news of all. Because after all this time spent waiting, the time had finally come for Dana to be reunited – once and for all and never to be separated again this time – with her *son*.

Chill bumps danced across her skin at the absolutely terrifying – and absolutely *beautiful* – thought.



## CHAPTER 158

Half an hour after leaving the hospital, Dana pulled the Protégé into the parking lot of the Cleveland Zoo and eased the car into an empty spot before hopping out.

Ten minutes later, she found Shelley Margolis and Bradley – check that, her *son* – standing near the gorilla enclosure and giggling uproariously at the primates’ silly antics while the near-



humans put on a show for the happy crowd gathered ‘round.

Dana stood there for several long moments, just watching little Bradley and taking in the gleeful look on his face, remembering just how much *fun* it had been to be a kid. While she’d been in surgery to relieve the pressure inside her skull brought about by the horrific car crash in which she and Angel Monroe

had been involved – Dana had finally, *blissfully*, made peace with her troubled past.

And this time Dana knew she'd finally made peace with her troubled past *forever*. The past – tenacious as the goddamn thing had been – could never hurt her again. All thanks to her beautiful and loving parents.

Tears wavered in her eyes, blurring her vision. James and Sara

Whitestone's advice to her while they'd been standing in the backyard of Dana's childhood home had been the most precious advice she'd ever received in her entire life. By just letting go – of the pain, of the misery, of the regret, of the *loneliness* – Dana could now grab onto life with both hands and really start *living* again.

And that was something she

hadn't been able to do – not in any meaningful sense, anyway – since she'd been four years old.

Dana took a deep breath through her nostrils and felt the fluttering of her heartbeat inside her badly constricted chest. This was it. Do or die time. No turning back now.

“Hey, there, Bradley!” she called out.

The little boy turned toward the

sound of her voice. His beautiful face lit up brighter than the runway lights over at Hopkins airport as he dropped the snow cone in his tiny hands to the ground at his feet and raced toward her. “Mommy!” he screamed, his gorgeous blue eyes twinkling with a breathtaking combination of both unmistakable joy and barely contained excitement. “Mommy, you came for me!”

Dana fell to her knees and opened her arms, ready to receive her son, to hold onto him tight and to never, *ever* let him go. All of the pain in her life disappeared in that very instant, running away from her heart and mind and body and soul like the scared little ghosts they'd always been.

Bradley opened his own toothpick arms, ready to throw them

around her and hold on tight, too. Now and forever and ever and ever.

He'd made it within ten feet of Dana when the sharp crack of a gunshot suddenly shattered the carnival-like atmosphere that had been hanging in the air at the zoo, murdering it savagely in cold blood. In an instant, screams replaced laughter. Tears replaced smiles. Fear replaced happiness.

Bradley stopped running and

looked down at his chest. A nauseating circle of blood soaked into his *Thomas the Tank Engine* T-shirt. He looked up at Dana again, pain and confusion coloring in his pale blue eyes.

Dana's heart snapped clean in two inside her chest as her mind flared with a dizzying rush of sadness, rage and *indescribable* agony. She would have gladly taken a *million* bullets to the chest



had she been able to spare Bradley just this one.

Springing to her feet, she dashed over to him and caught her son just as he collapsed to the cement.

Dana cradled the little boy's head close to her breast as her world spun wildly out of control, just like it had *always* done ever since she'd been four years old. Just like it always *would* for the rest of her life. Because there

would be no getting over this, she knew that. Not *ever*.

Bradley eyes swam with absolute terror as he locked his blurry gaze onto hers. “Am I going to die, Mommy?” he breathed, coughing up bright pink sprays of blood through his trembling blue lips.

Hard as it was for her to accomplish, Dana forced herself to

answer the little boy. She needed to do this, though. She knew that, too.

She choked out the words through the *boulder* of pain stuck in her throat. “No, my darling little baby boy,” she sobbed; blinking away the blinding tears so that she could continue to hold his rapidly fading stare. “You’re *never* going to die.”

And it was the truth.

In one sense, at least.

Sadly, though, Dana's final words to the most important person she'd ever met in her entire life – the most important person she'd ever meet again until the very day she died herself – had been the truth in but one, heartbreaking sense only.



## CHAPTER 159

From high overhead on the rocky ledge overlooking the gorilla enclosure, Jack Yuntz snapped shut the metal fasteners on his guitar case, securing the beautiful new AR-47 military assault rifle inside.

Slipping away into the cover of the nearby woods a moment later, he sighed contentedly as he headed for the highway three hundred yards away. The

AR-47 had been just one of the *many* perks he'd received from the late, great Jared von Waldenberg – may the idiot's eternal soul rest in peace forever. Or *burn* in hell. Jack really didn't care.

Jack smiled to himself, remembering the almost *comical* scene he'd just wrought. Dana Whitestone cradling the little boy's head in her arms, blubbering like the weak fool

she'd always been. The little boy not knowing *what* the hell to think as his life force expired just like one of those little red flags on a parking meter. Still, even after all this, Jack wasn't anywhere *near* finished yet, now was he?

Nope, not even close.

Jared von Waldenberg – stupid as the man had been – had at least made good on his promise to spring Jack from the Connelly Institute. With a little help



from the inside, the entire thing had gone down as smoothly as if they'd extracted him from a kindergarten class underneath the distracted gaze of a harried substitute teacher. And when he'd checked his overseas bank account earlier that morning, Jack had seen that the money von Waldenberg had promised him had already been sitting there for more than a week.

Enough to set him up for *life*.

And now that he'd made good on his end of the deal, Jack could now concentrate all his noble efforts on Dana Whitestone, just as he'd always planned to do ever since the very beginning, ever since the day that she'd snapped silver handcuffs around his wrists back in the ritzy Presidential Suite of the Fontainebleau Hotel in downtown

Manhattan eighteen months earlier.

First, though, he wanted to play with Dana Whitestone a little more. Tease her a bit. *Challenge* her. See just how good the bitch really was.

Manhood wasn't very far away now, after all – just a few more years. And after that, the *final* showdown could take place.

But first, a little more fun.

Jack resisted the urge to break

out into song as he finally reached the highway fifteen long minutes later.

Never before in his life had ever gotten such a *charge* out of playing chess.



# CHAPTER 160

Bradley's funeral three days later barely registered in Dana's drugged-up mind. She'd become a living zombie thanks to the Xanax – enough to stun a thoroughbred horse. She hadn't tasted her food, hadn't heard all the well-intentioned words people had said to her during the service. Hadn't *felt* anything at all.

Good thing, too. Because if

Dana *had* felt anything, she knew she'd go clinically insane. Of course, that possibility still remained, though, didn't it? Of course it did. Maybe when she quit taking the drugs, which she planned to do just as soon as everybody stopped watching her. And they *would* stop watching her, Dana knew. They always did.

After that, who knew? She

supposed she'd just have to wait and find out.

Almost time to join all the others on the other side.

Bruce Blankenship's left arm was draped around her shoulder as they made their way up to the tiny white casket. Dana looked directly at the little boy, but she didn't actually *see* him. What she *did* see, however, was the envelope attached to the colorful flower



arrangement five feet to the right of the coffin. An envelope that had been addressed to *her*.

In a daze, she covered the short space and plucked the envelope off the flowers. She felt nothing as she read the note inside. No grief. No anger. No pain.

*Nothing.*

CHECKMATE, AGENT  
WHITESTONE. THAT WAS A LOT  
OF FUN. WANT TO PLAY AGAIN?

YOURS TRULY,  
JY

THE END

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

If you've made it this far,

thank you for reading my book! I hope you enjoyed it. Please leave a review! I'd also like to take this opportunity to invite you to join me on my Facebook page [here](#). Hope to see you there!

**SHARP FORCE TRAUMA**

**A DANA**

**WHITESTONE THRILLER**

**BY JON OSBORNE**

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skin: the white power murders

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# PART I

“Peek-a-boo.”

Eric Harris, to Cassie Bernall, right before the trench-coated high school senior shot the pretty, blonde-haired junior in the head while she hid beneath a library table with her terrified classmates during the infamous Columbine High School massacre on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1999.





# CHAPTER 1

*Friday; 12:30 p.m.; St. Anthony Elementary*

*School; Lorain, Ohio (40 miles west of Cleveland)*

The young man wearing a long black trench coat slipped undetected into St. Anthony's Catholic grade school just as the second of the two lunchtime bells rang, signaling an unwanted return to classes for the two hundred or so students unlucky enough to be in attendance that day.

None of the pint-sized pupils skittering about the place took much notice of the ominous shadow of death moving among them – practically right *through* them – but no great surprise there. After all, despite any muckle-mouthed nonsense New Age-apologists might like to spout to the contrary, children made such fine targets precisely because they didn't notice *anything*

going on around them, much less everything. The plain truth of the matter was that anybody under the age of twelve not only represented lambs easily led to the slaughter, but lambs that had no idea where the hell they were going at all – and most likely wouldn't have been able to comprehend their shared doom even if they did.

And so it was under these highly fortuitous circumstances that Jack Yuntz,

decked out in shiny black combat boots complete with blood red shoelaces tied up tight enough to cut off the circulation in his ankles, climbed the cement staircase at the northeast corner of the eighty-year-old brick building and paused in the upper hallway of the two-level structure to assess the situation.

*Perfect.* Everyone had made it into their proper spaces on the

chessboard now, including himself: the most important and powerful piece of them all. The most *deadly* piece of them all. Finally – after all that time spent arranging the annoying particulars – the game he loved so much could begin anew.

And maybe – just maybe – it could finally *end* this time, too.

Jack closed his eyes and drew a deep breath into his lungs to further steel

his resolve, readying himself mentally for the next step. One way or the other, he knew that this game would ultimately culminate in death – either his own or that of Special Agent Dana Whitestone of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Anyone who got caught in the crossfire simply represented unavoidable collateral damage. Because if nothing else, sacrificing pawns for the greater

good had always marked an integral component of chess, now hadn't it? Of course it had. Always would.

And – as Maverick from *Top Gun* might have said given the platform and opportunity – St. Anthony's represented an extremely *target-rich* environment.

Jack opened his eyes again and began walking down the hall, giving himself a quick mental pat on the back

for all the hard work he'd put in to reach this point and resisting the sudden urge to break out into a wide grin despite the current raw state of his frazzled nerves. This was the *fun* part of his work, after all. The *payoff*.

He should be *enjoying* this.

He swallowed hard and wiped his shaking hands against the sides of his long black coat, flicked his desiccated



tongue across his sandpaper lips, wishing like hell that he'd thought to bring along some water to slake his unrelenting thirst. Amateur mistake on his part; no two ways about it. He'd tried his damndest – both mentally and physically – but he hadn't yet mastered complete control of his physiology: the manner in which the cells in his body carried out the chemical signals from his brain. Still, he was working on it, and

he needed to remember that Rome hadn't been built in a day. Neither had it fallen that quickly, for that matter. Like just about everything else involved in this highly complex and monumentally important mission, though, time was squarely on his side here. Cunning, too. Same thing went for preparation and guts.

Most importantly of all, *youth*

was on his side here.

And who could put a price on something like that?

As things stood now, however, Jack's mouth was bone-dry, his palms were flooded with perspiration and his furiously pumping ticker was pounding away so madly inside his badly constricted chest that he feared it might sprout tiny little fingers and *claw* its way through his ribcage before jumping right

out of his body of its own accord and flopping around wildly on the shiny white tile at his feet in a streaky red mess.

This was it, though. Jack knew that. No turning back now. No more putting off until another day what needed to be done today. And if everything went well for him, soon enough all of the pain, suffering and loneliness he'd

experienced over the past tumultuous year of his life would prove worth it. Because soon enough he'd have yet another innocent child positioned directly in his crosshairs.

Quite literally, as it would turn out.

The delicious realization was enough to send waves of ice-cold gooseflesh fluttering across the electrified surface of his sweat-slicked

skin, stitching it up tighter than a cadaver's Y-incision under the nimble fingers of an experienced coroner and causing a sudden, shameful stirring in his pants.

As far as logistics went, the necessary reconnaissance work for this opening salvo had been conducted weeks in advance – a hallmark that Jack knew sang of a professional hit. Good

thing, too. Because although he eventually wanted to take complete and total credit for orchestrating this dastardly foray into the very heart of the American educational system, at the same time he didn't want to make things *too* easy on the woman who'd be tracking him down. Where would the challenge be in that? No, the closer this fight proved to be the better and the more exciting for him. Besides, picking

on weaker opponents only made you a bully, and Jack had *never* acted like a bully a single day in his entire life. Not in his book, at least. He simply ached to test himself against the best one last time. Where, exactly, lay the unforgivable mortal sin in that?

Much as he'd expected, he'd encountered *zero* resistance to his entrance to the school, which marked the



primary reason that he'd chosen this particular private institution in the first place. Thank God for small favors. Because if this had this been a public school – funded by taxpayers' dollars – he'd have needed to navigate locked doors in a best-case case scenario and a school resources officer and metal detector in a worst-case one. Not to mention the goddamn cameras all over the place, which had become *de rigueur*

in school security ever since the bloody mess that had gone down at Columbine High School in Colorado more than a decade earlier when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had murdered thirteen of their fellow students in a blistering hail of angst-fueled gunfire before sampling the barrel-flavors of their own, still-smoking weapons.

A week before graduation.

Jack shook his head at the complete *stupidity* of it all and forced his thoughts back onto the proper track. No time for that right now. He didn't even want to *think* about those two losers at this point. Not when he was this close to finally extracting his long-awaited revenge. Because, who knew? Some of their idiocy might actually rub off on him, and that was a chance he

simply couldn't afford to take. Besides, Catholic schools such as this situated on the rocky shore of Lake Erie didn't possess the disposable income required for all those shiny bells and screeching whistles, anyway. Not on their shoestring budgets. Not with all of the dough their parent churches had tied up in paying out settlements to the victims of pedophile priests – gross old men with gin-blossom noses who couldn't

seem keep their hands to themselves around the altar boys.

The unyielding feel of the rifle tucked beneath Jack's trench coat along his left side might've provided comfort to him had he been the kind of boy who required comforting, but he wasn't. Not anymore, anyway. Not even close. Hadn't been ever since the life-altering day more than a year earlier when he'd

discovered his mother's murdered and mutilated body tied down to the filthy floor of her condemned New York City apartment, her gruesome death having marked just another in the long line of victims of the Chessboard Killer, which – not unlike the Hillside Strangler duo of Kenneth Bianchi and Angelo Buono out in California during the late 1970s – had actually turned out to have been *two* men, Sergei Michalovic and Edward

O'Hara: both very dead now, thanks to Jack.

Jack inhaled quickly several times through his nostrils and resisted the overpowering temptation to cry at the soul-crushing memory. On the awful day his mother had died his heart had turned as cold and hard as the steel currently tucked away inside his long black trench coat, never to be made completely

whole again. The same cold, hard steel that he'd soon use to refresh the unfinished chess match going on between himself and Special Agent Whitestone – an exceedingly interesting little affair that had most recently seen him blow a foot-wide hole into the chest of the four-year-old boy she'd been stupid enough to think he'd allow her to adopt. Not to mention the beautiful move he'd executed by jamming a sharp pair of



scissors deep into the exposed throat of her former partner and sometimes-lover, Jeremy Brown. *Nobody* had seen that one coming. Not even the venerable Miss Whitestone herself.

“Hey. Hey, you.”

Jack frowned as he was bumped rudely out of his reverie. Looking down, he saw a pretty little thing in a flower-patterned dress standing at his right side

and tugging insistently at the bottom of his trench coat. Maybe six years old, judging by the look of her. Seven, max. Probably a first-grader, if not a lowly kindergartner.

Jack bit down hard into his lower lip and fought back a sudden swell of anger in his chest. Wasn't easy. It took every last ounce of patience he possessed to keep himself from backhanding the presumptuous brat

across the face just as hard as he possibly could for bothering him at this hugely crucial moment, sending her tiny, purple-framed glasses flying across the hall in the process. The lone soft spot left in his heart might have been reserved specifically for children, but he really didn't have time for this shit right now.

Right now, he had *work* he

needed to do.

Reining in his anger the best he could, he gave the little girl the once-over, sliding his cold gaze from the top of her head all the way down to the tips of her scuffed and untied saddle shoes. Her short blonde hair had been cut into an adorable bob that framed bright blue eyes glittering behind the colorful glasses in an angelic face carved out of pure porcelain, twin sparkling sapphires

that were further illuminated by the yellow-tinted fluorescent light streaming down from the ceiling above their heads. All in all, remarkably similar in appearance to and not much younger than Molly. Not to mention the childhood version of the soon-to-be-dealt-with Dana Whitestone.

Jack's throat tightened without warning at the unexpected thought of

Molly – his faulty physiology rearing up its ugly head again in its never-ending attempt to undermine his hard-won confidence. He sighed heavily. If nothing else, he knew that he'd need to work on getting his traitorous body under control if he wanted to serve up the heaped helping of humble pie that Dana Whitestone so desperately needed to taste.

Taste until the pompous bitch

*choked* on it.

Jack took another deep breath and willed himself to calm down. Jangled nerves led to stupid mistakes and represented the trademark of an amateur. He knew that. Besides, if he were to be perfectly honest about the whole thing, he supposed he couldn't be *too* hard on himself for his unwanted physical reactions to his crippling

emotional pain. Ever since the deaths of his parents (his father by Jack's own, at-the-time-inexperienced hand), his little sister was all that he had left in this world in terms of family. And though he hadn't seen Molly in better than a year now (and though she'd inadvertently ratted him out to Dana Whitestone back in New York City during the whole Chessboard Killer debacle), he planned to rectify that situation very soon.



*Needed* to rectify it very soon, as a matter of fact. Because ever since he and Molly had first been separated he'd felt completely dead on the inside, and that unpleasant feeling didn't seem at all likely to go away on its own anytime soon.

Only one way to fix that – even if it meant temporarily putting Molly in the line of fire.

Jack finished composing himself and traded in the dark frown on his face in favor of an easy smile. Typical psychopath behavior, he knew – this ability to change his personality on the fly in order to achieve what he wanted – but also a useful card to play at the moment. Reaching down, he clamped a moist hand on the girl's bony shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. “What is

it, sweetheart?” he asked. “How can I help you?” Sincerity oozed from his voice. His face crinkled up with just the right amount of concern. A real chameleon – that was him, all right.

The little girl let go of his coat and shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other in an obvious effort to underscore the urgency of her situation. “I need to go to the bathroom,” she squeaked in a high-pitched voice that

immediately made Jack think of Minnie Mouse, at the same time looking around quickly to make sure that none of her nosier classmates were eavesdropping on them at the moment. This was *private* information, after all. Not for general consumption. “I need to go *really* bad.”

Jack released the little girl’s shoulder and blew out a frustrated breath

over his teeth. Pulling back the sleeve of his trench coat, he checked the time on the cheap plastic watch strapped around his left wrist. *12:33 p.m.* He'd already been in the school for more than three minutes already and he'd only given himself five to get in, do what he needed to do and get out. Not a very good start, to say the least. Still, professionals needed to adapt to their circumstances as they presented themselves. Anything

less was for the brain-deficient losers who actually *wanted* to go to prison.

“Then why don’t you *go* to the bathroom, honey?” Jack asked, somehow managing to keep his own tone relatively civil while at the same time attempting to put an end to the inconvenient conversation just as quickly as it had begun. Perturbed as though he might be by the girl’s incredibly inconsiderate

interruption at this highly critical juncture, however, he also realized that sometimes the easiest answers proved the most difficult to figure out for yourself – especially when you possessed the woefully inept mental faculties of a child.

No luck for him on that count, though, unfortunately.

“I forgot where it is,” the little girl whined, practically *hopping* from

foot to foot now in a panicked response to the ever-expanding pressure in her absurdly inefficient bladder. “Can’t you take me? *Please?* I think I’m going to pee right in my pants.”

Jack looked up from the girl and scanned the hallway. He cursed softly beneath his breath. The space had filled up to near capacity now. Fewer than twenty feet away, a portly nun wearing a



long string of wooden prayer beads around her impossibly fleshy neck shepherded chattering children into a classroom. Once the jowly penguin caught sight of him the jig would be up, and Jack knew it. So like it or not – and whether or not he'd planned it out this way for the past several months – he'd been left with no other choice but to edit the original script. He needed to act *now*.

So that was exactly what he did.

In a heart-stopping blur of well-practiced movement, he sprang nimbly backward, sending the little boy standing directly behind him careening out of the way. The rifle came from beneath his trench coat in a glimmering flash of cold black metal that would soon become very *hot* black metal, indeed. Raising

his arms, he leveled the barrel of his intimidating weapon squarely at the center of the little girl's birdlike-chest.

Then, almost as if to answer in no uncertain terms her amazingly selfish question about escorting her to the bathroom when he clearly had other, more *important* tasks to attend to at the moment, he jerked back his right index finger hard on the trigger.

A violent explosion of power

roared up Jack's arms with the firing of the rifle, setting every last nerve-ending in his body on fire with the surge of pure *omnipotence* that washed all hot and sticky through his veins like a dose of pure black-tar heroin. After all of this time of feeling so lost, of feeling so alone and directionless, he'd finally found himself *exactly* where he'd wanted to be all along:

A mighty god among mere mortals who was serving as their cold-blooded judge, jury and executioner.

A bright red splotch blossomed across the little girl's scrawny chest as the speeding projectile made thudding impact with her fragile breastbone a split-second later, followed almost at once by a waterfall-rush of urine that streaked down her toothpick-thin legs

and pooled in a liquid yellow mess on the shiny white tile at her feet.

Pure *chaos* followed after that as screams of terror ripped through the hallway. The little girl stumbled backward three feet, clutching at her badly traumatized chest and gasping helplessly for air. All throughout the hallway, sneakers squeaked dissonantly against the tiled floor as confused children relied on the instincts they'd

been born with in a manic attempt to escape the wild-eyed lunatic who was firing a rifle in the confines of their previously safe school. A beautiful ballet of madness that Jack wouldn't soon forget, accompanied by sounds that were absolute *music* to his ears.

Breathing hard through his nostrils now – practically *snorting* with the pulse-pounding excitement of it all –

he swung the barrel of his weapon around in the direction of a little boy who was standing five feet away and wearing a clean white polo shirt, simultaneously racking the pump-action rifle again with a blood-freezing *click-clack*. The little boy froze in place at the ominous sound, as though his feet had been nail-gunned to the floor. Then his enormous brown eyes widened in absolute *horror* as he became painfully



aware of his own mortality for the very first time in his ridiculously short life.

Winking at the boy, Jack Yuntz pulled back his finger on the trigger again – even *harder* this time – not entertaining for even a millisecond the thought of bestowing mercy upon him.

After all, who in the hell had ever bestowed any mercy upon *Jack*?

Nobody, that's who.

And now they'd all pay for it.

Starting with these clueless little  
children here today.



## CHAPTER 2

*Friday; 8:30 p.m.; Oak Barrel Bar; Cleveland,  
Ohio*

The man's target sat alone at the end of the long mahogany bar; enveloped by a thick cloud of swirling cigarette smoke that danced languidly above her frizzy brown hair as though moving to the haunting melody of a beautiful love song only it could hear.

Horatio D'Arbinville shifted in

his seat and wrinkled up his slender patrician nose in thinly veiled disgust at the mere *sight* of this complete train-wreck of a woman – this despite the true feelings that he had locked away for her deep inside his heart:

The feelings of pure and utter devotion. The feelings of pure and utter love. The feelings of pure and utter *lust*.

Mixed in with more than just a

dash of greed, of course. Couldn't forget about that. After all, greed turned good men great. It turned cowards brave. Above all else, greed made sure things got *done*. And quite aside from whatever other faults might be pinned to the back of his finely tailored suit at the moment (and quite aside from any unfortunate comparisons one might see fit to draw to Michael Douglas's "Gordon Gecko" character in the 1980s

movie *Wall Street*, of course), if nothing else, Horatio D'Arbinville had always been the sort of man who'd gotten things done. Hell, getting things done had always marked his single greatest claim to fame in this hopelessly uncultured world that he had the great misfortune to inhabit. His goddamn *trademark*; every bit as noticeable as his lean and muscular body, impeccable taste in

fashion and the generally aristocratic air that hung about him.

The woman in his crosshairs at the moment certainly didn't *look* like most of his other previous targets, though – no debating that simple fact. Not even remotely. Too bad for D'Arbinville, but that was the way the cookie crumbled sometimes. Wasn't that what the Americans always said?

In stark contrast to the thin and



glamorous jet-setting types he usually preferred, this woman appeared slightly overweight, more than just a tad bit drunk presently and pasty-faced to a fault. Not to mention just plain *dour*-looking.

Helen Morgan sat with her wide, manly shoulders hunched forward like a football player huddled up for last play of the last game of the year, but not even

her sloppy posture could obscure bloodshot hazel eyes that had been plastered with far too much inexpertly applied mascara. No matter how hard he tried to do so, D'Arbinville couldn't detect anywhere at all within her completely defeated body language even the slightest *trace* of self-confidence.

In other words, she couldn't have presented a more perfect fit for his intentions for the evening if she'd tried.

Still, Helen Morgan suffered from a terrible many problems in the looks department. The poor soul. For on top of these notable and extremely visible transgressions, D'Arbinville also saw that she had also somehow seen fit to leave her home that night in an outlandishly garish get-up that came complete with a vomit-colored blouse, skin-tight yoga pants testifying to the fact

that she'd never practiced yoga a single day in her entire life and too-big silver hoop earrings that stretched the lobes of her ears in a decidedly unattractive manner. Rather disgusting on the whole, really, when you looked at the unpleasant view through the crystal-clear lens of absolute honesty. Then again, beauty had always lain in the eye of the beholder, now hadn't it? Of course it had. And to Horatio

D'Arbinville – at least on this particular night – Helen Morgan appeared absolutely *gorgeous*. A stunning vision of jaw-dropping femininity. The belle of the ball. The queen of the prom.

The unquestioned woman of his dreams.

D'Arbinville smiled a toothy grin – the one that folded his handsome face clean in half – and took a violent

pull on his cigarette before flicking a short line of gray ash into the clean glass tray that was sitting on the scarred wooden table in front of him while the sounds of *She's Like the Wind* poured forth from the antique Wurlitzer jukebox situated over in the southwest corner of the bar.

D'Arbinville widened his smile another half an inch or so as he listened to the late, great Patrick Swayze work

his way deftly through the iconic Eighties song. Fitting tune for the occasion, certainly, especially considering the fact that this rather mousy woman had proven so remarkably difficult to catch up with. Still, that had been then and this was now, and right now D'Arbinville had backed his surprisingly elusive quarry *directly* into the corner where he'd wanted her all

along:

Drunk, desperate and looking for  
love.

Just like him.

D'Arbinville took another  
healthy drag on his smoke and relished  
the heavy taste of tobacco on his tongue  
before leaning back contentedly in his  
sturdy wooden chair and allowing  
himself to savor the moment. He'd  
always *adored* these quiet slices of calm



directly prior to the striking of the storm. They gave him an all-too-rare chance to collect his thoughts, to gear up for the events that would soon transpire, to ensure that he operated at the utmost capacity of his extremely considerable abilities. And unlike the majority of the other missions he'd undertaken in the past, this time he had more than just a little financial incentive driving him

along.

Because this time – fates willing – he'd also have the opportunity to restore the criminally besmirched honor of his beloved family name.

The smile ran away from D'Arbinville's face at once at the infuriating thought. Sadly, however, he knew that he couldn't restore his family's name without initially taking something equally precious from the man

who'd sullied it so badly with his wholly unforgivable actions in the first place.

Thankfully for him, though, the unsuspecting Helen Morgan provided him with the ideal opportunity to do just that.

The Frenchman lowered his gaze eighteen inches and stared at the cigarette tucked between his manicured

fingers. Undulating wisps of smoke floated softly upward toward his eyes and made them water slightly, filling his nostrils with the pleasing scent of fine tobacco. Applying slight pressure on the filter with his knuckles, he dented the tightly rolled cotton as his anger began to burn even *more* insistently in the back of his throat, producing a sharp, acidic taste in his mouth that immediately made him want to spit. Even if it meant a

lifetime spent in prison for his troubles, he'd smash in Zachary Paulson's smug little face with his bare fists until it had been turned into a bloody, soupy mess that not even the man's mother would be able to identify at the morgue once they pulled back the opaque plastic sheet. Hell, D'Arbinville would consider a lifetime in prison *worth* it.

That being said, he certainly had

no plans of getting *caught* here tonight – or on any other night in the near future, for that matter. Where the hell would lay the point in that? No, he'd stick to the game plan here and see each one of the particulars all the way through to the inevitable, bitter end.

And the first step on that long journey began with the entirely perfect, completely beautiful and hopelessly naïve Helen Michele Morgan.

D'Arbinville leaned forward in his chair and stubbed out his cigarette before immediately lighting up another and resuming his smoking. His coffin nails of choice were Gitanes – always had been ever since he'd been sixteen years old and running the dirty streets of Paris with his rowdy friends – now removed from their iconic blue box and placed into a sterling silver case that had

been etched with his initials. Classier that way. More *European*. Not to mention the ideal affectation to impress the American woman seated across the bar.

D'Arbinville blew out a huge cloud of smoke and shook his head in mild contempt, knowing full well that it wouldn't take very much to impress the lovely Miss Morgan. Never did with these woefully unlettered provincial



types. For all the positive qualities they might possess – and Lord knew they possessed a hell of a lot of them – the women here in the States had always impressed so goddamn *easily*.

D'Arbinville sighed and chased away the thought with a quick shake of his head. Didn't want to get too far ahead of himself here. *To everything there is a season, and a time to every*

*purpose under heaven.* Leaning back in his seat, he let loose with another long, smooth stream of grayish-blue smoke, making a small, wavering *O* with his lips before efficiently clearing away the pungent fog hanging in front of his face with a rapid wave of his left hand. This was it. No more waiting. No more preparing. No more following this middle-aged spinster all around the city while he played unpaid private eye.

Because once everything had been boiled down to brass tacks, his time was *worth* something, goddamn it. A lot, actually. And he intended to be paid for his time. A *lot*. And *soon*.

D'Arbinville found his best smile again at the comforting thought and took another long drag on his cigarette as the jukebox in the corner switched over to *Cecilia* by Simon and Garfunkel.

Tapping his left dress shoe against the uneven wooden floorboards at his feet in perfect time to the upbeat ditty, he lifted his three fingers of mid-quality Scotch to his full lips and took a tentative sip, feeling the potent amber liquid warm his gullet while he surveyed the other patrons present at the Oak Barrel Bar on Euclid Avenue in downtown Cleveland with a discerning eye.

The place didn't look very full to

him, even though Friday night should have marked a measurable up-tick in business for the proprietors. Still, all the better for doing what it was he needed to do. Fewer patrons meant fewer witnesses, and drunks possessed notoriously poor recall skills, anyway. Always had ever since the very beginning of time. Not to mention the fact that he and his small – though

extremely *well-trained* – team had prepared far too meticulously for the train to go running off the rails before it even had a chance to pull away from the station.

The bottom line here hadn't changed one little bit:

He and Helen Morgan were going to have a *baby* together.

“Can I get you anything else, sweetheart?”

D'Arbinville looked up at the sound of the throaty-sounding female voice filling his left ear. A full-figured waitress in her mid-twenties was standing over his table with a circular serving tray balanced in her right hand. Naturally pretty, with just a trace of understated make-up highlighting her soft features – quite unlike the painted-up caricature Helen Morgan presented fifty

feet away.

Sitting back in his chair again, D'Arbinville breathed in the server's floral perfume and allowed his smoldering brown eyes to do what they'd always done so very well since he'd been just a boy:

Notice *every single detail*, no matter how slight or initially inconsequential those details might seem.



Mid-length, dyed-blonde hair framed a youthful-looking face featuring a pair of large and shiny doe-brown eyes that book-ended a cute and slightly upturned nose. Several cheap silver rings adorned her surprisingly slender fingers. Most notably of all, her pleasingly plump cleavage threatened to burst right through the buttons of a shirt that had been chosen a size too small for

two *extremely* apparent reasons.

D'Arbinville sharpened the smile on his face into the approximation of a freshly whetted axe blade and mentally complimented the server for her obvious financial acumen. If nothing else, the girl clearly knew how to maximize her tips. Smart cookie. Pity he didn't have time for her tonight. Because ever since he'd first entered the hopelessly dull and dreary bar an hour

and a half ago, his dance card had already been filled up from top to bottom with a single, beautiful name.

Straightening in his seat again, he nodded and felt a delicious thrill of anticipation swirl around deep in the pit of his stomach. This was it. The time had finally come for him to get off the sidelines and jump feet-first into this long-overdue and highly dangerous game

of cat-and-mouse. His claws had been honed to razor-sharp points, his reflexes felt quick and nimble and his belly had been grumbling for *nine months* now.

High time for him to enjoy some delicious mouse stew.

Gesturing to his target – who'd just finished off the last of her latest oversized cocktail and who was now reaching back into her ridiculously oversized beige purse to light up yet

another smoke, he cleared his throat forcefully and said, “As a matter of fact, yes, I believe you can. If it doesn’t present too much trouble for you, I think I’d like to buy a drink for that lovely young lady seated over there at the end of your fine bar.”



# CHAPTER 3

*Friday; 8:42 p.m.; Lakewood, Ohio (10 miles west of Cleveland)*

As the dashing (though unquestionably psychotic) Horatio D'Arbinville ordered a drink for the decidedly plain-Jane Helen Morgan over at the Oak Barrel Bar on Euclid Avenue in downtown Cleveland, Dana Whitestone huddled on her living-room couch beneath a tattered plaid blanket

that hadn't been washed in three weeks.

Dana closed her horribly puffy, hopelessly bloodshot and thoroughly *exhausted* eyes while she ran a small hand through her short blonde hair, cursing the day she'd been born into this unfeeling world that had given her everything only to snatch it away again at the hands of a string of bloodthirsty killers.



Her devoted parents, James and Sara: slain by Dana's half-brother, Nathan Stiedowe, who'd also taken out her mentor, Crawford Bell, and her best friend, Eric Carlton, along the way. Six months after that, the man of her dreams – the ridiculously kindhearted Jeremy Brown – had followed those four doomed souls prematurely into the afterlife, murdered in cold blood by an

up-and-coming serial killer who'd only recently turned sixteen years old. The same youthful offender who'd finally ripped Dana's still-beating heart right out of her chest with his most recent stomach-turning kill.

All told, six beautiful, vivacious and completely *innocent* people who were all dead now simply because they'd had the distinct misfortune of getting caught up in the insatiable vortex

of Dana's wretched excuse for a life.

First-world problems, though,  
right?

Dana tugged at a greasy knot near her left ear. She'd given her hair a cursory combing each day in an attempt to keep the tangles away, but not much more than that. She simply lacked the energy for it anymore. And who the hell could blame her for that? After

everything she'd been through in her life – after all the *blood* she'd seen – it was a goddamn miracle that she hadn't been committed to the nearest insane asylum yet.

Dana closed her eyes and let out a heavy sigh that deflated her chest completely, knowing full well that if anything went wrong with the horrible thing she planned to do here tonight that fate still remained a *definite* possibility.

Only time would tell, and time, she was definitely a-tickin' now. Ready the white coats that restricted the free movement of your arms, for the safety of both yourself and that of those around you. Either that or ready a funeral shroud for her. When all was said and done, though, Dana knew that she wouldn't be sitting here wearing these stained gray sweat pants or this badly

wrinkled Cleveland Indians T-shirt with former shortstop Omar Vizquel's faded last name printed across the back much longer. A tragic loss to the fashion world, she felt sure. Still, at least Omar Vizquel's old *number* fit her life pretty well.

*Thirteen:* everybody's least-favorite combination of digits.

Dana wrinkled up her nose at the offending smell in her nostrils. The

source of the odor wasn't hard to trace. Half-full containers of Chinese take-out littered the coffee table in front her, no doubt covered in penicillin by this point. Nothing to alert the press about there, though. Nothing newsworthy at all about the fact that un-refrigerated, perishable foods often underwent that sort of radical chemical change after a while. Unfortunately for her, however,

the spoiled food didn't mark the end of it when it came to the general lack of cleanliness surrounding her. Not even close. Bulging bags of garbage had also been stacked up high near the front door; some of them not even tied shut. A general scent somewhere between sour milk and old shoes hung in the air. All things considered, it would have been entirely safe to say that the state of her life matched the state of her apartment



right now.

In other words: a complete and utter mess.

A mess Dana knew that she could never clean up, no matter how hard she scrubbed or how many different brands of cleansers she tried out.

Because like it or not, sometimes blood stained.

She sucked in a ragged breath

that fluttered her lips against her teeth and forced herself to not start blubbering again. Another thing for which she simply lacked the energy anymore. Besides, the chances that enough moisture remained in her overworked tear ducts to support another extended crying jag seemed highly unlikely to her. Not at the world-class rate she'd been going for the past twenty-two days now. Again, though, no big surprise there.

After all, murdered children tended to have that sort of soul-sapping affect on people.

Especially murdered children who'd *almost* been yours.

The television was on, but Dana hadn't been paying much attention to the rerun of *Pillow Talk* starring Rock Hudson and Doris Day. What was the point? There existed no hope at all of

getting lost in somebody else's world while she remained so hopelessly stuck in her own – a cruel, vicious world in which four-year-old little boys could have their chests disintegrated by a cowardly monster squeezing the trigger on a high-powered rifle from a hundred yards away.

Dana bit down hard into her trembling lower lip and blinked back the fresh surge of hot tears that sprang up

into her pale-blue eyes at the excruciatingly painful memory. Jack Yuntz hadn't stopped with the mere killing of little Bradley, though. Not by a long shot. That hadn't been good enough for the bastard. Simply murdering the little boy hadn't been enough to satisfy the youthful lunatic's newly acquired taste for blood. Because after killing the little boy the

unbelievably audacious prick had then had the gall to actually *mock* Dana at Bradley's funeral, sending along a flower arrangement bearing a card that playfully challenged her to come for him, if she dared.

No shot of that happening, though. Not anymore. Dana knew that she was done. Had been for the past three weeks now. Let someone *else* take up the struggle for a little while. She'd

given all she that she had and she didn't have a single thing left to give.

Except for maybe *one* last thing.

A token gesture, perhaps, but the only thing of value she had left to offer this world.

From her post on the living-room couch, she stared at her pair of identical-twin cats, which struck even her as odd, considering the fact that she'd always

kept just one feline companion around to break up the crushing feelings of loneliness that went hand-in-hand with being a forty-year-old single woman who had no living family left to speak of.

Or to.

“What are you two looking at?”

Dana slurred, tasting the potent whiskey still burning the back of her throat. Not surprisingly, she'd given up any pretense



of being a sober person the day Bradley had died and she hadn't looked back since, not even for a second. Hell, she hadn't just fallen off the wagon; she'd *leapt*. And the entire time she hadn't been able to stop thinking about the adorable nickname that she'd picked out for Bradley: "Boo Radley", in honor of the Harper Lee character in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Unless she and Bradley

were somehow reunited up in heaven, though, she knew that she'd never get the chance to use that term of endearment for him now, however cutesy it might have sounded to others. Because up there in heaven he'd probably be with his *real* parents.

Dana sighed again, even more heavily this time. Still, who knew? Maybe pretty soon she could say the exact same thing for herself.

Chasing away the thought with a quick shake of her head – at least for now – she turned her attention back to the cats in front of her. There was no point in dwelling on the past here, she knew that, however recent or painful that past might be. It was her *future* that she needed to concentrate on now, however short or painful that future might prove.

She funneled her next words in

the general direction of the blurry kitties stationed five feet away. “Haven’t you guys ever seen an empty shell of a human being before? Why don’t you make yourselves useful and go catch some mice or something?”

Oreo – Dana’s lone four-legged friend – yawned, clearly unimpressed. Turning on his heels, he headed for the kitchen. A moment later, the crunch of dry cat food filled the apartment. No

earth-shattering occurrence there, however. Oreo had never been an especially quiet eater ever since the happy day seven years earlier that they'd first rescued each other at the local animal shelter. Then again, Oreo had never been an especially quiet *anything*.

A short, hard sob that started somewhere deep in Dana's stomach burst out of her mouth before she had a

chance to stop it from coming, hurting her insides so badly that for a moment it felt like a goddamn *Buick* had parked itself squarely on the middle of her chest. As much as she would miss Oreo, though, she knew that this was for the best. She was useless to him now. Just like she was useless to everybody else in the world now. No doubt the rambunctious little pile of fur that liked nothing better in this world than to chase

rapidly unwinding balls of string across the living-room carpet would be far better off without her. Again, just like everybody else in the world would be far better off without her. And Dana felt infinitely grateful to know that her landlady – the kindly old Mrs. Carter who lived on the first floor of the seven-level complex with her husband of more than sixty years – would take exquisite

care of her constantly purring black-and-white buddy once she'd finished up doing what she knew she needed to do next.

Dana reached over her left shoulder and plucked the almost-empty bottle of Jack Daniel's off the end table by its glass neck, grimacing while she finished off the last of the contents in four long swallows. Then she placed the bottle back on the end table next to



her Bureau-issued Glock, an as-yet-unopened prescription bottle of Ambien and a wickedly sharp butcher's knife that she'd appropriated from the sturdy wooden block on her kitchen counter.

Taking a deep breath that ballooned her lungs to capacity, she braced herself for what would come next, both mentally and spiritually. This was it. The end of the line. After a star-

crossed lifetime spent seeking answers  
she could never seem to find no matter  
how hard she looked, only one question  
remained for her now:

*Which one would it be?*



# PART II

“Depression is rage spread thin.” –

George Santayana, Spanish-American  
philosopher



## CHAPTER 4

Grunting hard with the intensity of his efforts, Bruce Blankenship finished off his last set of bench-presses at the 24/7 Fitness Center in North Ridgeville before waving goodbye to the pretty woman named Della seated behind the front desk, stepping out into the mostly deserted strip-mall parking lot and flipping open his cellphone to call his partner again.

He frowned when the familiar voicemail message clicked on:

*“Hello, you have reached Special Agent Dana Whitestone. I’m unable to take your call at the moment but if you leave your name, number and a brief message I’ll get back to you as soon as possible. Thank you, and have a nice day.”*

Blankenship deepened his frown and flipped closed his phone without leaving a message. What was the point? It marked the fourth time already that he'd tried calling his partner today and the technology let you *know* who'd been trying to reach you with a simple check of the caller ID.

Clearly, Dana didn't want to be



reached right now. Not by him, and probably not by anyone else, either.

Blankenship sighed and stepped off the short cub in front of the gym before making his way across the parking lot with his beat-up canvas gym bag slung over his right shoulder, luxuriating in the invigorating cool fall air that was rapidly drying the sweat on his face. The worst of the summer heat had passed now and had given way to

crisper October weather. Next up on the hit-list: winter. If nothing else, he knew it would prove exceedingly interesting to see how his first one in Cleveland played out. If all the stories he'd heard proved true, no doubt it would be a long and cold one. As the long-running and hopelessly clichéd joke went here in northeast Ohio, there existed only two discernible seasons in Cleveland:

Winter and construction.

Switching off his car alarm with the keychain-control, Blankenship slid behind the wheel of his Toyota 4-Runner and cranked the engine to life before maneuvering the shiny, dark blue vehicle that he'd just washed that morning out of the parking lot, pointing it in the direction of Interstate 90 East for the short trip home while *Through The*

*Years* by Kenny Rogers played on the stereo.

Blankenship pressed his lips together while he listened to the heartstring-tugging lyrics. The intensely melancholy tone of the song immediately struck something deep inside him that he couldn't quite put his finger on. He hadn't known Dana Whitestone for years, not even close. They'd only partnered up a couple months ago on the

Race Master case. Still, he'd been worried about her ever since they'd wrapped up that racially driven shitstorm. And why *shouldn't* he be worried about her? She'd watched from no more than ten feet away as the child she'd been preparing to adopt had been murdered in cold blood by a juvenile lunatic hell-bent on exacting misplaced revenge, subsequently taking a leave of

absence from work in order to concentrate on dealing with her overwhelming grief. If that didn't mark a cause for concern, he didn't know what on earth ever would.

The last, plaintive strains of *Through The Years* wound down just as he merged with the heavy, Friday-night traffic streaming down I-90, followed almost at once by frat boy-favorite Jimmy Buffet's *Come Monday*. Fitting,

since that's when Dana had been scheduled to return to work. Blankenship only prayed that his partner had somehow been able to find a measure of peace in these last three weeks, however slight that peace might be.

Hard to imagine, though.

Leaning forward in his leather-covered driver's seat, he turned down

the volume on the radio as his thoughts went to his own children. The twins had just turned three years old the previous month and he couldn't conceive of a life without them, much less a life in which they'd been struck down by the calculating hand of a deranged killer. That being said, he realized that was the single-most terrifying risk they all took in their chosen line of work: losing loved ones as a direct consequence of



their professional actions. And nobody had ever told him or any of his colleagues that being a special agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation would be an easy or safe way to make a living.

Still...

Ten minutes later he glanced up at the latest in the long series of large green signs dotting the edge of the busy

highway. He'd almost made it past Dana's Clifton Avenue exit when he suddenly jerked the steering wheel hard to the right at the last possible moment, squealing his tires in a long, wailing screech of burning rubber and eliciting an angry, extended horn-blast from the elderly blue-haired lady piloting the dented brown minivan he'd just cut off. He lifted a hand sheepishly to the rearview mirror to apologize, but the

charming old gal who could barely see over her own steering wheel only lifted up her frail right arm and extended her bony middle finger to him in return.

Blankenship grinned. Fair enough. He'd deserved that.

Three more minutes and four turns later, he finally wheeled his vehicle into the parking lot of Dana's apartment complex on Fairview Avenue

in Lakewood and found an open spot before sliding in and killing the 4-Runner's engine. He sat in his parking space beneath the building's muted exterior lights for another five minutes while he debated his next course of action, knowing good and goddamn well that he wouldn't have wanted anyone showing up unannounced at *his* home like this. Still, *he'd* have answered his friggin' phone by now – if only to put his

persistent caller's fears to rest. That was what you did for those who cared about you. Lord knew that most people didn't have enough of them around in this world.

Finally, he got out of his car, slamming shut the door behind him and locking it up with the keychain-control. Fuck it. Partners – even new ones – needed to have each other's back. That

was how the FBI worked. And whether or not the weekend had come was completely immaterial. Dealing with personal tragedies didn't magically go away simply because Friday night had arrived.

He tried calling Dana again once he'd reached the lobby of her building, but was only met by the same voicemail message again. Flipping closed his phone; he shook his head in confusion,

feeling a weird, indefinable tingle of fear ripple deep through the pit of his stomach. Dana *had* to know he was trying to reach her now. Why the hell would she be ignoring him like this? If nothing else, the cold shoulder marked a distinct one-eighty in her usually sunny disposition. Ever since the very beginning – ever since he'd first been reassigned from the Omaha office to take

over as her new partner – she'd been unfailingly warm and accepting, taking Blankenship under her wing with all the grace and class that had marked the entirety of her illustrious career.

Something *definitely* had to be wrong.

Blankenship slipped his phone back into the left-hand pocket of his baggy red-and-blue gym shorts and made his way quickly over to the elevator



located at the east end of the lobby. Stepping into the open car, he punched the illuminated button for the fourth floor and waited for the doors to close again, letting out a slow breath as they did. Uninvited or not, maybe a more personal overture would turn the trick. Dana could rip off his head if she really wanted to but he wanted to make sure she was OK. *Needed* to make sure she

was OK, actually. They might have known each other for only a short while now, but he had no doubt in his mind that she'd do the exact same thing for him had their situations been reversed. That was just the sort of person Dana was. Always had been ever since he'd first met her a few months earlier. One of the few kindhearted souls left in an inexplicably heartless world hopelessly overrun with horrendously rotten apples.

Some of who actually got *pleasure* from killing four-year-old kids.

Blankenship shuddered a full-body shudder that practically rattled the teeth in the back of his mouth as he rode the car up. Jack Yuntz was one highly disturbed individual, no two ways about it. Worse, the murdering little punk was still out there in the weeds somewhere, probably plotting out his next foul act

*right now.*

The unsettling idea was enough to send a skin-stitching series of chill bumps racing across his arms.

When the elevator came to a stop with a high-pitched *ding!* a few moments later, Blankenship exited the car and strode down the hall to Apartment 417 before lifting a hand and knocking on Dana's door.

No response.

He waited twenty seconds before knocking again. Another twenty seconds passed with no response.

Blankenship knitted his eyebrows in frustration and felt a second, more profound stab of fear slice hard through his gut. He knocked a third time, more forcefully this time. Maybe Dana was in the shower, couldn't hear him with the water running. Hell, maybe

she'd fallen and couldn't get up, as that old infomercial on television had been so terribly fond of saying.

Met by the same lack of response after four more loud raps that hurt his knuckles, he stretched his muscular neck and ran through all the possibilities in his mind again. Dana might have been out for the night, but he didn't think so. He'd seen her silver Mazda Protégé sitting in its assigned spot downstairs.

And she didn't have any boyfriend that he knew of, had been single ever since the terrible day more than a year earlier when Jeremy Brown had died his unbelievably grisly death at the hands of Jack Yuntz in the Presidential Suite of the Fontainebleau Hotel in downtown Manhattan.

So where the fuck *was* she?

When a fourth series of knocks

still failed to elicit any response from inside Dana's place, Blankenship returned to the elevator and made his way back downstairs before exiting the car on ground floor and striding purposefully through the lobby. On the south side of the building, he pulled open a fire-containment door and walked down the hall before knocking at the landlady's place. He'd reached the point of no return now, needed to get to



the bottom of this mystery come hell or high water – even if it meant annoying his partner into an atypical emotional outburst as his unjust reward for his efforts. Fair enough on that count, too, though. Blankenship was a big boy. He could handle it. Obviously, though – barring the forceful kicking down of Dana's front door – he required a little help in accomplishing his goal.

Straining his ears, he heard stirring coming from inside the apartment. A moment later, the door opened a crack in a prolonged rattling of security chains. Moist blue eyes peered up at him through the slight opening.

“Yes?” Maggie Carter asked, further crinkling up her already impressively wrinkled face. “How may I help you?”

Blankenship put on his warmest smile and tried his best to appear as unthreatening as humanly possible. Didn't want to give the old woman a heart attack, after all. Wasn't an easy feat to accomplish at his six-foot-four height, though. And his sweat-stained workout clothes probably weren't helping matters any, either. "Good evening, ma'am," he said, clearing his

throat and holding up his Bureau ID. ““I was wondering if I might borrow your master key for a minute to check on a friend of mine.”

Maggie Carter narrowed her striking blue eyes into suspicious slits. ‘Who’s your friend?’

“Dana Whitestone, ma’am. Apartment 417.”

The landlady closed the door right in his face, causing Blankenship to

lift up his eyebrows on his forehead in mild surprise. Not exactly the reception he'd been expecting or hoping for.

Thankfully, though, after a brief pause, more metal chains rattled, followed by the reopening of the door, all the way this time. Clearly, security marked a primary concern for the cautious landlady, and who could blame her? Judging from the news reports

littering the airwaves nearly every single night of the week lately, even the suburbs weren't what they'd once been these days. Crackpots, drug dealers, child molesters, serial killers – just about every conceivable manner of lowlife that you could possibly lay your brain on – had all long ago moved their disgusting acts into the previously safe neighborhoods all around the country and all around the world. The message

seemed clear enough to anyone who bothered to listen: you couldn't trust *anybody* anymore. "What's this about?"

Maggie Carter demanded. An unmistakable look of concern colored in her weather-beaten face, and Blankenship wasn't at all surprised to see it. He knew that Dana and her landlady were close, with his partner often leaving her cat in the elderly

woman's care when she needed to be out of town on FBI business. "What's wrong with Dana?"

Blankenship immediately kicked himself in the ass for his ham-handed approach. He should have known better than to go crashing in like a bull in a porcelain factory like this. After all, he'd always considered himself a *people*-person.

Then again, so had Charles



Manson.

He widened his smile in a belated effort to put the old woman at ease, realizing that he'd missed his mark by a mile with his initial overture. Just because he felt freaked out right now didn't mean that he needed to pass along that distinctly unpleasant feeling to others. Wasn't the best way to make friends, to put it mildly.

He gathered himself and tried again. “I just need to wake her up, ma’am,” he said, manufacturing the story on the spot and feeling pretty damned good about his ability to think on his feet. “I’m afraid that she’s overslept for the stakeout we’re conducting tonight and she hasn’t been answering her phone all day.” No need to cause any more worry than he absolutely needed to if it

turned out there'd been no cause for concern in the first place, right? Besides, saying something like "*I'm afraid she might have killed herself*" didn't exactly have the most pleasant ring to it.

Unfortunately, though, Maggie Carter didn't seem the least little bit convinced by his lie. Quite the opposite, as a matter of fact. Perceptive old lass.

Drawing herself up to her full

five-foot height, she challenged him more directly. “What’s your name, young man?”

Blankenship immediately felt his cheeks suffuse with a warm rush of blood at the odd-sounding description of his person, wondering just *where*, exactly, all the time had gone. He’d passed thirty-five a few years prior so it was a bit unsettling to realize that there

were still people around in this world who retained the seniority to call you “young man” without the faintest trace of irony in their voices. Like it or not, though, he knew that it wouldn’t be too long before he found himself doing the exact same thing to the ever-growing population of folks that made up the segment of society younger than him. Through the years, indeed. As always, time proved the great equaliser in this

life. *No one* could escape it, no matter how desperately they tried or how many new and better brands of expensive moisturizing lotions they rubbed into their aging skin each night before slipping into their beds and losing yet *another* day of their lives in the process.

Suddenly, Blankenship felt supremely stupid for having lied to

Dana's landlady. And why the hell *shouldn't* he feel that way? What had been the point? He should have just been upfront with the woman and told her the truth in the first place. That he was worried about a friend. That he wanted to check on her.

That he wanted to ensure she was still breathing fresh air.

Too late for that now, though. Clearly and then some. He'd already

begun to weave his hopelessly tangled web and now he found his tiny little spider legs inextricably stuck in the strands of his own deceit. Sadly, rewinding time – even for the few seconds he needed right now – didn't mark a realistic option. As far as he knew, time travel hadn't been invented yet. He'd need to get online and check out Google when he got home to make



sure that particular law of physics still held true. Sure as hell would've proved useful right about now. "Bruce Blankenship, ma'am," he said. "I'm with the FBI."

"Let me see your badge again," the old woman said. Setting both her feet and lips into tight lines, she extended a frail arm and held out a tiny pale white hand that was crisscrossed by dark blue veins even in the palm.

Plainly, much more a demand than any sort of request.

Blankenship passed over his identification as instructed, feeling like a naughty schoolboy who'd been called onto the carpet by a fed-up principal sick to death of dealing with her incorrigible charges. After a moment or two of intense study, the old woman's face finally softened. "Oh, you're the

fellow she told me about.”

She tilted his ID back and forth in order to get a better angle at the watermark under the light before finally looking back up at him again. “You’re her new partner, right?”

Blankenship let out a slight sigh of relief that he hoped the old woman wouldn’t notice; infinitely thankful his ID seemed to have passed inspection. *He* knew it was valid, but for a second

there Maggie Carter had even him thinking it might have been counterfeit somehow. If nothing else, the old woman would've made a kick-ass interrogator. They could probably put her skills to very good use in the Bureau questioning the never-ending wave of terror suspects that had been flooding through their doors ever since the tragic and world-altering events of 9/11.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “That’s right. About a month now.”

She handed his ID back. “From Nebraska, aren’t you?”

Blankenship widened his eyes; taken aback by just how much Carter seemed to know about him. One thing was for certain: the old gal had a wonderful gift for putting people on their heels – even relatively grizzled ten-year veterans of the FBI like himself. All

things considered, he wouldn't have liked al-Zawahiri's chances one little bit given ten minutes alone with her in a locked room.

“I can see you're well informed,” Blankenship said. “Just moved here to Ohio a couple months ago. I used to-”

Maggie Carter cut him off with a quick wave of her skeletal right hand.

“Yes, yes, I know all about you, young man. Dana told me everything I need to know.” She stepped aside and motioned for him to come inside. “Still, I’m sure you won’t mind if I talk to your boss to check out your story. I mean, you *look* official enough and all, but you never know these days. Can’t be too safe about these things. *Way* too many weirdoes out there.”

Blankenship stepped into the old

woman's apartment and drew his phone from his pocket again. Flipping it open to dial Bill Krugman down in Washington, DC, he felt his heart sink in his chest. Bothering the Director on a Friday night probably didn't mark the wisest course of action for the furthering of his overall career prospects but he really didn't have much other choice now. He needed backup against this pit



bull wearing a flimsy green housecoat.

Quick.

Krugman answered his phone after three short rings. “Agent Blankenship,” he said, cutting straight to the point. “What’s up?”

Blankenship inhaled deeply. As quickly as he could, he brought his boss up to speed on what was going on in Ohio while Maggie Carter listened intently from no more than three feet

away.

Blankenship used a codeword to let Krugman know that he couldn't relate the full story at the moment. "I'm really sorry to bother you like this on a Friday night, sir, but could you please verify my identity to Agent Whitestone's landlady so that I can go on up and get her for our stakeout tonight?"

Krugman grunted into the

receiver on his end of the connection to acknowledge that he'd received the message. "Put her on," he said. "And call me back just as soon as you find out what the hell's going on with Dana."

"Yes, sir. Will do."

Blankenship passed over the phone to Maggie Carter, who gave him a pointed look before placing his outdated Motorola Razr to her left ear – his backup phone today since he'd fumbled

his brand-new iPhone 5 into the toilet just that very morning while trying to kill two birds with one stone by checking his email at the same time he'd been urinating. Pretty expensive mistake, to say the least.

Pretty stupid one, too.

Maggie Carter listened closely to what Krugman had to say for several moments before switching off and

handing the phone back. “Well, OK, then,” she said, apparently assuaged by Krugman’s hasty assurances that Blankenship was indeed who he’d said he was and not some recently escaped axe murderer on the loose from the local mental hospital who got his perverted kicks from targeting defenseless little old ladies on Friday nights. “Everything seems to check out just fine. Wait right here a minute, young man. I’ll be back

in a jiffy.”

With that, the old woman left Blankenship standing alone in the living room, turning quickly on her heel and disappearing down a narrow hallway just off the kitchen with the back of her green housedress trailing behind her in her wake like a superhero's flowing cape. Now you see her, now you don't.

Blankenship glanced around the

place while he waited. Plastic-covered furniture was arranged in a neat semi-circle around the living room. An old, cabinet-style television decked out with elaborately framed black-and-white photographs sitting on top served as the centerpiece. Tabloid magazines were stacked up two feet high on the oversized coffee table directly in front of the largest couch, the top cover featuring a blurry, bare-chested photo of

Kate Middleton that had been taken from long range. The beloved *paparazzi* doing their level best again to pretend that the subjects at the other ends of their expensive lenses weren't living, breathing human beings worthy of basic privacy.

Thirty seconds later, the landlady was back with the master key in hand, and Blankenship immediately felt his



cheeks flood with blood again despite the fact that he must have easily outweighed the woman by at least a hundred and thirty-five pounds – probably could've taken her out in two seconds flat if he'd really needed to. Probably even quicker than that, too. Somehow, though, just being in the little old lady's presence made him feel like a little kid again. And clearly her particular superpower lay in her uncanny

ability to make him feel like he was nine years old and back at summer camp at Lake Chippewa in Massachusetts, head hung low while he answered to the lead counselor for his role in orchestrating the surprise panty raid on the girls' cabin that had left at least one little lass without so much as a single pair of clean underwear left until her parents could drive up from Boston and deliver a fresh

load of laundry to her.

“Here you go,” Maggie Carter said, stretching her thin neck and removing the key from a large metal ring. Handing it over, she widened her glistening blue eyes and held his stare. “Just make sure you bring it right back to me as soon as you’re done. If you’re not back in twenty minutes, I’m calling the cops.”

Blankenship took the key and

promised to return in the allotted timeframe. He meant it, too. No way in *hell* he'd test the old lady on her threat. Not after what he'd already seen from her up to this point. From the look of things, the old woman would probably have the parking lot swarming with cruisers from the local PD should he dare to break their newly struck agreement and, failing that, he had very

little doubt that she'd try to arrest him herself if she felt it represented her only recourse to ensure the safety of her tenants against the unwashed riff-raff of the world such as himself.

Returning to Dana's floor via the elevator, Blankenship breathed out another sigh of relief, thankful beyond words to finally escape the feisty octogenarian's spirited interrogations. Not to mention that oppressively stuffy

living space of hers. The old woman's apartment had smelled suspiciously like a nose-jarring combination of over-the-counter muscle creams, week-old tapioca pudding and at least several *mountains* worth of moldy mothballs.

Forty-five seconds later, he slipped the key into Dana's lock and turned the handle.

Stepping tentatively inside his

partner's apartment, Blankenship immediately wrinkled up his nose against the *new* offending odor that invaded his nostrils. The garbage bags piled up high next to the front door indicated to him that Dana hadn't taken out her refuse in the three weeks since she'd left work. Not that he blamed her all that much for her apparent *laissez faire* attitude toward keeping a tidy home recently. After all, she had far

more important things to worry about than just a little routine housecleaning that could certainly wait until she'd cleared out some of the cobwebs of grief littering her mind. *Psychology 101*: deal with your emotions first; deal with the physical objects in your world later on.

Stepping past the bulging bags of garbage and farther into the badly



disorganized space, he cut his stare hard to the right and felt his breath catch in his throat. Ten feet away and sitting on top of an end-table next to the living-room couch, an empty bottle of Jack Daniel's had been flanked by two *extremely* disturbing items:

Dana's Bureau-issued Glock and a full bottle of prescription sleeping pills.

Blankenship gave an abrupt start

when something suddenly brushed against his exposed calves, nearly causing him to jump a foot in the air. A cold, hard burst of adrenalin rocketed through his veins, prompting all the hairs lining the back of his neck to come to attention like a line of tiny soldiers, as though he'd just jammed his moistened finger directly into a live electrical outlet featuring an exposed wiring

problem.

Half-expecting to see a rat – or maybe even *several* of them considering the dismal state of Dana's apartment right now – he laughed nervously when he instead found himself greeted by the sight of a plump, black-and-white cat. Rats and cats: two creatures that might have been separated by only a handful of letters in the alphabet but most definitely remained *worlds* apart when it came to

how *homo sapiens* reacted to their unexpected presence.

“Jesus Christ, pal,” Blankenship breathed, leaning down to stroke the top of the feline’s furry head while at the same time trying in vain to control the jack-hammering of his racing pulse in his wrists. “You scared the living shit out of me. Where’s your mom?”

Purring contentedly, the cat let

out a single, loud meow in response, somehow making both noises simultaneously. Impressive feat, to say the least. It was then that Blankenship finally became aware of the sound of running water coming from the end of the short hallway leading off the living room.

A tidal wave of relief washed over him. He breathed out forcefully enough to deflate his chest a full six

inches. Dana was safe. Thank God. Still, at the risk of giving her a stroke when she emerged from her shower and found him standing uninvited in the middle of her apartment on a Friday night he might as well stick around and verify that fact with his own two eyes. After all, that was what partners – even new ones – did for one another, right?

Blankenship pursed his lips.

One way or the other, he supposed he was about to find out.





## CHAPTER 5

Horatio D'Arbinville watched with interest as the well-endowed server at the Oak Barrel Bar on Euclid Avenue in downtown Cleveland delivered his drink to the lovely Helen Morgan, amused at the same time to hear the jukebox switch over to *There Goes My Life* by country music superstar Kenny Chesney.

D'Arbinville grinned at the sheer

*appropriateness* of the song as he listened to the cowboy-hatted crooner work his smooth vocal magic that had always had such a dizzying effect on the ladies. Much like D'Arbinville himself, Kenny Chesney was a real panty-dropper, no two ways about it. Women just couldn't *help* themselves around men like them. And if D'Arbinville hadn't known any better, he just might

have reason to believe that a force greater than himself somewhere out there in the never-ending cosmos had composed the musical score for the night. Crying shame that he'd always been an atheist, because the thought marked an exceedingly pleasant one. Still, faithful believer in any sort of unseen, divine heavenly power or not, he followed his *own* brand of religion. And midnight Mass had just begun for

him – kick-started by the formal presentation of the intoxicating communion wine.

Fifty feet away, the waitress placed the ridiculous fruity concoction on the polished mahogany bar in front of his target and said a few words to her before turning in D'Arbinville's direction and pointing. When Helen Morgan followed the server's extended

right index finger with a quizzical look on her heavily made-up face in order to ascertain the identity of her secret admirer, D'Arbinville lifted up his glass of Scotch in acknowledgement.

Predictably, sparks flew as their gazes locked for the first time in their lives – though certainly not for the last – and D'Arbinville reveled in the familiar reaction from a member of the opposite sex. Ever since he'd reached puberty at

the tender age of fourteen, his good looks and confident nature had meant that he'd never needed to work especially hard to gain favor with women. Plainly, this time would prove no exception.

An unmistakable sheen of desire and hope flashed in Helen Morgan's badly bloodshot hazel eyes, visible even through the alcohol-induced glaze.

Straightening up in her seat, she pulled back her rounded shoulders in a hasty effort to correct her sloppy posture, at the same time placing her still-burning cigarette down into the overflowing ashtray in front of her.

D'Arbinville nodded and put on his friendliest and most unthreatening smile. When he lifted his eyebrows into twin non-verbal question marks on his forehead, Morgan returned his smile

shyly and nodded back.

Forty-five minutes and two drinks later the conversation was in full swing.

“So, what do you do for a living?” D’Arbinville asked, though he knew good and goddamn well what she did for a living, had for the past several months now. Leaning over from his bar stool directly to the right of hers, he



casually rested his left hand on her right knee. *Body Language 101*: establish a personal touch just as soon as possible at the onset of an interpersonal relationship. If successful, it engendered a feeling of intimacy in your target that paved the way for further physical contact later on. And D'Arbinville had no doubt whatsoever of just how *much* physical contact would be taking place later on between him and Helen

Morgan. Hell, it marked the key to the entire bloody mission. The absolute *lynchpin*. The only question that remained now revolved around whether that physical contact would involve a great deal of pleasure or a great deal of pain.

Or, perhaps, a little of both.

*Exactly* how he liked it.

Fortified by a healthy dose of

liquid courage and the company of the most eligible bachelor in the entire bar – if not the entire *city* – any trace of demureness had left Morgan now. Tongue properly lubricated, she answered him in a voice that registered two decibels too high for his liking. “I’m a pediatric nurse in the birthing wing over at Fairview General Hospital in Fairview Park,” she bellowed. “It’s about twenty miles west of here.’

D'Arbinville resisted the urge to cringe at the painful audio onslaught in his ears. The music in the bar wasn't *that* loud, for Christ's sake, and the woman's booming voice called to mind a ship's foghorn, in both pitch and volume. "And how do you like being a nurse?" he asked, hoping that his discomfort wasn't *too* noticeable to her. Not that he supposed it made all that

much difference. Not in any meaningful sense, anyway. From all early indications, he'd already managed to tuck Helen Morgan safely away into his hip pocket. The lothario of the Renaissance City already – that was him, all right. And it certainly hadn't taken him very long to reach that particularly lofty status, either, now had it? So damn the torpedoes and full speed ahead.

Morgan tilted back her head and exhaled a long line of cigarette smoke. Marlboro Menthol Lights served as her preferred carcinogen. Typical American ragweed and no tremendous surprise to D'Arbinville. After all, rare indeed was the quality of *refinement* to be discovered in a Yankee. "I don't like it all," she said.

"Why's that?"

Morgan screwed up her cartoonishly painted face. From this distance, D'Arbinville could practically *count* the layers of make-up slathered there. Good thing the lights would be out on them soon, because he truly didn't know how much longer he could stand looking at her. If nothing else, taking one for the team would no doubt prove *extremely* painful this time. "Hmm, let's

see here,” Morgan said.

Swiveling on her stool in order to face him more directly, she lifted up her right hand and ticked off the reasons for her discontent on her stubby fingers.

“Shitty pay, shitty hours, shitty treatment – where would you like to start?”

D’Arbinville repositioned his own stool, already feeling closer to the woman in every possible sense of the word. “How about we start at the



beginning?” he asked. “You must love babies to work in the birthing wing.”

Morgan’s alcohol-clouded gaze did a complete three-sixty in eye sockets featuring purplish half-moons ringing the bottoms. “Must I?”

“You don’t?”

“Hardly.”

D’Arbinville felt a cold ripple of anticipation flutter through the core of

his being. So far, so good. The dossier on Morgan *seemed* to contain accurate information. Good thing, too. He'd certainly paid enough for it.

Setting his lips into a tight line, he cleared his throat and readied himself mentally for the next step. Now that he'd attended to all of the irritating preliminaries and had dispensed with all of the annoying buildup, the time had come to move in for the kill. Swiftly,

targeting the jugular straight away. Experience had taught him very well indeed that it didn't often pay to pussyfoot around on these sorts of things.

Reaching into the inside pocket of his finely tailored suit jacket, he removed his alligator-skin wallet and extracted a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill before placing it under his now-empty glass of Scotch. Then he turned back to

Morgan and held her heavy-lidded stare. “Ready to go?” he asked.

Morgan leaned back her head and drained the last of her own drink in a melodious rattling of rapidly melting ice cubes. “Go where?” she slurred.

“Why, back to my hotel, of course.”

Blissfully, D’Arbinville’s target chose to eschew any pretense of acting as though she didn’t know where this

night had been heading all along. She'd snagged herself quite the catch, and she seemed to be well aware of that fact, too. No way in *hell* she'd let him get away. Not when she found herself this close to sealing the deal.

D'Arbinville stifled a mischievous grin. Thank heavens – or the atheist's approximation of such a ridiculous concept – for the sexual

liberation of Western woman over the course of the past fifty years or so. Made things so much *easier* on men like him and Kenny Chesney.

“I thought you’d never ask,” Morgan said.

Pushing back her stool, she rose unsteadily to her feet and slipped her designer-knockoff purse over her left shoulder, swaying drunkenly from left to right, and then back again.

Finally regaining some semblance of her thoroughly compromised balance, she focused her watery eyes squarely on the tip of his slender nose and creased her thin and overly painted lips into an impatient frown. “Well, what the hell are you waiting for? Lead the way, lover boy. Lucky for you, I’ve got all night.”





## CHAPTER 6

Standing inside Dana's apartment while her *extremely* friendly cat rubbed up against his bare legs, Bruce Blankenship slipped his cellphone from the left-hand pocket of his knee-length gym shorts and checked the time again.

Ten minutes had passed now since Maggie Carter had issued her “twenty-minutes-or-I’ll-call-the-cops”

ultimatum, and he didn't at all relish the prospect of tangling with the no-nonsense landlady again. Hadn't worked out very well for him the first time he'd done so, to put it mildly, and he had no earthly reason to believe that a second go-'round with her would shake out any differently. Not to mention the fact that his horribly overburdened wife had undoubtedly grown frustrated with

his much-longer-than-anticipated absence by now. Not that he could blame her. After all, spending even a couple of hours alone with rambunctious three-year-old twin girls that liked nothing better in this world than to turn your previously neat house into a demolition zone was enough to make *anyone* want to pull out their hair by the roots. Madison needed backup on the home front, *pronto*, which meant that *he*

needed to get this show on the road. Literally. Sleeping on the couch tonight certainly hadn't appeared at the top of his to-do list today when he'd woken up this morning.

Stepping over a small mountain of dirty clothes piled up next to the coffee table, Blankenship made his way carefully through the living room with his new feline companion trailing

closely at his heels, past a large color portrait hanging on the wall near the flat-screen television set of what he assumed to be a childhood version of Dana flanked by her murdered parents. He felt a sharp twinge in his heart as he remembered her telling him about how James and Sara Whitestone had been brutally murdered in cold blood by Nathan Stiedowe right in front of her eyes when she'd been just four years

old. The poor thing. Ever since the very beginning, Dana's life had never been what anyone would have described as especially easy or fair. And no doubt the recent horrific murder of little Bradley had only reopened those old tremendously painful wounds.

Blankenship stopped dead in his tracks when he reached the bathroom at the end of the hall. A neatly handwritten

note had been taped to the door:

*Do not enter. Please call  
emergency services personnel.*

Blankenship nearly threw up. He tried the door handle. Locked.

Frantic, he called out to his partner. “Dana? Honey? It’s Bruce Blankenship. Open up!”

No answer.

Blankenship took one quick step back and lunged forward again, putting all of his weight behind the powerful kick and landing it just below the door handle, exploding the wood around the lock with a deafening *crack* and a small shower of flying splinters, one of which somehow found its way into the corner of his left eye.

A thick wall of steam filled the



bathroom, making it even *more* difficult for him to see. His left eye watered badly from the splinter lodged there and his hammering heart pounded wildly in his throat as he cut hard through the swirling gray fog. Flinging open the plastic shower curtain in a cacophony of screeching metal rings, his breath hitched in his throat. Acrid bile flooded into his mouth. He grimaced against the foul taste.

Then he grimaced against the foul *sight* invading his eyes.

Dana was naked on her back inside the tub. Blistering-hot water streamed down on her prone form from the showerhead attached to the wall. Her eyes were half-open, glazed over, completely unseeing. The sharp edge of a huge butcher's knife peeked out from between her spread thighs. Pinkish

water swirled around the drain near her feet.

Blankenship's mind raced. His heart rolled across his ribcage like an Olympic-level gymnast performing a world-class floor routine. His skin crawled with what felt to be at least a *billion* invisible bugs. He couldn't process his own fractured thoughts through the mind-numbing haze of confusion that was pressing down hard

on his thoroughly unprepared brain like a thousand-pound weight.

Then it hit him. *Hard.*

Dana had cut herself. *Badly.*

More tears flooded into Blankenship's eyes, stinging his retinas and further blurring his vision. Wiping at his leaking eyes with the back of his left hand, he reached inside the shower with his right hand and twisted off the

hot-water handle violently, nearly tearing it free from the wall in the process. Bright red blood immediately pulsed out of Dana's right thigh, no longer diluted by the stream of rushing shower water.

Blankenship blinked back the blinding veil of tears in his eyes, unable to believe what he was seeing right now. Dana had sliced her femoral artery *lengthwise*. Clearly, this had been no

simple cry for help. This had been *deadly* serious.

She'd meant to end her own life.

*Not if he could fucking help it.*

His mind snapped back into gear as his training took over. Ripping his sweat-soaked T-shirt over his head, he fell to his knees and tied off the fabric just above Dana's wound, banging his knees sharply against the tiled floor but

not even feeling it. Placing two fingers against Dana's slender throat, he checked for a pulse.

Weak, barely discernible against his fingertips.

Blankenship rose to his feet again and bent over at his waist, trying again to not throw up. Wasn't easy. Gathering Dana's naked body carefully into his shaking arms, he laid her down flat against the tiled bathroom floor and

shooed away her cat irritably before putting his ear to her mouth.

She wasn't breathing.

Blankenship shook his head hard in a panicked effort to clear away the residual shock still cluttering up his mind. This couldn't be happening. Not now. Not like this. This wasn't the way Dana's life was supposed to end. She was a good person, goddamn it. Always



had been. A *loving* person. She'd needed his help and he hadn't been there for her. *None* of them had been there for her. She'd given over her entire life in service of the FBI and they hadn't been there to take care of her when she'd needed them the most.

*No time for that now.*

Sliding quickly on his bruised knees up to Dana's head, he tilted back her chin to clear her airway before

sweeping her tongue with his right index finger. Moving farther down her motionless body, he began single-man CPR, finding the proper spot on her chest and performing thirty forceful compressions, followed immediately by two quick rescue breaths that left the sharp taste of sour whiskey resting on his lips.

Then he listened again for the

sounds of her breathing.

Still nothing. The silence coming from Dana's ice-cold lips threatened to shatter his eardrums. To shatter his entire *world*.

Blankenship repeated the exhausting series four more times, falling into the proper rhythm as he forced himself to stay focused on the life-and-death matter at hand. Leaning down to check her breathing a fifth time,

he felt the cold metal of a gun barrel press firmly into the back of his skull, just behind his right ear.

A man's deep voice sounded in his ear a split-second later. "Lakewood Police! Put your hands over your fucking head. *Now*, asshole!"



## CHAPTER 7

Post-coital bliss and the further smoking of cigarettes marked the orders of the night in Horatio D'Arbinville's sumptuous suite on the twenty-second floor of The Four Seasons Hotel & Resort on Ontario Street in downtown Cleveland.

Pulling back the paisley-patterned curtains covering the oversized bay window in the living

room of his splendid (though sadly temporary) quarters, D'Arbinville gazed out upon the bright Cleveland skyline while Helen Morgan freshened herself up in the gleaming, impeccably appointed bathroom, a space that just so happened to be situated directly off the equally impressive bedroom, which in turn just so happened to feature a king-sized Tempurpedic bed upon which the

two of them had just now made *extremely* satisfying love, if he did say so himself.

D'Arbinville inhaled deeply on his latest Gitane and let out the smoke again in a satisfying rush over his perfectly straight white teeth while taking in the sparkling nighttime view. To his mind, Cleveland had gotten somewhat of a bad rap in the global media. During the nights, darkness



covered the long-suffering city like a layer of professionally applied make-up on an otherwise-homely woman, ably concealing some of its less-than-stellar attributes and fooling unsuspecting onlookers into finding a level of attractiveness they hadn't been aware of before. When the sun had gone down on the day and the harsh glare of natural light had receded from view in favor of

more forgiving artificial illumination, one could more easily appreciate the architectural splendor of buildings such as the Terminal Tower, One Cleveland Center and the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. Glittering jewels adorning the knobby fingers of an aging metropolitan whore that had never been taken especially seriously by the rest of the world ever since the horribly polluted Cuyahoga River had actually

caught *fire* in the scorching-hot summer of 1969.

D'Arbinville stretched his aching neck and did his best to work out the slight kink there that had come courtesy of one of the more adventurous positions they'd tried on for size in the bedroom. No matter, though. He could deal with a little physical discomfort here. It was *others* who needed to

worry about the forthcoming physical pain he intended to distribute. And Cleveland's superficial problems certainly didn't represent anything for him to be concerned about, either. Geographical beauty didn't play any role whatsoever in what he had planned here. Not to mention the fact that there existed *plenty* of money for the taking in even the most depressing corners of the world. Detroit. Bombay. Beirut. You

simply needed to know where to look for it.

Blissfully for him, he knew *precisely* where to look for it: Zachary Paulson's perversely bulging pockets. So, all things considered, he expected that Cleveland would no doubt prove a cakewalk when compared to those other three cities. Because once everything had been said and done and the last

piece of the puzzle had fallen into its proper slot in order to create a beautiful portrait of financial health that would keep him supplied with Scotch and Gitanes for the rest of his life, he didn't at all mind taking candy from an ugly baby. Tasted every bit as sweet.

Maybe even just a little bit sweeter.

Speaking of ugly babies...

D'Arbinville turned away from

his unexpectedly pleasing view when he heard Helen Morgan pad into the living room behind him. Barefoot with her hair still wet from the shower, she'd slipped herself into one of the two comfortable cotton robes that had been hanging by a pair of sturdy brass hooks in the bathroom – not that he'd have put up all that much of a protest if she hadn't taken the trouble to cover herself.

Surprisingly enough, her body had turned out to be quite nice, with full, reasonably pert breasts and a somewhat flat tummy testifying to the fact that she'd never before given birth.

And that *mouth* of hers.

A welcome bonus of her spinster status he certainly hadn't been expecting.

D'Arbinville grinned. Hell, just might need to give his mark one more



going-over before the night had run its course. And why not? Never before had he settled for just one roll in the hay when time hadn't presented a pressing obstacle.

“And how are you, my dear?” D'Arbinville asked, widening the smile on his face and reveling in the renewed sense of desire flowing through his veins at the intoxicating vision of Helen

Morgan's entirely adequate form.

“Feeling satisfied?”

Helen Morgan smiled back and pulled her robe tighter around her body, hugging herself with her own arms. The glow on her face was unmistakable, visible even from across the room. Cheeks lit the soft red of a cherub's. Eyes shining as happily as those of a newborn baby's. Nostrils flared with the delicious novelty of her recent – not

to mention clearly *appreciated* – romantic conquest.

D'Arbinville did his best to stay composed despite the hot jolt of adrenalin coursing through his system and blurring the edges of his vision. Wasn't easy. It took every last bit of self-control he possessed to keep himself from cracking his knuckles loudly in satisfaction right there in front

of the woman's hopelessly average face. From all appearances, however, it looked to him as though he hadn't lost his exquisite touch with the fairer sex. Another bonus — this one he *had* been expecting, of course. After all, he'd always been considered an *animal* between the sheets by anyone who'd ever had the distinct pleasure of enjoying his intimate company, now hadn't he?

Of course he had. Then again, he'd also been considered an animal for other, far less *noble* reasons, too.

Helen Morgan flipped back her damp hair coquettishly in response to his question, ever the flirtatious schoolgirl now that she'd taken care of the intense sexual frustration she'd no doubt been carrying around with her for the past several years now. "Yes, I'd say that's

about right. No complaints over here. And what about you? Any interest in going for round two?"

D'Arbinville laughed heartily. He just couldn't help himself. Combined with the impressive amount of liquor they'd already consumed and his undivided attention for the past hour, clearly a long-overdue romp had transformed his target into an entirely new person. A *confident* person.

*Exactly* what he'd planned all along. And why not? He'd need Helen Morgan to feel completely sure enough of herself if he were to have any hope at all of her pulling off what he was about to ask her to do next.

Striding over to the large beige sofa stationed in the middle of the luxurious space, D'Arbinville sat down and patted the soft cushion beside him.

“Let’s just have a little talk first before we get into it again,” he said. “Right now, I have a very important question I need to ask you.”

Helen Morgan creased her thin and slightly wind-burned lips into a worried frown. Crossing the room in six quick steps, she took a seat next to him on the couch. The light and clean scent of her recently applied shampoo tickled D’Arbinville’s nostrils and made him



feel uncharacteristically lightheaded. The seductive warmth floating off her freshly scrubbed skin caressed his heavily whiskered cheek like the back of a loving hand. “What do you need to ask me?”

D’Arbinville took a deep breath through his nostrils and leaned forward to stub out his cigarette in the clean glass tray that was sitting on the coffee table in

front of them. Then he straightened back up and crossed his left leg over his right. Holding her gaze with his own, he injected a somber tone into his deep, slightly accented voice. “Helen, have you ever thought of having a baby of your own?”

Morgan lifted her eyebrows uncertainly, then laughed without humor. Clearly, she didn’t have the faintest clue on Earth of what to say to that. Still, no

world-shattering revelation there.

D'Arbinville had sprung his unorthodox question on her this abruptly to achieve *precisely* that desired affect. “A

*baby?*” she started, incredulously. “I don't know. Why the hell would you be asking me something like that? I'm *way* too old to be thinking about having a child and we just *met*, for Christ's sake.

Not to mention the fact that I'm almost-”

D'Arbinville cut her off by placing his right hand on her left knee and giving it a gentle squeeze, just as he'd done back at the Oak Barrel Bar a few hours earlier. Morgan's words died unfulfilled in her throat. Her thighs spread involuntarily. Almost imperceptible, but definitely there.

D'Arbinville resisted the urge to grin again. Still, why *shouldn't* he

grin? It certainly hadn't taken him very long to learn how to play *this* particular instrument, now had it? Looked to him as though all those many formative years spent practicing with the most nubile girls in all of France had served their purpose quite ably, allowing him to retain his renowned touch with the opposite sex. Good thing, too. Because without that infinitely useful skill he knew that he had no other suitable base

of attack from which to operate. No other suitable base from which to *attack*. Sex not only sold, it *bought* things, too.

Including – judging by the intense look of concentration coloring in her face at the moment as she chewed away thoughtfully on her weather-ravaged lower lip – the willing ear of Helen Morgan.

“Your age doesn’t matter one little bit,” D’Arbinville said, dismissing her concerns with a quick wave of his left hand while running his right one up her thigh. “All you need is love, my dear. The Beatles had it exactly right. So tell me, Helen, do you love me?”

Morgan placed her hand on top of his and stroked his skin softly, making small, sensual circles with the tips of her

stubby fingers. “I don’t know,” she said, almost plaintively. “This is all happening so fast.”

She leaned back into the sofa and put her hands to her head. “Jesus Christ, I’m so fucking drunk right now. Everything is spinning. Can’t we talk about this later?”

D’Arbinville took his hand off her knee and grabbed her firmly by her shoulders. Roughly angling her body



toward his, he locked his stare onto hers like a heat-seeking missile. “No, we *can’t* talk about it later,” he said sternly. “We were damned lucky to have found each other, Helen, and I need to know if I can depend on you.”

Morgan narrowed her bloodshot hazel eyes and pulled back her head six inches on her manly shoulders, clearly taken aback by his brusque tone.

“Depend on me for *what?*”

D’Arbinville took another deep breath that expanded his well-toned chest against the plain white T-shirt he was wearing now, still holding her tightly by her shoulders and feeling not unlike the lead male character in some sort of racy Harlequin bodice-ripper one might purchase at the grocery store in order to pass the time on a lazy summer’s day. The only things that

seemed to be missing at the moment were a wide-open field, a stiff breeze blowing through their flowing locks of golden hair and a recently broken wild stallion to serve as their transportation.

“Depend on you to take care of our baby, Helen,” he said, speaking more fervently now. “Do you want to have a baby with me or not? I’m no spring chicken, either, you know. I need to know the answer

now. *Tonight*. It's either now or never.

So what do you say?"

Helen Morgan's face drained completely of blood. Clearly, she couldn't believe her good fortune, mitigated in no small measure by the shocking nature of D'Arbinville's words. And who in their right mind could honestly blame her? All things considered, though, a man of D'Arbinville's caliber certainly hadn't

come around very often in her life – if ever. So terrifying as the dizzying prospect might seem at the moment, she needed to decide if she'd take advantage of the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that had just presented itself.

Her timid reply was barely audible even from less than a foot away.

“Yes, Nicholas,” she breathed.  
“I want to have a baby with you.”



## CHAPTER 8

Bruce Blankenship lifted his hands over his head, then froze in place like a living statue.

“I’m FBI,” he said, not daring to twitch even the most minor of his spring-loaded muscles. The last thing in the world he needed right now was to have his brains splattered all over Dana’s bathroom wall by some itchy trigger-fingered cowboy looking to make a name

for himself down at the precinct. He had enough troubles already as things stood. And then some. His partner was *dying* right in front of his eyes, for Christ's sake. No time to play cops and robbers. "My ID is in my left pants pocket," he said. "Take it out and see for yourself."

Blankenship felt a rough hand invade his pocket while the gun remained pressed hard to the back of his



skull. An eternity seemed to pass before the barrel-pressure finally disappeared and the previously stern voice in his ear sounded from behind again. “I’m very sorry, sir. I didn’t know.”

Blankenship leapt to his feet and spun around angrily to find himself staring at an ashen-faced Lakewood cop. Maybe twenty-five or twenty-six, judging by the look of him. Barely more than a rookie. “Give me that thing,”

Blankenship spat, gritting his teeth and jerking the uniform's service revolver from the man's right hand. "Get EMTs here *now*. Self-inflicted knife wound to the right femoral artery. Patient still has a pulse but she's not breathing. CPR efforts haven't proved successful so far."

The Lakewood cop did as he was instructed. His panicked voice

shook badly as he leaned over to relay the information Blankenship had just told him into the CB radio strapped to his left shoulder.

When the man had finished passing along all the details regarding Dana's condition, he looked back up at Blankenship with a haunted look flashing in his bulging green eyes. His voice wavered some more. "What do you want me to do now, sir?"

Blankenship placed the local cop's gun on the edge of the porcelain bathroom sink. "Do you know two-man CPR?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then let's get to it."



## CHAPTER 9

Eight interminable minutes later, Blankenship and the Lakewood cop finally gave way to the EMTs that burst into Dana's apartment like a small, well-trained army taking over on the battlefield.

He watched with increasing dread while the efficient team of medical personnel loaded Dana's limp body onto a gurney and wheeled her

quickly down the carpeted hallway to the elevator.

Blankenship checked the time on his cellphone as he brought up the rear. By his unofficial count, Dana hadn't been breathing for at least fifteen minutes now. Among myriad other things, irreversible brain damage marked a *definite* possibility.

If not a whole hell of a lot worse

than that.

He shuddered hard as he took the fire-escape stairs three at a time all the way down to the ground floor, nearly breaking his neck in the process before racing wildly through the lobby and making it outside.

Reaching his vehicle a moment later, he threw open the 4-Runner's driver's-side door in a flash and jammed the proper key into the ignition before



cranking the engine to life. Checking his rearview mirror to make sure that nobody was behind him, he backed up quickly and shoved the vehicle into drive before mashing down his foot on the accelerator and pulling out of the parking lot in an ear-bending screech of tires, following the wailing ambulance as closely as he could without getting into an accident all the way to Fairview

General Hospital, which was blissfully located just three short miles away.

Blankenship jammed the 4-Runner into park mode outside the emergency-room entrance and extracted a clean blue T-shirt from his gym bag. Pulling it hastily over his head, he hustled inside the building without bothering to remove the keys from the ignition, roughly shouldering aside a teenaged kid who was standing on the

sidewalk as he went, wanting desperately to be with Dana during her time of need.

Wanting desperately to make up for *not* having been there for her when she'd needed him the most.

He paced the lobby for more than an hour before a doctor finally came out and spoke to him in a solemn voice. Thirty seconds later, his cellphone rang

in his pocket. Bill Krugman again, who'd been checking in on Dana's condition every ten minutes for the past hour now.

“What's the status of Agent Whitestone?” the Director barked.

“How's Dana doing?”

Blankenship fought back a gut-wrenching sob; afraid he might throw up his own stomach all over the freshly polished hospital floor at his feet.

“Agent Whitestone is brain dead, sir,”  
he stammered.

The awful words cracked  
painfully in his horribly constricted  
throat. He fought valiantly to regain  
control of his trembling voice but it  
didn't work one little bit. How the fuck  
*could* it?

Finally, he managed to speak  
again. Not surprisingly, the horrifying

words weren't any less excruciating to choke out the second time around.

“They just pronounced Dana *brain dead*.”



# PART III

“Mem’ries,

Light the corners of my mind.

Misty water-colored memories,

Of the way we were.”

Barbra Streisand, performing *The Way*

*We Were* – written by Alan and Marie

Bergman (lyrics) and Marvin Hamlisch

(music) – in the 1973 movie of the same

name.





## CHAPTER 10

Dana clearly heard what the overly pessimistic doctors had to say about her condition. Pretty hard not to with the way they'd boomed out the especially dreary diagnosis just a few short feet away. Still, she *hadn't* gone brain dead, no matter what they'd declared so prematurely. Not yet, anyway. Quite the opposite, as a matter of fact. Hell, her brain hadn't felt this

good in *years*, if ever. And as a direct result she now found herself right back in her most favorite place in the entire world: the West Park section of Cleveland on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1976 – the same fateful night that her parents had been brutally murdered in cold blood by Nathan Stiedowe directly in front of her shocked and horrified four-year-old eyes.

Dana let out a soft sigh of contentment in her mind. It went without saying that – apart from losing her parents on this horribly bloody night – she'd missed this place right down to the core of her innermost being for the entirety of the blood-soaked life she'd led ever since.

Dana sighed again mentally. If nothing else, it was certainly nice to be

back here again – back at the loving home of her childhood – however brief her stay might be.

Steeling herself mentally, she dug down deep and drew upon what little remained of her rapidly dwindling life-force for strength. Relaxing her traumatized brain the best she could considering the circumstances, she willed her overloaded synapses to continue firing, at least for a little while

longer. If she were to find out whether she'd stay here on Earth with Bruce Blankenship and Bill Krugman or leave to go join her parents on the other side, she'd need to lose herself completely in this terrifying night and see how things played out this time around.

Heck, who knew? Maybe the awful series of events that had taken place way back in 1976 would play out

differently for her and her parents this time.

Only one way to find out.

\*\*\*

Dusk darkened the summer sky as James Whitestone barbecued hot dogs and hamburgers on a rusty outdoor grill. He flipped a burger expertly with a quick flick of his right wrist before using the spatula to motion to the sandbox where Dana was playing quietly. He

spelled out the word to his wife so that their only child wouldn't know what they were talking about. Although she was a precocious and highly intelligent little girl, Dana had yet to completely master the tricky art of spelling.

“Think we could let her hold a *S-P-A-R-K-L-E-R* when it gets all the way dark out?” he asked. “She’s been bugging me about it for weeks now.”



Sara Whitestone slid her sunglasses down the bridge of her slender nose and raised one perfectly groomed eyebrow in her husband's direction. "Yeah, right, James. *You're* the one who's been bugging me about it for weeks now and you know it."

Her husband grinned at her. He looked absolutely ridiculous in his *Kiss the Chef* apron, which was par for the

course when it came to him. James Whitestone was easily the world's biggest dork, but then again that was *precisely* what Sara loved so much about him.

“C’mon, honey,” he whined. “Whaddya say? It’ll be a lot of fun. Don’t pretend it won’t.”

Sara let out a soft sigh of resignation, knowing she’d lost the argument already. Dana was the apple

of her daddy's eye, and he never denied her anything that wasn't unsafe for her. Probably the result of his growing up as the youngest of five sons of a strict Presbyterian minister, a stern man who most likely would have been happy if playtime had been classified as the Eighth Deadly Sin. "Fine, you big goofball." Sara finally relented. "But you're the one taking her to the

emergency room when her hair catches fire.”

Her husband’s lopsided grin exploded into a full-blown smile as he easily covered the fifteen feet between the grill and the lawn chair where she was sitting in three long, graceful strides. He leaned down and planted a kiss on the top of her head. “That anything like when my mom told me to not come running to her when I broke my

leg?”

Sara laughed and punched him on one tree-trunk thigh. “Damn straight it is. Moms always know what we’re talking about. It’s hard-wired into our psychology.”

James groaned theatrically as he straightened back up, as though the strain of leaning down to kiss his wife had been enough throw his back out of

alignment.

Sara Whitestone was a remarkably small woman; a trait that Dana would inherit as she herself grew into womanhood. Standing a shade under five feet tall, Sara tipped the scales at just below a hundred pounds, though those she went up against in court as a litigating attorney for the law firm of Smith, Frey and Bogner never seemed to mention anything about her size. Her

diminutive stature simply didn't register with them when she was in front of a jury, more often than not whipping their tails and looking for all the world exactly like what she was: an intellectual giant with a brilliant legal mind. Whenever anyone would ask her if it were nice always being the smartest person in the room, she'd smile politely and reply, "Well, no. Actually, it's

hell.”

Sara pouted and punched her husband on the leg again, harder this time. “Hey, be nice to me, you oversized gorilla. Be nice to me or no dessert for you tonight.”

James smiled and dropped down to his knees in front of her. His weight dented the soft grass as he wrapped his strong arms around her slender body and leaned forward to press his face into her



breasts, which were braless and straining hard against a tattered Abba-concert T-shirt, her small nipples making tiny little diamond points against the thin fabric. “Just exactly what kind of dessert are we talking about here, Mrs. Whitestone?” he breathed into her chest.

Sara laughed and pushed his face away. “Nip it, lover boy. Nip it right in

the bud. There's a time and place for everything, and this is certainly neither the time nor the place for this little conversation. If you're a good boy, though, maybe we'll revisit this subject later on tonight when our little angel is in bed sleeping. Play your cards right and anything's possible, I suppose."

James rolled his eyes and rose to his feet. Favoring his wife with a comically lecherous wink, he returned to

the grill by way of the sandbox, stopping just long enough to ask Dana what heinous and unforgivable crime her Holly Hobby doll had committed to warrant the extreme punishment of being buried up to her neck in sand. Sara smiled at them as she watched them talk before turning her attention back to the legal brief she'd brought home from work.

Fifteen minutes later James announced that the food was ready and that Dana needed to go into the house to wash before they could eat.

“What do I have to?” Dana asked, turning up her enormous blue eyes to meet his.

James furrowed his eyebrows, turning his handsome face into a mask of mock confusion. “Well, you have to

because your hands are all dirty from playing in the sandbox, silly goose.”

Dana stood up with a dramatic sigh. Tiny granules of sand cascaded down from her Barbie T-shirt as she wiped her hands across the butt of her previously clean white shorts and held them up for her father to inspect. “There, all clean now. See, Daddy?”

James threw back his head and roared with laughter. It was a deep,

joyful sound. “Sorry, kiddo. Not good enough.”

He paused and grinned down at his daughter. “Now, I could be all wrong about this, but I’m pretty sure it’s just about time for *this* plane to take off.”

With that, he ran over and swept up her small body into his strong arms, swinging her out wildly to his side in a

horizontal position five feet above the ground. Dana's eyes lit up brighter than the runway lights over at Hopkins airport as he held her suspended in the air. They'd played this game many times before and it had always been one of her all-time favorites.

Winking at Sara again, James began humming loudly to imitate the rumbling of a plane's engines. The sound came from deep within his chest

and Dana could feel the vibrations as they tickled her body. “The pilots are ready for take-off in the cockpit!” James boomed. “Are the passengers ready?”

“Ready!” Dana giggled. “All the passengers are ready for take-off, Daddy!”

Engines rumbling joyfully, the impromptu summertime flight taxied quickly down the runway of the



backyard and into the house, where it banked sharply to the right in the foyer before finally touching down at the kitchen sink to complete its vital hand-washing mission with a fresh bar of Ivory soap.

When father and daughter had returned and they were all seated around the wooden picnic table covered by a red-and-white-checkered plastic tablecloth in the middle of their

backyard, the young family began eating and fell into an easy conversation centering on Dana's trio of imaginary friends: Lula, Pano and Mr. Sunday.

“And what is Mr Sunday up to on this fine Fourth of July?” Sara asked, dabbing with a paper napkin at a smear of mustard that had found its way onto her daughter's left cheek.

“He's working today. No

fireworks for him. And, boy, is he ever sad about that.”

“That’s too bad.” James empathized. “Seems pretty darn unfair that he has to work when everybody else is out there having a good time. What line of work is he in, anyway, sweetheart?”

“He’s a filthy prostitute,” Dana mumbled through a mouthful of half-chewed hot dog.

A shocked look flashed across Sara's delicately pretty face. "*What* did you say?"

"I said Mr. Sunday's a filthy prostitute and that he's gotta work today," Dana repeated nonchalantly, her attention now squarely focused on the tiny army ant that was marching its way steadily across the table and toward her plate.

James arched an inquisitive eyebrow at his wife before turning back to his daughter. “Where on *earth* did you learn a word like that, honey?”

“From that movie you were watching last night, Daddy. You know, the one with all the filthy prostitutes in it. Did you forget about it already?”

Sara shot her husband a look that could have frozen water. “That’s it,

James. That is *it*. No more late-night television for you until this little girl's been in bed and sawing logs for at least an hour. You ever hear the saying about little pitchers having big ears? Well, there you go. There's your proof right there, buster."

"But, Mom!" Dana whined.

"But, Mom!" James echoed in the same tone.

Sara held up a hand to silence

them. “Don’t *But, Mom* me, you two. That’s final. I mean it, James. Only PBS until she’s in bed and lost in dream world, you hear me? The only words she needs to be learning are the ones they teach her on *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company*.”

Turning back to Dana with a frown, she added, “And I don’t *ever* want to hear that word out of your mouth

again, little lady. It's a bad word and if I ever hear it again you're getting the soap. You didn't like it very much the last time, remember?"

Dana rolled her eyes and took a long drink of her Kool-Aid before smacking her red-stained lips once. "Fine, Mommy. I heard you the first time, you know."

Sara raised her eyebrows and pulled back her head on her shoulders in



surprise. It took everything she had to hold back the laugh she felt coming on. In some ways her daughter seemed so advanced for her young age that she often had to remind herself that Dana wasn't even five years old yet. "I only said it once, Little Miss Smarty-Pants."

"I know you did, and that's the same time I heard you say it."

"Hard argue with that logic,"

James chimed in helpfully.

Sara shot him another look.

“You stay out of this, James. Stay out of it or you can consider the dessert menu off-limits to you tonight, if you get my drift.”

James turned back to his daughter with a grin and held up his large hands, shrugging his broad shoulders in good-natured defeat. “Hard to argue with *that* logic, too. Sorry,

kiddo, but Mom's definitely got the trump card on this one. Daddy's not the smartest guy in the whole world but he sure as hell knows when he's been beat. Only PBS on that television from now on."

By the time they'd finished eating, cleared the table and brought the leftovers inside to the kitchen, the sun had set fully and the moonless sky above

had sufficiently darkened for the Whitestone family festivities to begin at last. Off in the distance they could hear the booming of the fireworks downtown as they streaked deep into the night to the accompaniment of the Cleveland Orchestra.

With an air of ceremony that made both Sara and Dana giggle, James switched off the back porch light and lit a sparkler from a box of ten with a cheap

plastic lighter before solemnly handing it over to his daughter. Taking his wife's hand in his own, they watched Dana gleefully run through the yard waving it around in figure-eight patterns. Little sparks of fire jumped off the stick in all directions, illuminating both a small circle of the night and the unadulterated joy on their only child's smiling face.

“I'm a fairy princess!” Dana

squealed with delight. “I’m a fairy princess and this here’s my magic wand!”

Sara smiled and slipped an arm around her husband’s waist, gently rubbing the small of his back. “You know what?” she said softly. “This is as good as it gets. I really think it’s moments like this we’ve worked so hard for all these years.”

A single tear formed silently in

the corner of her right eye, wavered there for a moment as though unsure what to do next, then spilled out slowly onto her smooth cheek.

“You know what?” James answered, pulling his wife closer and gently kissing the tear away. “I think you’re absolutely right.”

Sara Whitestone’s slender shoulders started to shake as she began

to cry harder then, once again asking herself how she could continue keeping such a huge secret from this man who so obviously loved her more than he loved life itself. But James Whitestone just held his wife tighter and kissed her again.

Even softer this time.





# CHAPTER 11

*In her oxygen-starved mind,*

*Dana is four years old again.*

It is the Fourth of July and she and her parents have just come back into the house after having enjoyed a wonderfully exciting holiday picnic in their backyard.

Still all wound up from being allowed to play Fairy Princess with a magic-wand sparkler; there is another

hour of frantic play before the first signs of sleep begin to creep into the corners of her enormous blue eyes.

She finally curls up in her father's lap as he sits on the living-room couch watching the evening news on their cabinet-style television. As usual, her mother is at the kitchen table reviewing a large pile of legal briefs that she has brought home from work,

periodically jotting down notes on the yellow legal pad at her side.

As Dan Rather signs off for the night, Dana stretches her arms high over her head and lets out a loud yawn.

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“Getting sleepy, honey bear?” James Whitestone asked, lightly scratching his daughter’s back over her Barbie T-shirt.

Dana nodded and yawned again.

“Mmhmm. I think I’m ready for bed now, Daddy.”

Hearing this declaration, Sara stood up, crossed into the living room and plucked Dana from her father’s lap.

“Well, then let’s go brush your teeth and get you ready for bed, sleepyhead. Then I’ll tuck you in and read you a bedtime story. How does that sound?”

“Sounds good, ’cept why do I

gotta brush my teeth again? I brushed them this morning, remember? They're still pretty clean."

Sara laughed and rapidly kissed the soft hollow of her daughter's neck. "You have to brush them again, silly, so that the Cavity Creeps don't invade Toothopolis while you're sleeping tonight."

Dana squirmed in her mother's arms. "OK, OK, already! Just stop that

– you’re tickling me, Mommy!”

When they’d finally finished up in the bathroom, they got Dana dressed in her pajamas and into bed. Pulling back the Big Bird covers, Sara tucked them in gently around her daughter’s small body. “What shall we read tonight, princess?” she asked.

Dana screwed up her face in concentration. Important decision here.

“Hmmm. How about we just do the story of Dana and the Three Friends again instead of reading from a book?”

Sara smiled. It was their own personal version of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, and over time and with Dana’s considered input, the story changed slightly with each telling.

Switching off the overhead light left only the soft yellow glow of Dana’s bedside lamp. Clearing her throat



dramatically, Sara began this night's version of the tale.

“Once upon a time there lived a delightful group of three friends, and their names were Mrs. Lula, Mr. Sunday and their precious baby – the wonderfully cute and adorable little Pano. They all lived together in a cozy little cottage in the forest and they enjoyed their peaceful lives there very

much.”

“Nope,” Dana corrected.

“That’s not right. They live in a gingerbread house in the forest now, Mommy. They moved last week.”

Sara laughed and tickled her daughter’s belly. “OK, smarty-pants, they moved last week. I think I can live with that. Anyway, the Three Friends all lived together in a cozy gingerbread house in the forest and they enjoyed their

peaceful lives there very much.”

The story progressed from there with the Three Friends deciding to take a walk in the forest in order to give their chocolate-cake breakfasts time to cool down. When they’d finally made it back home, Dana suggested they get James to do the voices.

“He does them best,” she said.

When James had been summoned

and had taken a seat next to his wife on the bed, Sara continued the story, leading her husband into his lines.

“The Three Friends had just returned home,” she prompted. “Pano could hardly wait to eat!”

“What’s this?” James asked in his Mr. Sunday voice. “Somebody has been nibbling on my cake!” Switching to his feminine Mrs. Lula voice, he said, “And somebody has been nibbling on my

cake, too!” Finally, Pano’s high-pitched and deeply wounded voice. “And somebody’s been nibbling on my cake, too, and they’ve eaten it all up!”

“Uh-oh,” the real Dana cut in. “Somebody’s in a shitload of trouble.”

Sara slumped her shoulders in defeat, much too tired to correct her daughter’s language again. She glanced over at her husband and gave him a long,

meaningful look before continuing.

“Looking around the room, Mr. Sunday noticed the chairs,” she said.

“Somebody has been sitting in my chair,” James growled as Mr. Sunday. “And somebody has been sitting in my chair as well!” he offered in his Mrs Lula voice.

“But it was Pano who was the most upset, the tears coming from his eyes.”

“Somebody has been sitting in my chair, too, and they broke it all to pieces!” James thundered. “This is complete and total bullshit!”

“*James Allen Whitestone!*” Sara cried out. “It’s no wonder she talks like a trucker!”

James tried to choke out an apology but couldn’t do it through the waves of laughter racking his body.

After several long moments he finally took a deep breath and wiped at his misty eyes. “Let me try that again,” he said. “Somebody has been sitting in my chair and they broke it all to pieces.”

Sara paused and looked at him expectantly. She knew he wouldn't be able to resist.

“They broke my favorite chair, the inconsiderate little bastards,” James muttered under his breath.



Dana giggled happily, but Sara just ignored him. “Don’t listen to him, Dana. Don’t listen to a single thing he says. I don’t know why they ever let him out of the Bad Boys’ Home in the first place. I’m calling them first thing in the morning so they can come pick him up.”

She stared at her husband for several measured beats before turning back to her daughter. “Now, where was

I before we were so rudely interrupted?”

“The Three Friends had just found out their chairs were all busted up,” Dana answered helpfully.

“Oh, yes. That’s right. Thank you, honey. The Three Friends did not know what they would find next, so they dashed upstairs lickety-split. Mr. Sunday was the first to look into the bedroom.”

Sara paused and looked over at

her husband, who obediently took his place back in the story.

“Somebody has been sleeping my bed!” James bellowed as Mr. Sunday. Switching to his Mrs Lula voice, he added, “And somebody has been sleeping in my bed, too!”

“Pano rubbed his eyes in disbelief.”

“And somebody has been

sleeping my bed, and there she is now!”

James cried out.

Dana's big blue eyes went saucer-wide as she peeked out from beneath the covers.

“Suddenly,” Sara said, her voice taking on a sense of urgency now, “Dana opened her eyes and shrieked at the sight of the Three Friends glaring down at her. But the friends never had a chance to do anything to her, for Dana jumped

out of bed, ran down the stairs and was out of the house in a blink of an eye.

“Needless to say, the Three Friends never saw Dana anywhere near their cozy little gingerbread house in the forest ever again. And as for little Dana, well, let’s just say that she became a lot more careful in her future adventures.

“The End,” Sara pronounced.

“Mommy?” Dana asked quietly,

slowly rubbing at her sleepy eyes with a tiny balled-up fist.

“Yes, honey?”

“Maybe tomorrow the Three Friends can call Dana up on the phone and ask her to come over to watch TV with them. That way they could be the Four Friends from now on.”

She paused and looked up at her mother. The innocence in her big blue eyes nearly broke Sara Whitestone’s

heart. “Don’t worry, Mommy. We’ll only watch PBS, I promise.”

Sara smiled. “I think that would be just fine. But it’s time for bed now, my little princess.”

She leaned forward and kissed her daughter softly on the forehead. “Sweet dreams, my darling little baby girl. I love you with all my heart.”

Somehow, Dana managed to

mumble her reply just a moment before promptly falling asleep.

“I love you too, Mommy.”





## CHAPTER 12

Dana twitched involuntarily in her hospital bed, not hearing the frenetic beeping of the monitoring equipment in the room, not feeling the rough hands all over her motionless body as frantic medical personnel tried their best to keep her alive. She knew this marked the part in her life story where all the good stuff had ended. From here, Nathan Stiedowe would slip into their

cozy West Park house in the dead of night and murder her parents in cold blood, shooting James Whitestone once in the back of his skull at point-blank range while her father used the bathroom before proceeding to draw a razor-sharp knife so violently across Sara Whitestone's slender throat that it practically turned the poor woman into a human Pez dispenser, cutting all the way

down to the bone right in front of Dana's shock-widened eyes.

An amped-up voice near Dana's right ear brought her hurtling back into the present. "We've got brain activity!" a disembodied female shouted. "Get Dr. Sanderson in here *now*! Ready the room for additional surgery! Fire up the crash cart and have it on standby. I don't want to lose her again."

Dana furrowed her eyebrows in

irritation, not particularly wanting to be here. She wanted to go back to 1976, to spend every last second with her parents that she possibly could, no matter how horrific those seconds might be.

That was when she felt delicate hands upon her shoulders, shaking softly.

Dana opened her eyes.  
Unbelievably, Sara Whitestone's

beautiful face smiled down on her. “Hi there, honey,” Sara said quietly. “I’ve missed you.”

An ethereal glow highlighted her mother’s soft features. There was no ugly, jagged slice across her slender throat. No horrible gurgling sounds coming from deep within her chest as she choked to death on her own blood. Once again, Sara Whitestone appeared and sounded just as gorgeous and

beautiful as she'd ever appeared or sounded in her entire life. Maybe even *more* gorgeous and beautiful, if that was even possible.

Dana sat up straighter in her childhood bed and rubbed away the sleep from her exhausted eyes, completely confused. “Where am I, Mommy?” she asked in a tiny voice.

Sara sat down on the bed beside

her and laid Dana down again, gently but insistently, pulling the Big Bird covers lovingly around her daughter's small body and tucking them in tight. "You're in heaven now, baby girl," Sara said, lightly stroking Dana's cheek with her fingertips. Glistening tears shone in the same pale-blue eyes that Dana had been staring right back into in her bathroom mirror every single morning for the thirty-six long years she'd spent on Earth



without her mother. “You’re in heaven now and I just wanted you to know that the bad man won’t be coming here for us tonight, so you can finally rest in peace, angel.”

Dana wrinkled up her face in confusion, not understanding her mother’s meaning. She frowned up at her mother, biting down softly into her lower lip. “How the heck would you

know something like that?” she asked.

“How do you know that the bad man won’t be coming here for us tonight, Mommy?”

Sara brushed a lock of short blonde hair out of Dana’s eyes with the back of her smooth hand. “Because he went to the other place, baby. The place where all the bad people go.”

Dana snuggled her head deeper into her still-warm pillow and yawned

despite herself. But she was so darn *tired* right now. More tired than she'd ever felt before in her entire life. "And he'll never hurt us ever again?" she asked wearily, feeling sleep begin to fold her up into its heavy embrace once more. "You promise me that?"

Sara nodded. 'Yes, honey. I promise you that from the very bottom of my heart. He'll never hurt any of us ever

again.”

Just then, James Whitestone appeared in the doorway to Dana’s bedroom, looming there like some sort of beneficent giant. His handsome face looked calm and relaxed. There was no longer a bullet wound that had ripped off the top of his head before splattering his brains all over the tiled bathroom wall down the hall. “Your Mom’s telling you the truth, honey bear,” he said, grinning

joyfully. “The three of us will be safe here and together forever now.”

Dana gave her father a small smile, happy to see him again after all this time. She’d missed him even more than she’d ever realized. “Good,” she said, “because right here is the only place I ever want to be from now on. Right here with you and Mommy.”

Sara leaned down and kissed

Dana softly on her forehead. “Well, that’s where you’ll *be* for ever, honey. From this day forward and forever and ever and ever. So just close your eyes and go back to sleep now, sweetheart. Your Daddy and I will be right here in the morning waiting for you when you wake up again.”

Dana wanted to stay awake a little while longer, to stay in the company of her loving parents for as

long as she possibly could under the circumstances, but she felt much too tired to protest. Her eyelids began to droop insistently and she yawned again, even louder this time. It was no use. She just couldn't fight it anymore. Besides, everything was OK now. After all of those years of living without it in her life, she finally felt at *peace*.

Wriggling herself into a more

comfortable position in her bed, Dana sighed contentedly and did as her mother had just instructed her to do.

She simply closed her eyes and went back to sleep again.

Forever this time.





## PART IV

“I don’t like Mondays.” – Brenda Ann Spencer, when asked by a reporter why she’d carried out a deadly shooting at Cleveland Elementary School in San Diego that killed two people and injured nine others, in the process inspiring a hit song by Bob Geldoff and the Boomtown Rats that topped the UK charts for four weeks in 1979.



# CHAPTER 13

*Monday; 7 a.m.; Parma, Ohio (12 miles southeast of Cleveland)*

Jack Yuntz sat slack-jawed in front of the flickering television set in his rented room at the Holiday Inn, not believing his eyes or ears.

A way-too-perky-for-the-morning-time female anchor had just segued from a standard piece on rising gas prices to this:

*“Sad news from the world of law-enforcement this morning, Jim. FBI Special Agent Dana Whitestone – who gained a certain measure of national celebrity for her role in tracking down the Cleveland Slasher, among many other high-profile killers over the course of her illustrious career – tragically took her own life*

*Friday night. Whitestone, 40, graduated from Cleveland State University in 1994 with a degree in criminal justice before beginning her career with the FBI three years later."*

The perfectly coiffed man seated to the right of his co-anchor frowned solemnly while an image of Jack's hated nemesis flashed across the left-hand side of the screen. Short blonde hair cut into

a professional bob. Pale-blue eyes embedded in an attractive, fair-skinned face that called to mind that of actress Reese Witherspoon's. Thin lips pressed together into a smug half-smile that *Jack* had wanted to erase himself.

*“Oh, my, Emily, that is tragic news. How absolutely terrible.”*

The woman nodded soberly and went on.

*“In 1976, Whitestone’s parents, James and Sara, marked the first known victims of Nathan Stiedowe, the infamous Cleveland Slasher who terrorized the Renaissance City and much of the rest of the country until she helped to finally stop him a few years*



*ago. A fifteen-year veteran of the FBI, Whitestone leaves behind no living relatives. Funeral services will be held later today at St Christopher's Catholic Church in Rocky River. Hundreds are expected to attend."*

The man shook his head sadly.

*"Awful, awful news, Emily. Now, have you heard about this?"*

*Seems that some enterprising youngsters out in Westlake have run up against the wrong side of the law by failing to secure the proper permit for their lemonade stand... ”*

Jack flipped off the television set in complete and utter shock. His reeling mind spun like a toy top on a table. His palms flooded with sweat. His temples

throbbed. His gag reflex threatened to go off in a disgusting explosion of his recently eaten breakfast: eggs, toast and pancakes – mixed in with more than just a small measure of the stomach bile that was churning away madly in his gut.

What the fuck was *this*?

He shook his head violently in an effort to get his stunned brain working again but it didn't work. Not even close. This *couldn't* be happening,

though. Not like this. He'd wanted Dana Whitestone for *himself*, goddamn it. He'd *promised* her he'd get her. And why the hell *wouldn't* he get her? It was because of her completely unforgivable professional incompetence that his poor mother had died in the first place.

Jack rose to his feet and seethed as he paced across the ugly, industrial carpet of his room. *Jesus fucking*

*Christ!* Of all the unbelievably *cowardly* stunts to pull. He'd expected so much *more* from Dana Whitestone. If she'd had such a weak stomach for this high-level game of good versus evil – to the extent of actually *killing* herself over it – what the hell had been the fucking point of her ever playing at all? She should've just stayed on the goddamn sidelines, where she'd belonged all along. Let the *real* pros carry out the

dirty work here and keep the fuck out of the way. It was what the public wanted to see, anyway, quite regardless of what the bleating sheep might like to say to one another while in the staid and all-too-safe company of family and friends.

Jack stopped his pacing; still unable to wrap his mind around the dizzying realization that Whitestone had actually *offed* herself.

*Why?*

He pursed his lips. Well, there *had* been the highly unfortunate circumstances surrounding the sudden and brutal death of poor little Bradley, of course, but still...

Jack took a deep breath through his flared nostrils that filled up his lungs nearly to the point of bursting and forced himself to calm down. He was much too

amped-up right now; he knew that, much too juiced. And he *also* knew that he had a whole hell of a lot of scrambling to do now. A whole hell of a lot of script re-writing. But fuck it, right? Like it or not, sometimes main characters got killed off. That was just a simple fact of life; the way the world worked from time to time even when you didn't *want* it to work that way. He certainly shouldn't feel the need to



abandon his entire beautifully written script just because of that one irritating little detail, should he?

Jack stretched his badly cramped neck that had come courtesy of the Holiday Inn's insufferably lumpy mattress, loudly snapping a long line of painfully compressed vertebrae in the process. Of course he shouldn't feel the need to abandon his script. Fuck *that*

shit. Edit it a little bit more, maybe, tweak it here and there, but to hell with just chucking the entire goddamn thing into the trashcan. Besides, from all appearances, it looked to him as though he had quite the busy day ahead of him today.

After all, he had a *funeral* he needed to disrupt now.

Making his way quickly over to the desk in the far corner of his room, he

sat down in the uncomfortable wooden chair that was bleeding cotton from several tears in the tattered cloth covering before accessing Google from the hotel's wi-fi connection and tapping a few words into the search bar. Dana Whitestone's funeral certainly wouldn't mark the *first* one he'd disrupted recently. Not even close. Still, this time he'd make his presence known a bit

more forcefully than by just sending along an elaborate flower arrangement bearing a playful little card. Just because the opposing queen piece had chosen to remove herself from this high-stakes game of life and death didn't mean that he should consider it over for *him* now, too, did it?

Jack stretched his neck again, finally, *blissfully*, snapping one last stubborn vertebra with the movement.

Of course it didn't mean that he should consider the game over for himself now too. There still existed *plenty* of pawns ripe for the capturing out there in the world, though the poor souls most likely weren't aware of that highly disturbing little fact yet.

And, from all reports, a great many of them enjoyed going to the movies from time to time in an effort to

de-stress from the laughable daily pressures of their wholly insignificant lives.

Finally finding out what he'd needed to know a moment later, Jack rose to his feet again and made his way over to the queen-sized bed in the middle of the room before unzipping his machinegun's padded nylon case and slamming a fresh magazine into the butt of the weapon with a satisfying metallic

report, eschewing the rifle that he'd used to wreak havoc over at St. Anthony's just a few days prior in favor of more complete coverage this time.

Yes, taking in a movie today seemed a good idea to him, as well. An absolutely fucking *awesome* idea, actually. He'd need to get there early in order to ensure himself the best possible seat, though.

After that, let all of the insignificant pawns scatter where they may.





# CHAPTER 14

*Monday; 8:12 a.m.; Fairview General Hospital;*

*Fairview Park, Ohio (20 miles west of Cleveland)*

Helen Morgan's stomach bubbled over with all the subtlety of an evil cartoon witch's boiling cauldron of blood thanks in large part to the lingering affects of a skull-cracking hangover that had come courtesy of a long and extremely beautiful weekend spent drinking endless amounts of liquor

with her handsome new beau in between making endlessly satisfying amounts of love.

A nauseating hangover certainly not helped any by the shocking thing that Nicholas had asked her to do on Friday night.

Helen swallowed back the small-but-cheek-melting measure of stomach bile that rushed up from her gut

and flooded into her mouth, threatening to hasten the already well-underway decay of her aging teeth as she slid her keycard through the magnetic reader located outside the birthing wing at Fairview General Hospital and stepped inside to report for her usual morning shift.

Somehow, and Helen still didn't understand how, the crazy idea that Nicholas had presented to her on Friday

night hadn't seemed *quite* so insane as she'd lay cuddled in his strong arms in the comfortable king-sized bed of his lovely suite over at The Four Seasons. Hell, the way he'd put things to her then had *seemed* to make perfect sense at the time. And why not? As he'd told her while softly stroking her badly disheveled hair following yet *another* frantic go-'round in the sack, if she

could somehow find the courage to do what he'd asked her to do then not only would the two of them have plenty of money to begin their new life together as an honest-to-God *family*, *she'd* finally have the opportunity to escape the mind-numbing existence of her pathetic excuse for a life that she'd sleepwalked through ever since as far back as she could remember.

Helen pressed her lips into a

firm line, never having been the type to lie to herself. No purpose in it. She knew full well that she'd never been what anyone would have described as a *pretty* girl. Not even close.

She'd been slightly overweight ever since her teen years and as a direct result the boys hadn't come calling very often. More like *never*, actually, if she wanted to be perfectly honest about the

whole thing. One boyfriend when she'd been seventeen, but that had been about it. Still, none of that had seemed to matter to Nicholas. He'd told her that she was beautiful, that he'd fallen in love with her at first sight. That he wanted to be with her *for ever*. What's more, she'd actually *believed* him when he'd said those wonderful things to her. And if that made her a blind nincompoop who couldn't see the forest for the trees,



then so be it. She was sick to *death* of being an afterthought, of not even being considered good enough to represent anyone's *last* choice, much less their first. So bent-over-at-the-waist, hurling-into-the-toilet sick-to-her-stomach today or not, for once in her life she needed to take a chance. A *real* chance, no matter how terrifying the prospect might seem. Because at forty-six years old now, she

highly doubted that very many more chances were headed her way from here on out.

She reached the front desk of the birthing wing and said her hellos to her colleagues who were still milling about drinking their morning coffees. Ellen Grolsch, the head nurse with whom Helen had always had somewhat of a contentious relationship over the years – mostly due to scheduling conflicts and

Helen's general lack of overall "cheerfulness" on the ward – seemed unusually chipper today. Heck, things felt different already.

“And good morning to you, as well, Helen,” Grolsch answered, looking up from her clipboard and smiling brightly. “Ready for another exciting day in the salt mines? Ready to do something adventurous today?”

Helen's face blanched, only accentuating the crippling nausea that was promising to make her insides explode. Belatedly, she realized that Grolsch couldn't *possibly* have any notion of what she had planned. This was *Helen's* little secret, hers and Nicholas's alone, though it most likely wouldn't remain that way for much longer. Soon enough – if everything

went well enough for the two of them, if everything unfolded *precisely* according to Nicholas's wonderfully daring plan – *everyone* would know the stunning thing she'd done for the love of a good man.

Her. Ugly old Helen Morgan who'd always been so deathly afraid of her own shadow.

Helen straightened her posture and cleared her throat forcefully before answering in an assertive voice that

sounded foreign even to her own ears. Still, no point in pretending that she liked Grolsch anymore. No point in continuing to kiss the old bag's ass, either, considering the happy fact that today would mark her very last day of toil in this godforsaken hellhole of a workplace. "Yes, ma'am," Helen answered, feeling her own spirits lift several notches at the supremely

welcome thought that freedom lay just around the corner for her. “What have you got for me on the schedule today?”

Grolsch glanced back down at the clipboard on the counter in front of her, then checked the thin gold watch strapped around her meaty right wrist. “The Paulson birth in Room 1A. Scheduled induction by way of our dear old friend pitocin. Big stuff.”

“How far along is she now?”

Grolsch raised her overly plucked eyebrows and examined her watch again, rapidly tapping the tiny glass face with her left index finger. “Four centimeters at last measurement fifteen minutes ago, so you’d better get scrubbed up and in there to relieve Maura. The poor thing looks like she’s dead on her feet this morning. Must have had herself one hell of a weekend.”



Helen nodded, then turned on her heel and left the front desk, marching briskly down the hall toward the scrub-room. She suppressed a small grin while she walked despite the extreme sourness in her stomach that made her mouth taste as though she'd just touched the tip of her tongue directly to the business end of a Duracel battery. Maura Jacobs certainly hadn't been the

*only* one to have herself one hell of a weekend, though, that much was for sure. Not by a long shot.

Reaching the deep-sink in the far corner of the scrub-room several moments later, Helen lathered up her arms all the way to the elbows with the pump-dispensed, anti-bacterial soap, humming softly to herself beneath her breath in an effort to calm her badly jangled nerves while she mentally ran

through the list of tasks she needed to accomplish today.

All of the steps seemed fairly routine to her – nothing too far out of the ordinary when compared to the normal things she did every other day at work. Save for the last step, of course. When the time came to execute *that* particularly crucial step, it was then where she'd really need to watch her

back.

To be the courageous woman  
Nicholas so clearly believed her to be.

Finally finishing up in the scrub-  
room ninety seconds later, Helen made  
her way back down the hall and pushed  
open the door to Room 1A. Twenty feet  
away, the anesthesiologist was just  
putting the finishing touches on Ann  
Marie Paulson's epidural, sliding a  
wickedly long needle out of the base of

the young woman's spine while the local beauty sat balanced on the edge of her hospital bed with her smooth, unmarked back facing Helen, shapely legs featuring pretty, painted toes at the ends swinging a foot high off the gleaming tiled floor.

Helen fought back the sudden, hateful grimace that threatened to crack her face clean in half at the highly unwelcome sight in front of her, praying

that the extreme disgust she felt inside didn't reach her eyes. Room 1A had always been reserved for VIPs, checking in several levels above the other rooms on the floor in both the quality of amenities it offered and the amount of staff-attention it garnered. And the breathtakingly, jaw-droppingly, *stunningly* gorgeous Ann Marie Paulson was nothing if she wasn't a VIP.

*A Very Irritating Person.*

Helen stepped farther into the oversized room and stretched her stress-stiffened neck, despising the self-satisfied little bitch with all her heart and soul already. And why the hell *shouldn't* she despise Ann Marie Paulson? Some women really did have things just too goddamn *easy* in this life. To Helen, Ann Marie Paulson represented every perky little

cheerleader that had ever caught the handsome football captain's eye. Every self-assured little *ingénue* that had ever had the door to a restaurant held open for her even though she'd still been thirty yards away from the entrance and making her way slowly across the parking lot at the time. Everything Helen Morgan had *never* been.

Someone who actually *mattered* to the people around her.



But that shit was about to change. In a big way. After all, why should the *beautiful* people get to have all the fun?

Moving purposefully across the room with her teeth clamped down tight enough to make her jaw throb, Helen pulled on a fresh pair of latex gloves with a loud elastic *snap* that caused Sheila Mendenhall, Laura Andrews and

Maura Jacobs to look up at her and smile. Maura – she of the extremely busy weekend that Ellen Grolsch had so recently expounded upon – then left the room, no doubt eager to go sleep off the remnants of her own overexertions at home in the comfort of her own bed.

From there, the next hour proved routine, even boring at times. A bunch of yelling and screaming as Ann Marie Paulson pushed and grunted and

breathed her way through the entirely banal ordeal of childbirth with her ridiculously supple legs spread three feet apart and suspended in sturdy metal stirrups.

The baby finally came with a wet explosion of placenta at precisely 9:17 a.m. Helen shuddered as she transferred the shimmering red afterbirth in a sterile metal tray to Dr. Smith's work cart,

having never gotten particularly used to this particularly gross part of the job. Nothing went to waste in the hospital, though. Umbilical cords, placentas, various other slimy odds and ends associated with the so-called “miracle of birth” that had now occurred approximately one hundred billion times since the dawn of human history: just about everything that could be exploited to make a quick buck on the medical-

research market *was* exploited. The laughably commercial American healthcare system at work for no one to see but the “privileged” few insiders unlucky enough to be privy to such unsavory things.

Ten feet away, Dr. Harold Smith rose to his feet from his short stool positioned in front of Ann Marie Paulson’s still-spread thighs and pulled

off his own bloodstained gloves with a similar snapping noise while Sheila Mendenhall and Laura Andrews attended to the mucus-suctioning of the bouncing baby boy that Mrs Paulson had just squeezed out into the world, still *sans* the silver spoon that Helen had very little doubt would soon be inserted into his greedy, newborn mouth.

Helen thought again about the complete *unfairness* of the world as she

busied herself cleaning up the disgusting aftermath. Under normal circumstances, the baby would have been a very lucky boy, indeed, with his software-king father Zachary Paulson footing all of his bills from the cradle to the grave.

Then again, these weren't normal circumstances, now were they?

Not hardly.

The elderly doctor stretched his

sagging-though-somehow-still-tan neck and checked the clipboard attached to his work cart by a short length of plastic cord. “Looks like this little guy’s scheduled for a circumcision today, Helen. Hell of a way to greet the world, huh? Anyway, would you bring him in to me in a few minutes or so? I know it’s a little sooner than we usually do it but I’ve got a noon tee-time at the club that I really don’t want to miss. Almost



got my handicap down to scratch now and there probably aren't too many days left in the season if this weather keeps going the way it's been going lately."

Fear and anticipation flared in Helen's chest at the doctor's words. She hadn't been expecting to handle the baby's transportation needs this soon, had thought it would prove infinitely harder to get her hands on the child

unsupervised. Still, as Nicholas had told her, if anything out of the ordinary happened today she should simply adapt her movements accordingly. And this should actually make things *easier* for her to do what she needed to do. This way – so to speak – she could cut out the middleman and sell directly to the consumer. “Of course, doctor,” she said, almost unable to believe the stroke of good fortune that had just slapped her

hard across the face and left her ears ringing. “That won’t be any problem at all.”

Helen watched Dr. Smith leave the room before she turned her attention back to the other two nurses present, who’d now removed Baby Paulson from his mother’s beautifully developed (though clearly *unnaturally* enhanced) chest, effectively ending the brief period

of kangaroo care that typically followed birth.

The two women attended to the squirming boy in a fluttering of hands over at the portable plastic crib situated on wheels that was located five feet to the left of Ann Marie Paulson's hospital bed. Damp cloths wiped at the baby's skin. Anti-bacterial lotion was slathered onto his still-closed eyelids. A radio monitor was strapped into place around

his tiny left ankle.

When Sheila Mendenhall and Laura Andrews had finished up with all this, Sheila looked over at Helen and smiled again. “All done over here, Helen,” she said. “Ready to take him off our hands?”

Helen nearly vomited on her own feet. *This was it.* The moment she’d been waiting for ever since Nicholas

had explained his wonderfully daring plan to her on Friday night. The moment she hadn't known until this very second she'd been waiting for her *entire life*.

"You betcha, Sheila," Helen breathed, praying to a God she'd never believed in that the nervousness shaking her voice at the moment wasn't *too* noticeable.

"Ready as I'll ever be, I guess."

Helen's pounding heartbeat thundered away madly in her ears as she

reached the plastic crib and looked down at her newborn son. Hot tears sprang up into her eyes. She was absolutely *shocked* to find that the initial wave of hatred she'd felt for the boy immediately faded away, replaced at once by the mysterious magic of a mother's eternal love.

Wearing a soft cotton cap and bundled up tight, the baby cooed softly,

his glistening face marking the single most *beautiful* sight Helen had ever laid eyes upon in her entire life.

Just then, the baby's tiny pink lips curved downward into a slight, heartbreaking frown. Just working out his facial muscles for the first time in his life outside the comforts of the womb, Helen knew, but her chest nonetheless almost caved in on itself from the sheer amount of *adoration* it brought on inside



her. After all these years of never really understanding it, she finally knew *exactly* what true love felt like. And why not?

She was a *mother* now.

She'd just begun to wheel away the baby's crib when Ann Marie Paulson's icy voice stopped her dead in her tracks. "Where the hell do you think you're taking him?" the woman

snapped. The *bourgeoisie* speaking to the lower class in the clipped manner to which it had grown so accustomed over the years.

Helen turned her eyes to the hateful woman and locked gazes with Ann Marie Paulson for the first (and thankfully) last time in her life. Blue-green eyes punctuated by dancing flecks of light gray were further illuminated by the bright sunshine that was streaming in

through the huge picture window fifteen feet away, staring directly into Helen's soul. For one terrifying moment, Helen was so lost the inexplicable wonder of the woman's swirling cobra eyes that she could barely even *breathe*, believing with all her heart, mind, body and soul that Ann Marie Paulson could see right *through* her.

K n e w *exactly* what Helen

planned to do.

“I... I just need to take him for his circumcision,” Helen stammered stupidly, hating herself all the way down to the core of her innermost being for her pathetic lack of self-confidence at this highly critical juncture but still unable to keep it from taking hold of her for the gazillionth time in her sorry excuse for a life. No huge shock there, though. Old habits tended to die hard.

Just like Ann Marie Paulson would.

Blissfully, the woman whom Helen had grown to think of as the “birth mother” over the past three days just released an annoyed sigh and closed her hypnotizing eyes, finally freeing Helen from their iron grasp. Then she simply returned her attention to the latest-model iPhone clutched in delicate hands

featuring beautifully manicured fingers at the ends. French tips, of course. Nothing but the very best for her.

Snapped out of her stupor like an overstretched rubber band reaching its limits, Helen fought back another powerful surge of revulsion in her chest at Ann Marie Paulson's condescending attitude. What the fuck was she, twenty-three? Twenty-two? *Nineteen?* And even after giving birth the stupid bitch

couldn't take her eyes off her dumb electronic device for even a second? Hell, the child would be *better off* with Helen and Nicholas. If this marked any indication, which Helen felt quite sure it did, they were actually doing the little guy a *favor* here. And it was no wonder at all why the father had chosen to not be present at the birth of his son. Who in their right mind would want to spend a

*millisecond* longer with Ann Marie Paulson than they absolutely needed to? Despite her many obvious physical attributes – insignificant, skin-deep characteristics that had no doubt blinded each and every man who'd ever had the great misfortune to drink in the stunning vision of her loveliness until they found themselves stumbling drunkenly around the room and tripping over their own feet with the overwhelming lust she



inspired in them – the thoroughly entitled cunt exuded nothing but pure *venom* from the inside out.

The arrogant snake *deserved* what was about to happen to her.

“Just make sure that you’re extremely careful with him,” Paulson said, not bothering to look up at Helen again while she continued to tap away mindlessly at the keys of her precious

phone. “As I’m sure you’re well aware, he’s a highly valuable baby.”

Helen managed a nod, then crinkled up her face in confusion as she left the room, infinitely happy to finally escape Ann Marie Paulson’s horribly oppressive aura but wondering just what, exactly, the smug woman had meant by her last statement. Probably nothing, but it had nonetheless seemed an odd coincidence to Helen that she’d

been thinking the *exact* same thing herself.

Making her way quickly to the empty room located directly next door to Room 1A, Helen clicked the metal lock button into place with her thumb and proceeded to remove the baby's ankle monitor with no trouble at all. And where lay the great surprise in that? She'd put on and removed *thousands* of

these things over the years. Everything was still normal, still routine.

She still hadn't broken any laws yet.

Exiting the room a moment later, she took a deep, chest-expanding breath and held it tight in her lungs as she walked down the hall before passing by the front desk with the baby. Nobody even looked up at them. Thirty seconds later, she simply wheeled the boy right

out of the birthing wing on the second floor of the five-level hospital and headed for the elevator.

Cameras had been positioned all around Fairview General – a measure of protection against the inevitable lawsuits always filed whenever even the slightest thing went wrong – but Helen didn't feel particularly concerned about them. Why should she? She'd never be returning to

this place again.

True to his word, Nicholas was waiting for her just outside the hospital's entrance, seated behind the wheel of a non-descript white cargo van and looking just as handsome as ever. He jumped out when he saw Helen emerge from the building and hustled around to slide open the side door for her; every bit the chivalrous knight in shining armor he'd been ever since the wonderful and

completely wondrous night seventy-two hours earlier she'd first met him.

Gathering the baby out of the cradle into his strong arms, Nicholas handed the child over to a woman seated in the backseat of the van before turning around to glance at the automated hospital doors thirty feet away. No one was rushing outside to stop them from pulling off the daring heist they were in

the midst of committing. Everything was still normal, still routine.

Just another day at the office.

Helen waited until the woman in the back had strapped the now-wailing child into a car seat before she began to climb inside the van herself, more ready than ever to finally start her new life with her new family in a land far, far away from here.

Nicholas stopped her by placing



a hand lightly on her left shoulder.  
“Helen, my love?” he said softly.

Helen turned around to face him.  
The unmistakable look of appreciation in his smoldering brown eyes made her swoon, nearly buckling her knees. After all these years of never knowing a man’s love, of never knowing his gentle touch reserved specifically for her, she finally understood every last Disney-princess

movie she'd ever seen since childhood.

She'd finally *made* it.

“Yes, Nicholas?” she asked in a voice that barely registered above a whisper, searching his warm brown eyes with her own and trying desperately to convey his overpowering love right back to him, wanting him to know *exactly* how much he meant to her. “What is it?”

Nicholas widened the smile on his beautiful face. Then, without

warning, he cocked back his right arm and smashed Helen directly on the bridge of her nose with all his might. The jarring right cross shattered the bone in half a dozen places, sending a sickening gush of blood rushing down her now-stunned face and knocking her out cold.

“I’m very sorry, my dear, but I’m afraid that you won’t be accompanying

us on our wonderfully exciting voyage today,” Horatio D’Arbinville said, slowly flexing the fingers of his aching right hand while he watched Helen Morgan crumple hard to the pavement before striking the back of her skull violently against the unyielding cement with an audible *crack* that made even *him* feel slightly sick to his stomach. “Unfortunately for you, however, this just so happens to be a *family* matter.”





# CHAPTER 15

*AMC Town Center Westwood Movie Cinema;*

*Rocky River, Ohio; 2:45 p.m.*

Jack stood outside the bustling movie theater fifteen miles west of downtown Cleveland and just four short miles away from St. Christopher's Catholic Church – scheduled site of the dearly departed Special Agent Dana Whitestone's impending and highly anticipated funeral today.

Once again outfitted in his long black trench coat that thankfully didn't draw too much unwanted attention to his person considering the crisper October weather that had taken hold of northeast Ohio over the past several weeks, he studied the marquee with a careful eye out for any clever political statements he might find himself presented with the opportunity to make.



With Halloween fast approaching at the end of the month, the theater's offerings had been littered with the typical seasonal fare:

*Paranormal Activity 4; 1hr 35min; R; Horror*

*Argo; 2hr 0min; R; Drama*

*Fun Size; 1hr 30min; PG-13; Comedy*

*Hotel Transylvania; 1hr  
31min; PG; Animation*

*Silent Hill: Revelation 3D; 1hr  
34min; R; Horror*

*Cloud Atlas; 2hr 44min; R;  
Drama*

Jack chewed thoughtfully on his lower lip while he considered his options. For starters, he'd leave the

animated movies to the kiddies, figuring he'd already made his point quite sharply with that mostly annoying age group just a few days prior at St. Anthony's Catholic grade school over in Lorain. So *Hotel Transylvania* was off the list from the get-go. Of the remaining offerings, however – horror, drama and comedy – which genre best suited his purpose today?

Seven-fifty to the skin-

challenged male teen in the badly scratched Plexiglas booth out front secured his ticket to the afternoon showing of his choice a few minutes later. Entering the humongous brick building through the revolving glass doors and proceeding to hand over his ticket to the elderly woman in charge of this particularly high-tech aspect of the theater's security operations, Jack

passed through the clicking metal turnstile and turned to his left. Twenty-five yards down the hall on his right, Theater 16 marked the place where all the shit would start going down.

Jack walked as normally as he could manage considering the cargo he'd brought along with him today, making his way all the way down to the end of the long corridor with the enticing smell of warm butter filling his nostrils. Pulling

open the heavy outer door to Theater 16  
a moment later, he stepped inside the  
darkened space and glanced down to the  
bottom of theater. On the massive movie  
screen a hundred and fifty feet away,  
animated candy and talking boxes of  
popcorn were playfully urging  
moviegoers to be mindful of their fellow  
film buffs and to resist the urge to cause  
any unnecessary disruptions during the

showing of the feature.

Sorry, animated candy and talking boxes of popcorn, but that just didn't represent a realistic option today. Not for Jack Yuntz, anyway.

Descending the sticky carpeted steps all the way down to the bottom of the theater, Jack took his seat directly in the middle of the front row and stretched out his long legs in front of him in order to allow the fully loaded machinegun

hidden beneath his trench coat to rest comfortably along his right thigh. The seat certainly didn't represent the best viewing angle for anyone who wanted to follow along with the movie's plotline without sustaining a serious neck cramp in the process, of course, but it just so happened to mark the ideal location for someone who desired a bird's-eye look at all of the action that would be taking



place from *front to back*. Not to mention the fact that it was conveniently located right next to the fire exit outside of which Jack had parked his latest getaway car: a piece-of-shit, light-blue 1989 Ford Escort that he'd picked up for a measly six hundred bucks off Craigslist and which he would drop off later on tonight in one of Cleveland's countless east-side ghettos after finishing up the stunning thing he'd come here to

do this afternoon.

Jack allowed himself a small smile at just how *perfect* everything seemed at the moment. Twisting at his hips from right to left until he both felt and heard a satisfying *pop*, he stretched his aching neck in the same direction in an effort to loosen up the muscles bunched so tightly together in his narrow shoulders, wanting to be *completely*

ready for what would come next. Once again, it appeared, all the world was indeed a stage – even the expansive seating area directly behind him that had been reserved for people who had no idea in hell they'd be serving as supporting actors today instead of simply representing the audience for an incredibly stupid movie that no doubt reflected quite accurately on the pathetically dismal state of their

collective IQ.

Jack chased away the thoroughly inconsequential thought with a quick shake of his head, wanting to keep his mind completely free of any sort of mental clutter and focused squarely on what really mattered here. The intelligence of the people around him at the moment simply didn't warrant another single second of consideration.

After all, dumb people died every bit as easily as the smart ones did, right? Maybe even *more* easily.

Only one way to find out for sure.

Tilting back his head, Jack rested the base of his skull directly against the springy back of his heavily cushioned seat and closed his eyes in the overly air-conditioned space, letting his thoughts drift back to the master template

for what he had planned today: the mass-shooting that had gone down at the Century movie theater just a few months prior in Aurora, Colorado – a very unlucky state that seemed to have *far* more than its fair share of just these sorts of tragedies.

Much of what would happen today here in Rocky River, Ohio would mirror those events almost perfectly.

Jack hadn't died his hair bright orange like James Eagen Holmes had, of course – hadn't even *considered* doing such a ridiculous thing. Those sorts of amateurish – not too mention *unnecessary* – theatrics only drew undue attention to your person, which certainly didn't mark the wisest course of action for someone who desired to remain just as unremarkable as he possibly could. And Jack sure as *hell* wouldn't allow

himself to be arrested outside the theater just minutes after pulling off the grisly deed. That would be even stupider. So, after everything had been said and done and outside of the obvious similarities involved in their preferred methods of message-delivery, he and James Holmes shared very little in common, indeed.

For one thing, Jack wasn't a broke-ass college student. Not even



close. He could thank Jared von Waldenberg – the infamous Race Master – for that much. Because not only had the brain-addled white supremacist sprung Jack from a boys’ detention home in upstate New York several months earlier in order to help him carry out his own nefarious plans after Jack had plunged a sharp pair of scissors deep into the exposed throat of Special Agent Jeremy Brown in the Presidential Suite

of the Fontainebleau Hotel in downtown Manhattan, the ridiculously wealthy nut-job had also paid him quite handsomely to do so. *Cash*. The way Jack figured it, as long as he continued to pay for all of his purchases with paper currency not readily subject to the electronic tracking law enforcement depended on so heavily these days he had nothing at all to worry about. Living off the grid, so to speak,

definitely had its benefits.

Still, it *could* get lonely at times.

Wondering idly what Molly might be up to at this very moment, Jack sat forward in his seat again and looked up at the huge movie screen fifteen feet away when the film finally began to roll five minutes later. Twenty interminable and hopelessly mind-numbing minutes after *that*, he pulled back the sleeve of his trench coat and checked the time

again on his trusty Timex watch in the darkened theater. *3:10 p.m.* By his calculations, the events over at St. Christopher's Catholic Church should be in full swing by now, with much gnashing of teeth and beating of breasts as the heartbroken community gathered 'round to mourn the sudden and absolutely *tragic* passing of Special Agent Dana Whitestone of the Federal

Bureau of Investigation.

Jack inhaled quickly several time through his nostrils and let out the air again in short rushes over his teeth as his pulse began to hammer away in his wrists. Then he tightened his lips into a firm line. Clearly, the time had come for him to pay his *own* special tribute to Dana Whitestone.

Heartbeat slamming powerfully in his ears to supply the deafening

internal soundtrack for the dizzyingly surreal scene, he rose to his feet as calmly as he could manage and turned around to face the crowd, simultaneously sliding out the machinegun from his trench coat and leveling his weapon at the mass of humanity now positioned in front of him.

Unbelievably – despite just how *fresh* the horrific events in Aurora,

Colorado must have been in their minds – most of the idiots in attendance didn't even bother to look at him as he did so, much too engrossed in the supremely dumb film playing at the moment to even *glance* at him.

Jack shook his head in disgust. Time to see just how easily stupid people died.

Taking one final breath that puffed out his narrow chest against his

trench coat, he held it tight in his lungs and pulled back his right index finger firmly on the trigger of his machinegun, keeping up the steady pressure and breathing in the resulting tendrils of sharp-smelling smoke that floated up into his flared nostrils while he methodically sprayed the crowd with ear-shattering gunfire from right to left and then from left to right again, finally



prompting the now-stunned theater-goers taking in *Fun Size* to notice him.

At least – in some cases – for the few, terror-stricken seconds that it took before their heads suddenly exploded on their shoulders in shocking sprays of red, white and gray.

Amazingly, Jack somehow managed to keep himself from bursting out into peals of maniacal laughter while he continued to efficiently mow down

the rapidly dispersing crowd of screaming people that was desperately trying to escape the conveniently enclosed space, this despite the immense pride he felt inside for having chosen a comedy as the location for this very important second act in his beautifully written script.

Still, why the hell *shouldn't* he laugh?

After all, whether or not it might make him a bad person completely unworthy of any sort of love from his fellow human beings, this shit was *funny* to him.



# CHAPTER 16

No matter how hard he tried to do so, FBI Director Bill Krugman simply couldn't wrap his brain around the mind-bending fact that he found himself here today.

Twenty feet in front of his face, a shining white coffin holding the dead body of Dana Whitestone rested on an accordion-like bed of collapsible metal, situated on wheels and book-ended by a

pair of large cardboard photographs supported by sturdy wooden easels.

The photograph to the right of Dana's gleaming coffin showed her at four years old, flanked by her murdered parents, James and Sara – the first known victims of Nathan Stiedowe on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1976. The photograph to the left of Dana's shining casket pictured her holding up her plump, black-and-white

cat close to her face while her beautiful pale-blue eyes danced with mirth in the bright sunlight that was illuminating the pleasant scene at a stunningly green park – the kind of unmistakable joy only brought about by children and a beloved pet that just as well might have been a child. *Your* child.

Krugman closed his own tired brown eyes against the horrible sight that his frazzled brain still couldn't quite

comprehend. He'd lost agents under his command before, of course – everyone who'd ever held his job since the formal inception of the Bureau way back in 1935 had lost agents under their command, including the inestimable J. Edgar Hoover, himself. And everyone who'd ever hold the job in the future after Krugman had finally stepped down from the post and ridden off into the



sunset of his life would need to prepare him or herself for that unavoidable eventuality, as well. It marked the harshest reality in an occupation *full* of harsh realities that liked nothing better than to slap you hard across your face on a daily basis – sometimes even before you had a chance to take the first sip of your morning coffee.

Still, he'd never lost an agent to *suicide* before.

And he'd certainly never lost an agent anything quite like Dana Whitestone.

Krugman brushed an imaginary piece of lint from the sleeve of his best black suit and stretched his aching neck that had come courtesy of the frantic, unscheduled plane ride he'd taken three days earlier. Adjusting the tiny American flag pin tucked into his left

lapel, he took a deep breath that filled up his lungs with the stale, unmoving air inside the church. Then he rose to his feet in the front row of St. Christopher's when he heard the priest announce his name.

Making his way somberly up the marble altar stairs with the thunderous *swish* of his own dress pants echoing loudly in his ears in the deathly silent church, Krugman reached the heavy

wooden lectern stationed at the front of the overflowing place of worship and repositioned the microphone in front of his mouth, causing several jarring bursts of static to crackle through the air before he reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and withdrew a folded-up sheet of paper upon which he'd jotted down a few notes.

Slipping his reading glasses onto

his face, he looked up at the assembled mourners in front of him. Clearing his throat softly, he then began to deliver a eulogy that he'd never in a million years thought he'd ever need to deliver, having fully expected that his and Dana's positions would have been reversed when this time came.

“Dana Whitestone was my friend, my colleague and one of the finest agents I've ever known in my

entire career,” Krugman began, relieved beyond words to find that his characteristically gruff voice still felt and sounded relatively steady despite the heartbreaking circumstances. “Dana loved and *was* loved from the moment she drew her first breath in this life to the moment she drew her last...”

As he continued speaking, Krugman fell into an easy rhythm

memorializing Dana; unable to keep his mind from drifting back to all the people he'd lost in his life over the years. He couldn't help but think of Crawford Bell, his closet friend, confidant and ally ever since their first days together back at the Academy more than forty years earlier and a man whom Nathan Stiedowe had strung up carelessly by the neck in an oversized closet with all the respect one might show a squealing, squirming hog

scheduled for an impending slaughterhouse butchering. There'd been his old brother, Bob, who'd died in Vietnam back in 1967, one of the first casualties of that extremely bloody war that hadn't even decided a winner when he'd stumbled upon a landmine hidden in the dense jungle. His parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles: all gone now. Cousins, in-laws, friends,



enemies, colleagues and softball buddies. Two mailmen, a butcher and his insurance agent. And he'd very *nearly* lost his wife, Peggy, to breast cancer the previous year. Still, no huge shock to Krugman that he'd lost all those people. Not really. He was almost seventy-two years old now, for Christ's sake. Practically had one foot in the grave himself. So like it or not – and he most certainly *didn't* like it – he realized

that life was ultimately death in the end,  
and the older he got the more he'd begun  
to accept that ugly truth.

Still, Dana had been much too  
young to go. Much, *much* too young.

Not to mention much too  
important to him.

Krugman held on tight to the  
sides of the lectern and dug his  
fingernails deep into the wood in an

effort to steady himself against the powerful waves of emotion that were crashing through his body. He knew that he'd never have another agent like Dana again. God had broken the mold after he'd made her, and now He'd broken Krugman's heart – not to mention the hearts of a lot of other people – by taking her away again in the thoroughly shocking manner He had.

Three minutes into his eulogy,

Krugman abruptly snapped up his head at the sudden sound of several beepers going off at once inside the church. Anger flared up hot in his chest. His temples began to pound. He gritted his teeth, ready to explode in an apoplectic rage at the disgusting lack of respect being shown for a person of Dana's unequalled caliber. She deserved *better* than this, goddamn it. Just then, though,

his own beeper vibrated insistently in his pocket.

A hundred feet away – ten or twelve pews deep – Bruce Blankenship sprang to his feet and caught Krugman's eye. The sandy-haired agent jerked his head toward the exit.

Flustered, Krugman tried his best to stay calm. Wasn't easy. Overly pressurized blood slammed away at his temples, bringing on an instant,

throbbing headache that he knew wouldn't go away anytime soon. A thin trickle of sweat slipped down his ribs underneath his white dress shirt.

Turning toward the priest in charge of conducting Dana's funeral, he said, "Could you please take over here for me, Father? I'm afraid we have a situation on our hands."

Murmurs of disapproval rippled

throughout the church. Thankfully, though, the man of the cloth stationed directly to Krugman's left had already begun to make his way back over to the lectern. Sliding behind the wooden pulpit in Krugman's place, he quieted the crowd by raising his hands, palms-up. "Dana Whitestone loved and *was* loved from the moment she drew her first breath in this life to the moment she drew her last. Beloved daughter, friend

and colleague, Dana epitomized complete grace and courage throughout all her days here on Earth. I know that Dana would have wanted us to remember...”

Krugman lost the priest's words as he reached the side exit of the church and banged out through the door. Blankenship was waiting for him on the other side.



“This had better be good,”

Krugman snarled, feeling his face heat up again with a fresh infusion of blood.

“We’ve interrupted a goddamn *funeral* here, for Christ’s sake. *Dana’s* funeral.”

Blankenship nodded. “Yes, sir.

I understand that.”

Krugman waited for an explanation. Unbelievably, none was forthcoming. The Director closed his

eyes briefly, balling up his hands at his sides in order to prevent himself from reaching out and choking the life out of the mute idiot right where he stood. “Well, Blankenship,” he snapped, “what the fuck *is* it?”

Blankenship held out his beeper. Krugman snatched it from his hands.

He needed to read the shocking type three times through before the horrible message from Headquarters

finally sank in:

*MASS SHOOTING AT WESTWOOD  
MOVIE CINEMA IN ROCKY RIVER,  
OHIO; AT LEAST THIRTY DEAD;  
STAGING AREA IN PARKING LOT  
OUT FRONT; ALL LAW  
ENFORCEMENT AND FIRST  
RESPONDERS IN TEN-MILE RADIUS  
ARE REQUESTED TO REPORT;*

*LIKELY NATIONAL AND GLOBAL  
MEDIA INTEREST TO FOLLOW.*



## CHAPTER 17

A strong north-westerly wind howled like a pack of screeching banshees through the movie-theater parking lot, whipping hard through Bill Krugman's full head of distinguished silver hair as he attempted to make sense of the mind-jarring tableau before him.

No use. Krugman might as well have been looking at some sort of bizarre, glass-enclosed, blood-soaked

ant farm at the moment, considering all the frenetic activity going on all around him right now.

The parking lot of the Westwood Movie Cinema was teeming with cops, firemen, EMTs, doctors, nurses and just about every other possible stripe of first-responder under the sun. Fire trucks, squad cars and ambulances lit up the stormy gray skies threatening

overhead with their flashing red-and-blue lights. Sirens wailed, piercing his eardrums. News trucks careened into the parking lot one after another in a long line, tires squealing, metal rattling, reporters jumping out with microphones in hand while camera operators followed close behind before their respective vehicles had even come to full stops. Onlookers held onto each other tight and sobbed hysterically in



each other's arms. Gurneys squeaked across the cracked black pavement, some bearing survivors with oxygen masks strapped across their mouths and noses while others carried unmoving, lumpy white sheets stained crimson with blood.

Krugman blinked several times against the visual, auditory and olfactory madness that had taken his senses

hostage, attempting to reconcile the horrific sights, sounds and smells that were slapping him hard across the face at the moment with the stupefying realization that he'd been delivering a eulogy for a beloved friend and colleague at St. Christopher's Catholic Church just fifteen minutes earlier. The scene was pure *carnage*, like nothing else he'd ever seen before in his more than forty years with the Bureau. And

Krugman had been around *plenty* of bloody scenes over the course of his lengthy career, that much was for sure. So many of them that he could never quite keep them from invading his dreams at night, no matter how many different and seemingly silly home-remedies Peggy prescribed.

John Wayne Gacy's kill-house in Illinois, where they'd dug up the badly

decomposed bodies of twenty-nine teenage boys: the unlucky victims of the deranged, portly businessman who'd liked nothing better in this world than to dress up as a clown and perform at children's birthday parties on the weekends in order to relax. Nothing better, that is, save for raping and killing the helpless boys he favored for his perverted sexual thrills before burying their strangled corpses in the foul-

smelling crawlspace beneath his suburban home of horrors. Richard Ramirez's hunting grounds out in California, where the sadistic killer had murdered at least thirteen people before his bloody rampage had finally been brought to a much belated end when enraged members of the citizenry had recognized the monster from a picture of his in the local newspaper, much too late

for the people who'd already died by the Night Stalker's steady and knife-equipped hand. The Son of Sam's bullet-ridden playground in New York City during the blisteringly hot summer of 1977, a terrifying time in The Big Apple that had seen young women all around the city change their hairstyles in a desperate attempt to remove themselves from the ranks of females who'd possessed the preferred physical

characteristics of David Berkowitz's highly unfortunate targets.

*None* of them could hold a candle to this.

Krugman stretched his aching neck to the left and willed the painful cramp squeezing the muscles there to go away already, but it didn't work. Not even close. Huge fucking surprise. His traitorous body had begun to betray him

in earnest during his late-forties, and it had really ramped up its sabotage efforts all throughout his fifties and sixties. If nothing else, retirement was looking better and better by the second. Not unlike Danny Glover's character in the *Lethal Weapon* movies, he was *far* too old for this shit. Had been for a good fifteen years now.

Krugman reached a local uniform stationed outside the theater's entrance.



The man was issuing orders to the people around him in a clipped, authoritative tone. The elaborate gold piping on his hat signified his great importance to the world in no uncertain terms. “Give me a status update,” Krugman barked, not bothering to introduce himself.

The local stopped directing things for a moment and turned to

Krugman with an unmistakable look of disgust flashing across his face. His hard gray eyes narrowed into a disbelieving squint. His upper lip curled into an ugly sneer that Krugman immediately wanted to punch right off his smug face. Clearly, though, this wasn't a guy accustomed to being barked at. *He* was the big dog in these parts, and God help anyone who didn't realize that. "Who the fuck are *you*, asshole?"

Krugman felt his headache worsen to the point that a radical lobotomy sounded like a pretty good idea to lessen the pain. And why not? Couldn't *possibly* hurt any worse than this.

Krugman whipped out his Bureau ID and shoved it in the other man's face. "I'm the guy who's going to rip off your head and shit down your fucking throat if

you don't give me a status update *right now*. I'm Bill Krugman, FBI Director. I'm assuming jurisdiction, so you can just give up any dreams of getting on CNN right now."

The local's face blanched, then suffused with what looked to Krugman to be at least a *gallon* of blood, turning his clean-shaven cheeks bright red. The man glanced around quickly to see if any of his subordinates had witnessed the

embarrassing exchange before turning back to Krugman with a bit more humility than he'd initially displayed.

“Yes, sir,” he said, clearing his throat forcefully and reducing the puffed-out nature of his ribbon-adorned chest. “I’m Chief Mike Billingham, Rocky River PD. Anyway, status update: we’ve got thirty-eight people dead so far and twenty-five wounded, some critical, so

the death toll could rise. Probably *will* rise.”

Krugman nodded. Now that the brief pissing match between him and the local cop had decided a winner they could get down to the business at hand. “Any children among the victims?” he asked.

Billingham blew out a slow breath and dropped his stare down to the pavement at his feet. “Yes, sir. Three

dead; four wounded.”

Krugman winced. If not for the hundreds of people around at the moment, he very well might have started crying. And why not? There was nothing worse in this world than dead kids. *Nothing.* He had seven grandchildren himself, couldn't even *begin* to imagine losing any one of them, much less to cold-blooded murder.

Still, the logical part of his brain knew that it could have been worse. *Much* worse. At least from a strategic standpoint. Children were short, low to the ground, which actually provided a measure of protection in a mass-shooting incident, however flimsy that protection might be. In most cases they didn't need to duck very far to escape the bullets that were whizzing over their heads. No particular solace to the parents of the



three dead youngsters, though; he knew that. “Any suspects?” he asked.

“We’re checking surveillance video now,” Billingham said.

“Witnesses say it was a teenager wearing a long black trench coat and wielding a machinegun.”

Krugman closed his eyes briefly in frustration, then opened them up again as the blood pressure at his temples

continued to tap out an exquisite, staccato drumbeat of pain: hard fingers with calcified fingernails at the tips drumming steadily against an unyielding wooden table. Sounded like a fucking game of *Clue*. “Gotcha,” he said. “Let your people know that I’m the point man for any information.”

“Yes, sir.”

Krugman jerked his head to the parking lot behind them, where eager

news reporters had already gotten far too close for his liking. That last thing on Earth he needed right now was any of these panting newshounds to trample over any evidence and possibly destroy it in the process. They had their work cut out for them here already, couldn't afford to lose even the *tiniest* shred of evidence at this early stage of the game.

“Get a yellow line set up thirty yards

from where we're standing and keep the goddamn press off my back," Krugman said. "Also, put a gag order on your people. I need to find out what breed of gorilla we're dealing with here before any publicity whores under your command go around playing Denzel Washington with the press. We don't have any time for movie stars today, Billingham. And I sure as *hell* don't have the patience for it. Any information

to the media had *better* come from me. If not, you can kiss those pretty scrambled eggs on your cover goodbye. Are we understood?”

The local bigwig nodded. For one long, uneasy moment, Krugman feared he might actually snap together his heels smartly and salute. Thankfully, though, the pomp-and-circumstance he'd been dreading never materialized.

Krugman really didn't think he'd have been able to handle that right now.

“Yes, sir,” the local said.

“We're completely understood.”

“Good. So get to it.”

“Yes, sir.”

When Billingham had scampered away in a fluttering of waving arms, loudly passing along Krugman's orders as he went, the Director surveyed the parking lot again. He counted at least

seven FBI agents who'd been at Dana's funeral. Good. At least manpower shouldn't be a problem for them here. Thank God for the little things in this life. Sometimes he thought they were the only things that kept him sane. If he could even be *considered* sane anymore. Even he knew that it took more than just a little bit of crazy to continue getting up for this job every

morning.

For the next half an hour, Krugman busied himself organizing the disparate law-enforcement agencies that were flooding into the scene, infinitely relieved for the diversion. Work kept his mind occupied and off Dana's death. Not to mention the fact that it also helped him to compartmentalize the horrifying realization that three children had died here this afternoon and four more



weren't anywhere near out of the woods yet.

Krugman shuddered hard, producing a skin-stitching pattern of ice-cold gooseflesh that rolled up his arms in unsettling waves underneath his long gray coat. Even under the worst of conditions: an absolutely *unthinkable* way to wrap up what had *supposed* to have been a fun day at the movies with

their parents, some of them dead now, too.

Forty minutes later, Billingham returned with an iPad in his hands. “Got the surveillance video you were asking about, sir,” he said, sounding out of breath. “Witnesses have positively ID’d the perp. Have a look for yourself.”

Krugman looked down and watched Billingham press a digital button on the glass face of the device.

On the tiny rectangular screen in the man's hands, the ugly scene sprang to life. A boy wearing a long black trench coat who looked to be somewhere in his mid-teens walked with a slight hitch down the long hallway inside the movie theater, his free movement impeded almost imperceptibly by the machinegun hidden along his right side but definitely there.

The footage jumped crazily several times before another camera picked up the suspect as he passed near enough to the lens for the security system to capture a clear image of his face.

“Pause it there,” Krugman ordered.

Thunder grumbled insistently in Krugman’s ears. The ominous smell of impending rain filled his nostrils. A

shocking burst of lightning flashed brightly overhead while Billingham did as he was instructed.

Krugman refocused his vision and felt his jaw drop as his eyes took in the image frozen on the screen. He blinked hard and grabbed the iPad from the other man's hands, bringing it up close to his face for a better look. "Motherfucker," he muttered underneath his breath.

“What is it, sir?” Billingham asked eagerly.

Krugman ignored him. He didn't want *anyone* to know the identity of the perp, least of all Billingham. Not yet, at least. He needed to get all of his thoughts in order here first, needed to map out the best plan of attack for dealing with this shitstorm that had just fallen into his lap.

Just then, though, the *other* storm that had been brewing like a huge pot of coffee in the sky for the past hour now finally opened up in all its glory, drenching everyone in the parking lot all the way down to the bone with soaking torrents of driving rain.

Krugman hunched up his shoulders against the freezing-cold rain and tucked the iPad quickly into his coat

in a hasty effort to shield the device from water damage. He'd be appropriating it for official purposes, of course. The locals could charge the feds for it later on. Then he looked up and scanned the parking lot again. Dozens of people were scattering for cover all around him, seeking some sort of protection from the angry storm raging in the heavens. But Krugman didn't move. Not even an inch. What was the point?



This day couldn't *possibly* get  
any worse.



# PART V

“Better murder an infant in its cradle  
than nurse an unacted desire.” – William  
Blake



# CHAPTER 18

Horatio D'Arbinville waited until night had fallen before driving alone with the baby to Elyria, which was located forty-five miles west of downtown Cleveland.

Stretching his kinked-up neck in the driver's seat of the white cargo van, D'Arbinville switched on the radio and fiddled with the dial until he reached WTAM 1100, *Cleveland's Newsradio*.

Just as he'd expected, a female reporter with a honey-covered voice was passing along the shocking details about the stunning heist that he and Helen Morgan had pulled off earlier that morning. And where was the great surprise in that? Nothing newsworthy *ever* happened in Cleveland, now did it?

Not until today, at least.

*“To recap again, Mike, we now have substantiated reports that the newborn son of Zachary Paulson was abducted at around 10 a.m. this morning from Fairview General Hospital, less than an hour after the baby’s birth. Helen Morgan, a longtime nurse at the hospital, has been taken into custody for questioning by Fairview Park Police. Morgan was*

*the last person to be seen with the child. According to a source within the police department who has asked to remain anonymous, citing the ongoing investigation, Morgan was found unconscious on the pavement outside the hospital without the baby in her possession shortly after she'd been tasked with delivering the boy to a doctor scheduled to perform a circumcision. A horrible start to what*



*eventually turned out to have been an even worse day.”*

The male radio host on the other end of the conversation clucked his tongue, and D’Arbinville could almost *see* the man shaking his head sadly. The forgotten power of radio: something lost to most people in this day and age of instant news available from high-tech

devices stored easily in one's front pocket.

The radio host positioned his microphone closer to his mouth, practically eating the goddamn thing before drawing back again. *“Farrah is referring, of course, to the mass-shooting that took place shortly past three p.m. today at the Westwood Movie Cinema in Rocky River. Do we have anything new on that yet,*

*Farrah?”*

*“As a matter of fact, Mike, yes, we do. I’ve just received word that FBI Director Bill Krugman will be conducting a news conference at the FBI building on Lakeshore Avenue downtown in about half an hour now. Krugman came into town a few days ago to attend the funeral of longtime*

*FBI veteran Special Agent Dana Whitestone, who took her own life last Friday night.”*

The male grunted. *“Oh, boy. Seems to me that we’re getting all kinds of attention for all the wrong kinds of reasons these days, Farrah.”*

*“Yeah, I’d say that’s about right, Mike. Awful, awful day for the*

*people of northeast Ohio, no doubt about it.”*

D’Arbinville flipped off the radio and widened his eyes, almost unable to believe the unexpected stroke of good luck that had just fallen into his lap. Absolutely fucking *amazing*. If the FBI had its attention split between the abduction of the Paulson baby and the

mass shooting that had gone down at the movie theater in Rocky River this afternoon, it should make things infinitely easier for him to pull off what he needed to do from here on out. *Loads* easier. After all, he'd known all along that the feds would be working this case and he'd prepared his next series of moves anticipating exactly that. So if the FBI's focus proved diverted by the movie-theater shooting, however brief

that diversion might ultimately be, *his* road had just been paved for a much smoother ride.

Could it *get* any better than this?

D'Arbinville's skin tingled with an almost erotic charge. He wished with all his heart and soul that he knew the identity of the shooter in the movie theater. He would've liked to buy the man a glass of Scotch at the moment,

because they were *always* males in these instances, weren't they? Maybe even *two* glasses of Scotch. Hell, after what he'd done to pave D'Arbinville's road for the rest of this thrilling ride, the mystery man deserved an entire *bottle*. The good stuff, too. Not any of that rotgut D'Arbinville had swilled over at the Oak Barrel Bar on Friday night.

In any event, bless the man's rage-fueled heart, wherever he might be



right now.

Shifting in his seat, D'Arbinville used his left knee to expertly steer the van and reached into his coveralls before extracting his cigarette case and taking out a fresh Gitane. Tucking it between his lips, he fired up the pungent tobacco with a cheap plastic lighter and breathed in deeply in excitement, not particularly concerned about any

detrimental health effects this action might cause the baby in the backseat. Hell, *his* mother had smoked for the entire duration of her pregnancy with him, and just look how *he*'d turned out. Just fine. Clearly, the gloomy reports of the medical repercussions brought about by the much-maligned habit he loved so much didn't vary too widely from the highly soothing action itself:

A whole lot of smoke and very

little fire.

D'Arbinville leaned forward in his seat and turned on the radio again after a moment or two of contented smoking – to a classical music station this time – while he ran through all the particulars in his mind once more. For the time being, he'd entrusted Louise to hold down the home front, which in this case was unfortunately being

represented by a fleabag motel on the eastern outskirts of the Renaissance City. Rooms rentable by the hour. Dirty carpets and bedding soiled with every conceivable manner of human fluid: blood, semen, vomit. More black faces than you could shake a stick at. Still, for all its many faults, the Manor Inn was also *exactly* the kind of place where the shifty-eyed occupants usually minded their own highly illegal business, so that

much proved a comfort at least. In that sense, if in none other, he and his cousin fit in perfectly there. Two parts of a three-person group that would one day soon become a *very* rich collection of people, indeed, thanks entirely to the expected forthcoming largesse of one Zachary Alexander Paulson, founder and CEO of Paulson & Associates Networking Solutions.

Hands firmly wrapped around the van's steering wheel again, D'Arbinville tightened his grip on the hard rubber cover and breathed in slowly through his nostrils, itching right down to the core of his innermost being to finally exact his long-awaited revenge. His need for payback burned within him the same way his need for sex had once burned within him during

his teenage years. Maybe even *more* urgently. Zachary Paulson's money wouldn't be the only thing that D'Arbinville's small group would be taking from the software king, however. Not by a long shot. Not after the unforgivable insult that Paulson had so carelessly foisted upon the D'Arbinville family name.

D'Arbinville clamped down his teeth at the infuriating memory of the

man's bold-faced affront, denting the soft end of his Gitane in the process. Zachary Paulson had *plenty* of money, so that wouldn't be enough to teach the smug bastard his much-needed lesson. No, it needed to be something much more *valuable* to Paulson than just simple currency. Hell, with Paulson's seemingly unlimited wealth, the multimillionaire most likely wouldn't



miss even the exorbitant sum they'd pry from his vast bank accounts. So it needed to be something much more *important* to him than just a little bit of cold hard cash.

Something, say, more along the lines of a warm and squirming newborn baby.

D'Arbinville glanced up into the rearview mirror at the car seat stationed in the back of the van. The low hum of

the tires against the highway blacktop had finally lulled the little guy to sleep. Thank God for small mercies. Because the thoroughly annoying brat hadn't shut up for more than ten minutes straight ever since they'd first whisked him away from Fairview General earlier in the day. The sheer *amount* of crying to which D'Arbinville had been subjected over the past ten hours had threatened to

make his brain explode, bringing on an instant, temple-pounding headache that had been playing the bass drums in his ears all day long. Unfortunately for him, however, Louise hadn't proved to be much of a foster parent, either – not that he'd expected her to be, of course. His dear cousin had always cared for just one person in this entire world: *herself*.

Still, that supremely selfish quality is what made her so particularly

effective at doing the unthinkable things she did.

D'Arbinville rolled down his window and flicked out his tooth-dented cigarette, glancing into the side-view mirror this time and watching the glowing cherry explode in a small shower of bright orange embers as it hit the pavement behind him. Turning his attention back to the road that was

unfolding like a huge black sheet in front of him, he took a deep breath of fresh air. He'd provide the feds with more than just a little bit of strategic misdirection here and there, of course, but if all went well for him and his group the FBI would think they'd actually left the country with the boy. No way in *hell* he'd ever be stupid enough to actually try something like that, though. They'd scoop him up in ten

minutes flat if he even *sniffed* an airport, and he knew it. He wouldn't even get past the parking lot. Four previous kidnappings for ransom in the past had taught him very well indeed what needed to be done here, and what was it that his mother had always told him?

Oh        yeah: *practice makes perfect.*

Finally coming to the off-ramp

for Elyria ten minutes later, D'Arbinville followed the GPS directions coming from the cellphone nestled in his lap all the way to St. Mary's Cemetery on the south side of town. And what better place than this hotel for the dead to convince Zachary Paulson and the FBI agents who'd be attempting to track him down that he meant *business*?

Easing the van into a space in

front of the wrought-iron gates in the deserted parking lot, D'Arbinville shut off the van's engine and killed the headlights. Then he closed his eyes and prepared himself mentally for the next step. After all, artificial illumination wouldn't be the *only* sort of death he'd be dealing with here tonight. Not even close. So he needed to be completely ready to execute this next bloody step



without leaving behind any sort of damning physical evidence. He certainly didn't want to get *caught* at this relatively early stage of the game, now did he? Of course he didn't.

Not on this little boy's *life*.

Opening his eyes again, D'Arbinville breathed out slowly through his nostrils and exited the vehicle before going around to the other side of the van and sliding open the back

door. Extracting a sturdy shovel and a hand-held pair of pruning shears, he tucked the shears into the front pocket of his coveralls and balanced the shovel underneath his left arm before reaching back inside the van for the still-sleeping baby.

Taking another deep breath that expanded his chest against his coveralls, D'Arbinville luxuriated in the cool night

air that danced across his face like a corpse's faint whisper. Once again, it seemed, the time had come for him to get back to work. And he'd be damned if he didn't absolutely *love* his work, however brutal it might prove at times.

He chuckled out loud despite his especially dreary surroundings at the moment. He just couldn't help himself.

Hell, after the heartless thing he was about to do here tonight, he knew

that he'd probably be damned, anyway.



## CHAPTER 19

Standing with various other officials on the wide concrete steps located outside the FBI field office on Lakeshore Avenue in downtown Cleveland, Bill Krugman gazed out upon the sea of reporters that was staring right back at him from the icy street thirty feet away

Krugman stifled a frustrated sigh in his throat and pulled his heavy gray

overcoat even tighter around his shivering body, seeking some sort of protection against the frigid nighttime blasts of air that were whipping in hard off of Lake Erie and turning the back of his neck into a lump of frozen flesh.

Krugman closed his eyes briefly, allowing the freezing wind to tap-dance across his eyelids with its tiny icicle feet. Unfortunately for him, though, the

shitty northeast Ohio weather wasn't even the most *annoying* problem he found himself faced with here tonight. Krugman absolutely *hated* press events, always had ever since he'd conducted his very first press conference sometime back in the early 1960s. They'd always made him feel like he was guest-starring on an episode of *CSI* or *Law & Order* or *NCIS* and not doing what he *should* have been doing: getting out there on the



streets and tracking down whatever maniac needed tracking down at the time. Still, however aggravating these things might be (and they were *supremely* fucking aggravating – no debating that simple fact), he knew that they marked an integral part of the job. As a public servant who earned his daily bread directly at the pleasure of the taxpayers (never an especially easy

group to please under even the best of circumstances), it was his duty to put the panicked citizenry at ease, whether or not he might feel at ease himself. And, as he'd noted earlier, he wasn't the freshest daisy in the bunch anymore. Not even close. So active fieldwork simply didn't represent a realistic option for him at this advanced stage in his life and career, no matter how badly he might miss the thrill of the chase sometimes.

Because seventy-one-year-olds with arthritic knees didn't often come out on the winning ends of heart-pounding footraces with fleet-footed suspects forty years their junior, no matter how many miles those knees might dutifully put in on the treadmill each week.

Krugman stamped his feet several times against the wide cement steps in an effort to get the blood in his

toes circulating again but it didn't work. Not even a little bit. They were just as frozen as the back of his neck. Maybe even *more* frozen. A hot bath in his hotel room tonight wouldn't mark just a luxury; it would be an absolute *necessity*. He felt like a Thanksgiving turkey in a deep-freezer right now, just waiting to be thawed out and consumed by the ravenous press who'd gathered 'round to devour the headline-grabbing

spectacle at hand.

Krugman glanced to his left and right as a sound guy fiddled with a tangle of wires a few feet away, putting the finishing touches on the technical requirements for the press conference.

The mayor was here, as was the Cleveland police chief. Other local big shots included a state senator from Lakewood and Chief Mike Billingham

from the Rocky River PD. Several agents under Krugman's command were here, too, including Bruce Blankenship – one of Krugman's most trusted lieutenants even if Krugman had come *this close* to strangling the breath out of the inexplicably mute man just six hours earlier for the unacceptable delay in passing along critical information regarding the movie-theater shooting while the two men had stood together

outside St. Christopher's Catholic Church after having so recently and so rudely interrupted Dana's funeral.

Krugman pressed his lips into a tight line and breathed out slowly through his nostrils. Even this relatively minor exhalation proved visible in the cold night air. He let out a soft sigh, producing still *more* vapors.

*Dana.* He missed her with all

his heart and soul already. And that would have been putting things *extremely* mildly. Truth be told, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her for more than five minutes straight ever since he'd first received Bruce Blankenship's panicked phone call Friday night. And Krugman didn't just miss Dana in the personal sense, either — though there was certainly plenty of that to go around, too. If nothing else, she



would've been his go-to gal for the kidnapping of the Paulson baby, though he most likely would've considered her far too closely involved with the movie-theater shooting to investigate that one after the sickening thing that had gone down a few weeks earlier among her, Jack Yuntz and the little boy she'd been preparing to adopt. Krugman knew that he could've counted on Dana to do

whatever he'd have asked her to do, though. He'd *always* felt that way about her, ever since he'd first met her at the Academy fifteen years earlier.

And now he could never count on Dana for anything ever again. Neither could anyone else.

When the soundman finally finished up doing what he needed to do, he glanced up at Krugman and nodded once. Krugman nodded back before

stepping to the microphone tucked into the top of a narrow metal stand. Adjusting the microphone in front of his mouth, he cleared his throat forcefully and began. “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. My name is William Krugman, director of the FBI. At approximately three p.m. today, a single gunman concealing a Sterling 7.62mm light machinegun beneath his trench coat

purchased a ticket to a showing of the film *Fun Time* at the Westwood Movie Cinema in Rocky River. The gunman then proceeded to open fire inside the theater half an hour into the film, killing forty-two people so far, including four children. The FBI has identified a suspect...”

Excited shouting sounded at once from the street, causing Krugman to pause mid-sentence. One male voice

rose above the rest. “Who is it, sir? Who killed those people? Who killed those poor kids?”

The harsh glare of the lights of the television cameras in front of him blinded Krugman, making it impossible for him to identify the question-asker. Someone in the back. Didn't matter who'd asked the question, though. The answer would have been the same no

matter who'd shouted it out.

Krugman held up his hands and waited patiently for a break in the din. When it finally came twenty seconds later, he went on. "Our suspect's name is Jack Yuntz," he said. "He's a sixteen-year-old boy originally from New York City. A multi-agency task force is in the process of being assembled to hunt him down. State and local police; with the FBI taking the lead. Jack Yuntz escaped

from the Squires Boys' Home in upstate New York several months ago after having..."

More excited shouting sounded from the street, even *louder* this time, again cutting off Krugman before he could get all the words out of his mouth. He resisted the urge to throw up his hands in frustration and just walk away. A pretty female reporter standing in the

front next to a hulking cameraman who was wearing a backward-facing baseball cap was the next to get a question through. “What was he in for, sir? What did Jack Yuntz do?”

Krugman fought back another skeleton-rattling shiver; feeling chilled all the way down to his bone marrow now. And not just from the inclement Cleveland weather, either. “For killing an FBI agent named Jeremy Brown in



Manhattan at the conclusion of the Chessboard Killer investigation,” he said, wincing internally at the gruesome memory of Brown’s horrible death in the Presidential Suite of the Fontainebleau Hotel. Jesus Christ. Had it really been more than a *year* now? Where the hell had the time gone?

Predictably, the horde of reporters on hand for the event went into

an absolute *frenzy* upon hearing this latest bit of information, sharp-toothed piranha schooling around a wounded jungle creature with its hooves inextricably stuck in the deep muck of an Amazon riverbed. Question after question slammed into Krugman from every conceivable direction, nearly pushing him back physically. Still, he wasn't surprised by the press's reaction to the information. Why the hell *would*

he be? The connection between this case and a pair of infamous serial killers that had captured the entire world's attention for more than half a year would no doubt boost ratings and circulation ten-fold. The media's equivalent of lining up three 7s on a Las Vegas slot machine and hitting the swollen jackpot in the process.

The press conference descended

into pure madness from there as even *more* questions hit Krugman's ears, slicing hard into his brain and bleeding into one another in a raucous jumble of words that seemed nearly indecipherable at times:

*“Where is Jack Yuntz now, sir?”*

*“How does the FBI plan to stop this kid?”*

*“How did Yuntz escape from the boys’ home in the first place?”*

*“Dana Whitestone worked on the Chessboard Killer investigation, didn’t she, sir? Is that why she killed herself last Friday night?”*

*“Why did Agent Whitestone kill herself, sir?”*

Krugman winced again – visibly

this time, he felt sure. The mention of Dana's name and the reference to her self-inflicted death nearly buckled his knees. Earlier today – not in the least bit to his surprise – he'd found out that Dana had been thinking about others right up until the very end. A handwritten will that the cleanup crew had found on the kitchen counter of her apartment had set aside ten thousand dollars for the care and keeping of her

cat. The remaining one hundred and twenty-two thousand dollars in her bank account was to be used to fund a four-year scholarship for a criminal justice major at Cleveland State University in Crawford Bell's name.

Krugman curled up his frozen toes inside his dress shoes and forced his attention back to the media, much as he'd have loved to have it somewhere

else at the moment. *Anywhere* else. The press conference had deteriorated quickly into an unpleasant trip down nightmare lane for him, only reminding him of the recent and unfathomable deaths of two of the best agents under his command. Not the most pleasant way to pass the time, to put it mildly. He waited as patiently as he could for another break to come in the shouting but it never did.



Krugman seethed as he stood on the steps, trying his best to withstand the audio onslaught. Wasn't easy. He ground his teeth back and forth in the rear of his mouth at the pure *un-professionalism* of the three-ring circus taking place in front of him. Still, he tried to avoid tensing up his jaw as he did so. If nothing else, he didn't want his anger to show up on his face. The

last thing in the world he needed right now was to look like some sort of unraveled rage-addict on the eleven o'clock news: a terribly inefficient way to calm the frightened hordes, as he'd found out the hard way during the Ted Bundy case back in the 1980s.

Krugman sighed again, feeling completely defeated now. He'd planned to address the abduction of the Paulson child during this news conference as

well, but clearly the hopped-up reporters weren't going to allow that to happen. So they'd just need to make due with the news release that the FBI press officer would be handing out at the conclusion of this dog-and-pony show. After all, you couldn't have any sort of decent conversation with people who wouldn't quiet down long enough to listen to what you had to say in return,

now could you?

Turning away from the madness after another forty-five seconds of incessant shouting coming from the reporters, Krugman pulled open the glass door to the FBI field office building and made his way back inside. Bruce Blankenship approached him in the marble-tiled lobby a moment later. "I want to work the Yuntz case," Blankenship said, setting his jaw into a

tight line. “I want to bring down that bastard myself.”

Krugman shook his head, feeling absolutely *exhausted* from the mind-numbing events of the day. Things had been tough enough on him today already with Dana’s funeral. Now he had a mass shooting and a high-profile kidnapping that he needed to deal with, too. Still, no great surprise there. Bad

news *always* came in threes, didn't it?

"Not an option, Agent Blankenship,"

Krugman said, shaking his head firmly.

"You were Dana's partner, however brief that partnership might have been. So you're much too close to the case to be as effective as you'd need to be. I'm very sorry."

Blankenship closed his eyes briefly in frustration, and Krugman empathized with him, but the display of

emotion didn't sway him in the least little bit. He understood the man's frustration — he really did — but much like seventy-one-year-olds with bad knees, frustration didn't catch killers. Usually had the opposite effect, as a matter of fact.

“So, what do you want me to do then?” Blankenship asked, opening his eyes again and blowing out a slow

breath of resignation.

Krugman thought he saw tears welled in the other man's eyes, but as badly as he felt for Blankenship right now, tears didn't catch killers, either. "You'll be working the Paulson baby abduction," Krugman said. "Fairview Park PD already has the Fairview General Hospital nurse in custody. Go over there tomorrow morning and see what you can find out from her."



Blankenship nodded. “OK, sir.

If that’s what you want. But who’s going to take the lead on the movie-theater shooting?”

Krugman glanced to his left and caught the eye of a female agent from Boston who’d graduated with Dana from the Academy in 1997 – a woman in her late-thirties who’d been in town to attend her former classmate’s funeral.

He waved her over before performing the introductions. “Agent Meghan Shaughnessy, meet Agent Bruce Blankenship,” he said.

Blankenship and Shaughnessy shook hands. “Pleasure to meet you,” Blankenship said.

Shaughnessy smiled grimly. “Likewise, Agent Blankenship. I’m just sorry it couldn’t have been under more pleasant circumstances than these. My

condolences on the loss of your partner. Such a tragic thing to happen. She was a very good friend of mine a long time ago.”

Krugman cleared his throat to cut short the niceties. Blankenship and Shaughnessy could get to know each other on their own time. This wasn't a matchmaking service. “Agent Shaughnessy will be going over to St.

Anthony's Catholic grade school in Lorain tomorrow morning to interview witnesses in a paintball shooting there last Friday afternoon," he said. Until the multi-agency task force could be assembled properly, Krugman would direct things from the FBI end of the equation, and they couldn't afford to lose even a single minute of work time here. Not with Jack Yuntz still out there planning God-only-knows-what next.

“A teenager in a trench coat shot three students before fleeing the scene,” Krugman went on. “No lasting damage to the kids – physically, at least – but probably Jack Yuntz warming up for the movie-theater shooting.”

“Makes sense,” Blankenship said.

“Agreed,” Shaughnessy chimed in.

Krugman pursed his lips.

“Great. So get the hell out of here and go rest up for tomorrow. You’ve both got big days ahead of yourselves. Let’s get these investigations underway just as soon as we possibly can. I want to hit the ground running when the task forces are put together on these cases, and I’m counting on you two to get things started.”

“Yes, sir,” Blankenship and Shaughnessy said in unison.

When Blankenship and Shaughnessy had finally gone – still talking to each other as they went – Krugman made his way alone to the back of the field office building. Exiting the structure through a little-used rear door, he crossed the parking lot and slid behind the steering wheel of his rented

car before cranking the engine into life. Twenty seconds later, he pulled out of the parking lot in the opposite direction of the reporters still stationed out front.

Krugman shivered hard from both the weather and the brain-bending events of the day. Leaning forward in his seat, he turned up the car's heater in order to start the defrosting process of his frozen old bones and sighed heavily. The media would still be out there



tomorrow, he knew. And every day after that until the FBI could put these shocking cases to bed once and for all. Plenty of time to bring them further up to speed later on, even if that marked the *least* of his concerns at the moment. Besides, he really needed that hot bath right now: a chance to scrub off the dirt of this hopelessly grimy day.

And for all he knew, it might be

the last one he'd get for a while.



## CHAPTER 20

Sweating profusely from the intensity of his extremely gruesome labors after he'd so efficiently and so ruthlessly extracted the precious ounce of flesh required for the next step in this now-bloody game of hide-and-seek with the FBI – the razor-sharp pruning shears tucked safely back into the front pocket of his filthy coveralls now – Horatio D'Arbinville used the blunt side of his

shovel to tamp down the rich cemetery dirt at his feet that he'd just spent an hour and a half plowing through.

Cemetery dirt six feet underneath of which rested a tiny white coffin that – not very long ago – he'd cracked open like an especially foul-smelling can of bad sardines.

D'Arbinville swallowed back the small-but-potent measure of stomach

acid that burned a trail all the way up his esophagus before flooding into his mouth. He winced against the sharp, metallic taste that danced across his tongue and sizzled on his taste buds. Even for a man possessed of his usually stout constitution, the shocking act he'd just performed had proved to be somewhat unpalatable at times.

Unsavory, at the very least.

And downright *unholy*, if nothing

else.

D'Arbinville shook his head in order to chase away the silly thought, knowing good and goddamn well that angry times called for angry measures. And the anger that still burned so hotly inside his chest at the unconscionable besmirching of his beloved family name had been the only thing keeping him going while he'd turned over spade-full

after spade-full of heavy earth, sometimes gagging against the pungent scent of rotted flesh that had floated up into his nostrils along the way.

D'Arbinville paused for a moment in his difficult work, leaning his weight against his shovel and mopping at his glistening brow with the back of his left forearm. Then he shook his head again, this time in disappointment with himself. He'd been surprised – if not



downright *dumbfounded* – by his uncharacteristic reaction to the requirements of his job. *Odd*. He'd always thought that he'd possessed a much *stronger* stomach than that. Dangerous timing to come to this sudden realization of his suddenly delicate nature, too. Because if he *had* lost control of himself and thrown up at the cemetery, no doubt the DNA strands

contained in his vomit would have been waiting for the feds like a stadium full of microscopic witnesses just *dying* to rat him out.

D'Arbinville reached into his pocket and lit up a fresh cigarette, inhaling deeply and relishing the fresh infusion of nicotine into his overworked system. Thankfully for him, though, the only dying required here tonight had already taken place. So in the end he

supposed that he didn't need to worry very seriously about any tiny, mute fingers doing their best to point out his identity to the authorities. After all, the only tiny, mute fingers that would come into play in this game from this point forward would be working *for* him, not against. And after he'd completed the next particularly brutal step in his upcoming sequence of moves, *nothing*

would smell like rotted flesh to him anymore. Quite the opposite, as a matter of fact. Instead, everything would smell like *money*: a scent that to him had always smelled sweeter than a dozen roses.

D'Arbinville managed a small smile at the comforting thought, which just about chased away the remaining nausea swirling around in his gut. All he needed to do now was to make sure that

he didn't prick any of his *own* fingers on the jagged thorns protruding from the base of the money tree that he and his small team would be shaking until the appropriate amount had finally fallen out.

Extinguishing his cigarette after smoking it halfway down, D'Arbinville tucked the crushed butt into the pocket of his coveralls so as to not leave behind

any evidence. Resuming his labors in earnest, he finally finished up with his difficult task and gathered his tools into his arms before making his way slowly across the deserted cemetery again, sighing contentedly as he headed toward the van that was waiting for him out in the parking lot like a blind and mute accomplice.

Clicking shut the heavy front gate behind him a moment later; he at last

departed the thoroughly depressing cemetery once and for all.

Slightly worse for the wear than how he'd initially found it, of course.





# PART VI

“Then Job arose, tore his robe, and shaved his head; and he fell to the ground and worshipped. And he said: ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, And naked I shall return there. The LORD gave; and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD.’ In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong.” – *Book of Job: Chapter 1, verses 20-22*





# CHAPTER 21

*Tuesday; 10 a.m.; St. Anthony's Elementary*

*School; Lorain, Ohio*

After driving around completely lost for nearly an hour and a half due to her thoroughly aggravating lack of familiarity with the northeast Ohio section of the map, Special Agent Meghan Shaughnessy heaved a grateful sigh of relief when she finally pulled into an empty space in the parking lot of

the grade school in Lorain, facing her rental car in the direction of the choppy waters of Lake Erie that were boiling away beyond a dented silver guardrail and maybe a hundred feet down from the sheer face of a jagged cliff.

Shaughnessy lifted up her eyebrows on her forehead while she took in the picture-perfect postcard view in front of her, duly impressed. Nice

place to go to school, to say the least. She didn't think she would've minded going there herself as a kid. At least, it probably *had* been a nice place to go to school before that murdering little punk Jack Yuntz had burst into the building last Friday afternoon with his paintball rifle and had stolen the innocence of God-only-knows-how-many children in the process with his sickening actions.

Shaughnessy grimaced and felt a

bone-rattling chill pass right through her despite the cranked-up heater in the car. She just thanked her lucky stars above that it had been a *paintball* rifle in that instance, and not a real one. The more-than-forty poor souls who'd perished in the movie-theater shooting over in Rocky River hadn't proved anywhere near as fortunate, however.

Shaughnessy swallowed away

the acrid bile that she tasted in the back of her throat courtesy of the infuriating thought. Yuntz – the murdering psychopath who probably didn't even *shave* yet – had directly caused the deaths of nearly fifty people so far in his brief career as a killer, and he'd indirectly caused the death of Dana Whitestone, a wonderful woman with whom Shaughnessy had dorned in their days back at the Academy fifteen years



earlier, sharing notes on classroom lectures just as easily as they'd shared notes on the cutest prospective male agents in their group. Shaughnessy would avenge Dana, though; she knew that. She *owed* it to her. And she'd avenge all those other people, too. Especially the children. She'd been cut from a rough enough patch of cloth to pull it off. Skinned knees and blackened

eyes were nothing new to her, after all. Growing up as the only girl among seven brothers tended to toughen up a gal a bit. Just as payback was a bitch, so could Shaughnessy be when she thought she needed to be, thanks to her roughhousing brothers.

And right now was most definitely one of those times.

*Bitch mode: activated.*

Shaughnessy glanced up into the

rearview mirror and used her pinkie finger to dab at the corner of her mouth where a dot of her soft pink lipstick had smudged. Though she'd been stationed in Boston for the entirety of her career – the same place she'd grown up as a kid – she didn't at all mind sticking around in Ohio to help Bill Krugman hunt down Jack Yuntz. Hell, it was the least she could do for the Director after

everything he'd done for her over the course of her career. Despite Krugman's reputation as sometimes being a difficult man for whom to work, Shaughnessy hadn't found that to be the case personally. Quite the opposite, as a matter of fact. Krugman was a straight shooter with her, always had been ever since the very beginning, ever since the days when she'd been a still-wet-behind-the-ears rookie who hadn't

known the difference between the mid-point in her arm and her *gluteus maximus* – which she hoped wasn't *too* maximus these days. Krugman's gruff nature might have rubbed some people the wrong way, but even in his seventies now Shaughnessy didn't think the Director could have rubbed her the wrong way if he tried.

No two ways about it: he was

kind of sexy for an old guy.

Shaughnessy smiled at herself at the supremely weird thought and exited her rental car before locking it up with the keychain-control. The vehicle honked once at her as though it were saying goodbye. Taking a deep breath through her nostrils, she stretched her neck and felt the frigid air chill her lungs. Time to get down to business.

The biting wind whipping in

hard off the lake swirled her mid-length, strawberry-blonde hair wildly around her head as she walked quickly across the parking lot and toward the school, cutting like a million tiny razor blades through the sheer beige stockings covering her legs. Shaughnessy had passed forty a few years prior, but she'd always kept at least *half* an eye on how she looked. So if she kept up her

jogging and watching what she ate, not only could she continue keeping her *maximus* to the very *minumus* possible, she figured that she could also probably get away with wearing skirts to work for the next five years or so. If nothing else, a hell of a lot more than a lot of women her age could've said.

Finally coming to the entrance to the school a few moments later, Shaughnessy pulled open a glass door



and stepped inside the scuffed-brick structure before making her way up the cement staircase on the northwest side of the building and stopping outside an office door that had an engraved plaque on it reading, *Sister Rose Alice, Principal.*

Shaughnessy fluffed her hair momentarily, then lifted a hand to knock on the door. A female voice sounded

from inside at once. “Come in.”

Shaughnessy turned the handle and stepped into the office. A pair of uncomfortable-looking chairs lined the back wall to her left, no doubt reserved for naughty school kids who’d been caught passing notes in class. Ten feet away from the chairs and seated behind a huge desk covered with an absolute *tornado* of scattered papers, an elderly woman who looked to be somewhere in

her seventies herself smiled up at her. “Good morning, ma’am,” the woman said. “I’m Joanne Churchill, the school secretary. How may I help you?”

Shaughnessy slipped her ID from the inside pocket of her blazer and flipped it open. “I’m Meghan Shaughnessy, ma’am,” she said. “I believe I spoke with you on the phone earlier this morning?”

Churchill widened the smile on her delicately pretty face and stood up. Dull yellow teeth colored in by age peeked out from between thin lips painted bright red. “Yes, of course,” the woman said. “It’s so nice to meet you in person, Agent Shaughnessy.”

Shaughnessy smiled back. “Likewise, Mrs Churchill. Is Sister Rose Alice around? I believe I was

supposed to meet with her.”

Churchill shook her head and stepped out from behind her massive desk. As she did so, Shaughnessy pegged the other woman's height at about five-three, if not even shorter than that. At five-nine herself, Shaughnessy felt like an absolute *giant* in Churchill's presence. Weird way for her to feel in a school office, that much was for sure. Not too many years ago, *she'd* have been

one of the naughty school kids sitting in one of the uncomfortable-looking chairs lining the back wall. “I’m afraid Sister fell ill not more than hour ago,” Churchill said, glancing down at the delicate silver watch strapped around her frail left wrist. “Stomach virus, I think. Anyway, she left me with very specific instructions to help you out in whatever I can.”

Shaughnessy slipped her ID back into her blazer pocket and extracted a folded-up sheet of paper nestled there. Unfolding it, she read the name she'd written down the previous night before looking back up at Churchill again. "Wonderful. In that case, I'd like to talk to Katie Morgenstern, if that would be OK with you. Could you please take me to her? Also, if it's not too much

trouble, I'd like to use an empty room, if you've got one available at the moment. Won't take more than ten minutes, I promise."

Churchill clucked her tongue and shook her head. "Poor Katie," she said, pressing her lips together grimly. "Only a first-grader, and to think of the horrible thing that horrible monster did to her. Simply *awful*. But you wouldn't know it just by looking at her. Not even close.



Brave throughout the entire thing, bless her little heart. Brave beyond her years. Anyway, I can take you to her, Agent Shaughnessy, but I'm afraid that we don't have a single room open at the moment. Being a private school, we don't have that many classrooms available in the first place, and they're all filled up today. The gym and the cafeteria, too. Play rehearsals and

physical-education class.”

Shaughnessy frowned. Talking to the little girl out in the hallway wouldn't work: way too many impressionable ears within hearing distance at any given moment.

Churchill took in the look on her face and read her mind at once. “Could you maybe talk to Katie outside?” she offered. “I know it's a little bit nippy out there today, but if you go down the

steps outside this office I'll be able to watch you guys.” Churchill gestured to the large window ten feet to her right, which overlooked the parking lot. “And if you won't be very long, I'll just tell Katie to grab her coat. The children still go outside for recess, even in this weather. Ohio kids are a pretty tough bunch. We won't keep them inside for recess until at least the middle of

November.”

Shaughnessy shrugged. It didn't mark the most ideal setup in the world, but what the hell? Besides, she was a guest here today, and if her host made a suggestion it would probably be considered pretty rude of her to simply ignore it altogether. And coming from the cold-weather climate of Boston herself, she'd braved a winter's day or two during her school years. Forty

degrees was pretty cold, but it wasn't going to bring on death by hypothermia. "That sounds just fine, Mrs Churchill," Shaughnessy said. "So, I'll just wait for Katie outside then. How long do you think she'll be?"

Churchill checked her watch again. "Give me five minutes and I'll have her teacher deliver her right to you. Sound fair?"

Shaughnessy nodded. “More than fair, Mrs Churchill. Thank you so much for your help. I really appreciate this.”

Churchill waved a tiny hand in the air to chase away the gratitude. “Think nothing of it, my dear. I just hope you can catch that monster before he hurts anybody else. Especially any more kids.”

Shaughnessy tightened her lips.

She and the secretary shared that particular hope. “I will, ma’am,” she said, meaning it. “That much I promise you.”

Churchill smiled again. “Great. I’m so happy to hear that.”

Shaughnessy nodded again and turned to leave the office. Before she could exit, though, Churchill stopped

her. “Agent Shaughnessy?”

Shaughnessy turned around to face the other woman. “Yes, ma’am?”

Churchill widened her smile *even more*, cracking the bright red lipstick at the corners of her mouth in the process. “God bless you, honey. You’re a wonderful person to do the things you do, to put your own life in danger like this to help others. Very Christ-like. Anyway, I hope you know



how much I and many others like me appreciate it.”

Shaughnessy felt her cheeks suffuse with a warm rush of blood that chased away some of the chill still dancing on her face from outside. Wasn't very often that she got such a glowing report from the general public, though. And she couldn't deny that it felt nice. Smiling back at Churchill, she

said, “Thank you very much for saying that, ma’am. It really means a lot to me. And God bless you, too.”

Finally exiting the office with the cheesy smile still planted firmly on her lips, Shaughnessy descended the cement stairs again before stepping back out into the swirling wind just outside the scuffed-brick building. She waited for less than three minutes before a portly nun wearing a long string of wooden

prayer beads around her impossibly fleshy neck pushed through the same glass door she'd just pushed through a few moments earlier.

The nun was holding a tiny little thing wearing a pink *Hello Kitty* jacket and matching woolen cap by the hand. She nodded to Shaughnessy and said, "Hello, Agent Shaughnessy. I'm Sister Myra." Gesturing to the little girl

standing at her side, she added, “This here is Katie Morgenstern, hero of the week last week, if you haven’t heard by now.”

Shaughnessy smiled. Damn right, she’d heard. The kid *was* a hero.

Three feet away, Christ’s bride bent down until her face was even with the little girl’s. “Katie, this is Agent Meghan Shaughnessy,” she said. “She wants to talk you about the bad man who

came into our school last week and hurt you. Would that be OK with you?”

The little girl nodded and chewed gently on her lower lip. Shifting her shining blue eyes that were stationed behind colorful purple glasses up at Shaughnessy for a second or two, she returned her gaze to her teacher.

“Mmhm,” the little girl said, nodding more vigorously now. “Like I told you

and my mommy and daddy and Mrs. Churchill, I remember *everything* about him. I've got a *really* good memory."

The nun straightened up and rubbed the little girl's back over her puffy coat. "I know you do, sweetheart. Heck, you win the classroom spelling bee nearly every single week. You've got a *great* memory."

The little girl's face lit up like a sunburst at the praise coming from her

teacher while Sister Myra shifted her gaze back to Shaughnessy. Gesturing to the glass door that she and the little girl had just exited with a quick motion of her habited head, she said, "I know that Mrs. Churchill will be watching you from her office, but would you mind very much if I stayed just inside there and kept an eye on things, too? The glass is thick, Agent Shaughnessy. I

won't be able to hear a thing. And if I *do* hear anything, I can promise you that it will be between me and God and the two of us alone. You've got my word on that."

Shaughnessy shook her head. Mind? Hell no, she didn't mind. Besides, she didn't blame the nun or the secretary one little bit for being on high alert like this, probably would've considered it pretty weird if they *hadn't*



been on high alert like this. After the terrible thing that had happened here last Friday afternoon – to this little girl standing here with them, no less – *everyone* should be on high alert right now. It was the only intelligent way to go about things. The only *responsible* way to go about things. “That would be just fine, Sister,” Shaughnessy said. “Not a problem at all.”

The nun gave her a small smile before turning back to the little girl. “I’ll be just a few feet away watching you, Katie,” she said, “so you don’t need to be afraid. Just answer the nice lady’s questions the best you can, OK?”

The little girl nodded. “I will, Sister Myra. And don’t worry; I’m not afraid. Not even a little bit.”

The girl’s teacher gave Katie’s

shoulder a quick squeeze before turning away. “OK, angel. You’re the absolute best. I want you to know that I’m *very* proud of you.”

When the nun had gone back inside the building and had positioned herself just inside the glass door, Shaughnessy smiled down at the little girl. “Thank you so much for talking to me like this, Katie,” she said, widening her smile until her cheeks began to ache,

trying her best to put the girl as much at ease as she possibly could. “This is such a big help to me.” Shaughnessy reached inside her blazer and extracted a plastic silver badge from the interior pocket. “And this is my way of saying thanks to you, honey. You can now consider yourself an official honorary member of the FBI.”

The little girl smiled delightedly

in surprise, showing off an adorable grin that was missing its two front teeth. “Neato!” she exclaimed, reaching out and taking the badge. She examined it closely, turning it over and over again in her small hands. “Just *wait* until my brother sees this. He’ll be so darn *jealous*. It’ll be great!”

Shaughnessy widened her own grin. She just couldn’t help herself. The little girl’s smile was *infectious*. And

the plastic badges worked miracles with kids. Always had. She was thankful she'd thought to bring one along today. From the look of things, the simple gesture hadn't just broken the ice; it had absolutely *smashed* it. "So, Katie," Shaughnessy said, wanting to strike while the iron was hot. "Can you tell me about the bad guy who hurt you last week? Do you remember what he

looked like?”

The smile ran away from the little girl's face at the abrupt shifting of the subject. “Yep,” she said, nodding again while she tucked the plastic badge safely away into the side pocket of her pink jacket. “I sure do. He was a little bit taller than you, and a little bit skinnier than you, too.”

Shaughnessy grimaced before she had a chance to stop herself. Looked

as though she'd need to keep a little closer eye on her weight, after all. Pride came before a fall, and kids weren't in the least bit shy about putting a swellheaded adult like her back into their proper place with a well-placed honest assessment or two. "Did the bad guy say anything to you?" Shaughnessy asked, making a mental note to increase her number of miles on the treadmill



each day. Clearly, five just wasn't cutting it anymore.

The little girl frowned at the question, looking embarrassed.

“Mmhm,” she said quietly. “I remember what he said to me. He told me why don't I just go to the bathroom by myself.”

Shaughnessy frowned back, not understanding the little girl meaning.

“What does that mean, honey?” she

asked. “Do you have any idea of why he might have said that to you?”

The little girl cut a furtive glance back at Sister Myra, who was still standing a few feet away just inside the doorway. Shifting her stare back to Shaughnessy, she lowered her voice in a conspiratorial whisper. “He said that to me because I asked him to take me to the bathroom. I had forgotten where it was

and I needed to pee *really* bad.”

Shaughnessy smiled gently.

Hell, she'd once peed her own pants in the second grade, and she still remembered the unpleasant feeling all too well for herself. Her fellow students had called her “Pee Pants” for the rest of the year. “Ah, you don't need to be embarrassed about something like that, sweetheart,” she said, waving a hand in the cold air to chase away the little

girl's thoroughly unwarranted shame. "I actually *peed* my pants once when I was just a little bit older than you. The other kids called me 'Pee Pants' for the rest of the year and my brothers *still* haven't let me forget about it. They still bring it up every single Christmas when I see them. But after that did the bad man ev-"

Before Shaughnessy could finish her question, the sharp report of a rifle

cracked in the air. A split-second later, her mind abruptly went blank, faded to black, just like the final episode of *The Sopranos*.

Meghan Shaughnessy didn't hear Katie Morgenstern's horrified screams of terror as her discharged brain matter splattered wetly across the little girl's face, dirtying up the lenses of her colorful purple glasses with disgusting, chunky streaks of gray and white and

red.



## CHAPTER 22

Shielded by the FBI agent's own vehicle, Jack Yuntz lowered his rifle in satisfaction and tucked his still-smoking weapon back into its nylon case. Working the zipper, he slung the strap over his left shoulder and turned away from the bloody scene he'd just wrought with the wonderful sounds of the little girl's screaming echoing in his ears from fifty yards away. Jack shook himself as



hot jolts of adrenalin zipped giddily through his veins, causing his skin to buzz with an intense electrical charge. He felt *especially* proud of himself right now. And why the hell *shouldn't* he feel especially proud of himself right now? It had been an absolutely *perfect* shot.

Jack widened his smile despite the mad pounding of his heartbeat inside his chest, which was slamming away so

powerfully against his ribcage that he feared it might crack a few of the bones. Making his way carefully down the embankment, he followed the rocky shore of Lake Erie half a mile west before finally climbing back up the modest cliff ten minutes later and into the parking lot of the flower shop where he'd parked his latest getaway car, which once again had been purchased dirt-cheap off Craigslist: an El Camino

with no hubcaps this time.

Tossing his rifle in ahead of him as the ice-cold wind whipped in hard off the lake and froze his ears solidly to the sides of his head, Jack slid behind the steering wheel of the faded brown shit-box and attempted to crank the stubborn old engine into life. Didn't work at first, which caused several interminable moments of panic that soured his

stomach to the point of making him want to throw up. But then on the fourth try the engine finally turned over. Jack breathed out a grateful sigh of relief at the supremely welcome grumbling in his ears. Thank God for small favors. And for the big ones, too, for that matter. Blissfully, the four hundred bucks he'd spent on the vehicle hadn't been a *total* waste. And with any luck at all, the El Camino still had a few miles left in her

tired old rubber legs. It least, it had *better* have a few more miles left in her tired old rubber legs. About a thousand or so of them, if he'd calculated correctly – enough to make the long voyage from Cleveland to New York City and back again.

Jack concentrated on controlling his excited breathing as he pulled out of the parking lot of the flower shop and

made a left-hand turn onto East Erie Street before losing himself in the steady stream of traffic that was flowing down the busy road, being extremely mindful to stick to the posted speed limit. The car was enough of a sore thumb on its own. He certainly didn't need to be tripped up over something as stupid as getting a fifty-dollar moving violation. Not now. Not after everything he'd already gone through up to this point in

the game.

Jack shifted in his seat and resisted the urge to pinch himself at just how *easy* this latest kill had been as he pointed the El Camino in the direction of Interstate 90 for his upcoming trip. Still, much like the moves that had been executed by Sergei Michalovic and Edward O'Hara during the Chessboard Killer slayings out in Manhattan the

previous year, everything in the FBI was so goddamned *predictable*.

Too bad for them but an absolute *godsend* for him.

Jack chuckled out loud despite the heightened state of his raw nerves right now. Still, even *he* knew that it hadn't been *God* who'd sent him here to finish up this deadly little game of modified chess that had begun on a chilly spring day with the killing of



Jack's very own father. It had been the devil himself. And now the time had come for the devil's little helper to visit what probably marked the last remaining angel here on Earth.

After all this time spent apart, the time had finally come for him to go see Molly again.

And why not? He'd *missed* her.



## CHAPTER 23

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” Bruce Blankenship twisted up his face into a mask of utter disbelief. “Say that again,” he ordered.

Helen Morgan held a tear-soaked tissue to her badly damaged eyes, dabbing first at the corner of her left eye, and then at her right. They were in Interview Room Number Three of the Fairview Park Police Department. She

was seated at a rickety metal folding chair at a small wooden table while he hovered above her two feet away. “Say *what* again?” she sobbed.

Blankenship gritted his teeth. Though usually a softie when it came to such things, he didn’t feel even the *slightest* bit guilty for grilling this woman so hard, not even considering the sad-sack state of her thoroughly beat-up

appearance right now. And why the hell *should* he feel guilty for grilling her so hard? She *deserved* it after what she'd done to the poor Paulson baby. And a hell of a lot worse than this, too. She'd gotten off *easy* with a simple punch to the face; he knew that. She'd heal eventually, would get over her wounds, at least in the physical sense. And though Blankenship had never really believed in the death penalty as it was

against his Catholic religion, he honestly thought that he could make an exception in this case. And if anything should happen to that baby – if so much as a *single hair* on the boy's head was harmed – he could *definitely* make an exception. “Tell me the name of the man you say coerced you into kidnapping the Paulson baby again,” Blankenship snarled.

Morgan balled up her tissue in her shaking hands. Heavy streaks of black mascara ran down her cheeks. A hard plastic surgical device was the only thing holding her broken nose together. Her swollen eyes looked like those of a cartoon raccoon's from all the purplish bruising around them. "He told me his name was Nicholas Sarkozy," she said, still sniffing.

Blankenship glanced up at the surveillance camera that was mounted near the ceiling in the southeast corner of the room where two walls met. He shook his head in disgust before turning back to Morgan. “You *do* realize that Nicholas Sarkozy is the name of the former president of France, don’t you?” he asked, not even trying to disguise the icy edge of contempt lacing his voice.



Still, the only thing worse in this world than a bad person was a *dumb* bad person – and in Helen Morgan’s case he’d clearly found someone who fit that bill to a *T*.

Morgan’s lower lip trembled.

“No, I didn’t realize that,” she said. “I don’t really follow politics all that closely, though.”

Only by the slimmest of margins was Blankenship able to keep himself

from smacking his palm hard into his forehead in exasperation. Fighting back the overpowering urge – at least for the time being – he shook his head again. “Fine. Then just run through everything from the beginning again. Take it from the top and don’t leave anything out.”

Morgan shifted uncomfortably in her folding chair. An untouched can of Coke sat on the table in front of her.

Beads of condensation dotted the iconic red-and-white label, slipping down the surface onto the table every few seconds or so and collecting in a small puddle like the tears that were sliding down Morgan's face. Taking a deep, snuffling breath through her rearranged proboscis, she said, "OK. Let's see here. I met him at the Oak Barrel Bar over on Euclid Avenue downtown Friday night."

"At what time?"

Morgan shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe around ten p.m. or so. I was drinking a lot that night so it’s pretty hard for me to remember exactly.”

Blankenship flexed his fingers; wanting badly to punch something himself right now. He made a quick mental note to see if there were any gas stations or ATMs near the entrance to the Oak Barrel Bar. Maybe a security

camera had picked up an image of the kidnapper's face. Worth a shot, anyway. "OK," he said. "Go on."

Morgan lifted her tissue to her eyes again. "Do you have any more Kleenex on you?" she asked. "This one is too used to be any good now."

Blankenship sighed and reached into the inside jacket pocket of his leather jacket before flipping a portable package of Puffs across the table to her.

With three-year-old twin girls at home who were always in one stage of a cold or another, he knew better than to ever leave the house without extras. Never knew when they might come in handy.

Morgan extracted a fresh tissue from the packet and resumed the wiping of her leaking eyes. “Anyway, from there he had a waitress ask me if he could buy me a drink.”

Blankenship nodded again and made another mental note, this time to interview everyone who'd been working at the Oak Barrel Bar on Friday night. Might turn up some more usable information, and he needed to cover every last base here by himself until the task force had been assembled. Could mean the difference between a happy ending to this story and a tragic one.

“Then what happened?” he asked.

Morgan looked away from him, seemingly embarrassed now. A flash of color flooded into her pale white cheeks. “Then we went back to his hotel and had sex,” she said quietly.

Blankenship widened his eyes in surprise. His skin crawled. *Bingo*. If Morgan had engaged in sex with the mystery man, there’d be some DNA evidence left behind. Locard’s



Exchange Principle: every contact leaves a trace. “Do you still have the clothing you wore last Friday night?” he asked.

Morgan nodded. “Yes. They’re in the dirty laundry hamper, but I still have them.”

Blankenship took off his coat and draped it over the chair opposite Morgan, happy to hear this latest bit of

welcome information. If nothing else, obtaining a search warrant for Morgan's home shouldn't prove difficult. The citizens of Cleveland were baying for blood – *lots* of it – and they wanted that blood to come from Helen Morgan until they could get it from the throat of the ravenous wolf who'd taken the baby to God-only-knew-what corner of the world. “What hotel did you go to?” he asked.

“The Four Seasons downtown,”

Morgan answered quickly. “*Very* nice place.”

Blankenship ignored the wistful tone of the woman’s voice. Clearly, the idiot still didn’t realize just how big of a shit-pile she’d stepped in. Still, this was good. The Four Seasons should have plenty of surveillance footage for him to go through. Maybe identifying the

kidnapper would be as simple as just checking the guest log. He'd caught criminals in the past working with far less. "Great," he said. "So tell me what this guy looked like again."

Morgan straightened in her chair. Despite the dire circumstances she found herself in at the moment, she seemed almost *proud* to relate the particulars. "He was *very* handsome," she said, pressing her wind-burned lips

together in obvious contentment. “About six-two or six-three and maybe a hundred and eighty pounds or so. Just a little bit smaller than you.” She paused and gave Blankenship the once-over, sliding her gaze over his body and causing him to stifle a shiver against it. “Very fit like you, too. He obviously worked out a lot. Wavy brown hair and dark brown eyes. A real looker. Sort of

looked like Ricky Martin to me, only a little bit older.”

Blankenship stretched his aching neck and rolled his shoulders forward, still creeped out by Morgan’s visual equivalent of copping a feel. And it was just plain *odd* listening to her gleefully recount the caliber of her romantic conquest, as though he’d somehow found himself stuck in an episode of *Sex and the City*. And Blankenship would know,

too. Thanks entirely to his lovely wife and her fascination with the wildly popular program; he could effortlessly discuss the lives of Carrie, Samantha, Charlotte and Miranda with the best of them.

Blankenship was just about to resume his grilling of Morgan when his cellphone rang in his pocket. He dug it out and looked down at the name on the

caller ID: *Bill Krugman*.

Blankenship flipped open his Motorola Razr and pressed it against his left ear. “Yes, sir?”

As always, Krugman cut straight to the point. *Sliced* straight to the point in this case, actually. “Agent Shaughnessy has been murdered,” Krugman said without preamble, catching Blankenship completely by surprise.



Blankenship's breath hitched in his throat as his boss's words slammed hard into his gut like a balled-up fist. He furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. "*What?*" he said, trying in vain to process the Director's shocking words but not quite accomplishing the feat. "When? Where?"

"Outside of St. Anthony's grade school about ten minutes ago," Krugman

answered. “I’m headed over there now.”

Blankenship heard the low hum of a car engine on the other end of the call. He refocused his wavering vision in an effort to keep the room around him from spinning any more but it didn’t work. He needed to put his hands on the table in front of him to support his weight. Poor Shaughnessy. She’d seemed like such a nice woman to him.

A damned fine agent, too, from everything he'd heard about her. And it hurt like hell to lose *any* of your colleagues, now matter how briefly you'd known them. Now he'd lost *two* of them in the space of less than a week. Hazards of the job, he knew, but that it didn't make it hurt any less. "Jack Yuntz?" he asked, feeling his anger flare up hot in his chest.

“That’d be my guess.”

Blankenship gritted his teeth.

“So do you want me to take over the shootings then?” Now more than ever, Blankenship wanted Jack Yuntz for himself. *Needed* Jack Yuntz for himself. He had a personal score to settle with the murdering little punk after what he’d driven Dana to. And then the movie-theater shooting and now this.

When Krugman didn't immediately answer him, Blankenship repeated, "Do you want me to take over the lead on the Jack Yuntz case, sir?"

Krugman grunted into the receiver on his end. For a long moment the Director had seemed preoccupied with something else but now he was back again. "Nope," Krugman said, his tone letting Blankenship know in no

uncertain terms that there was no room for negotiation on the issue. “Same reasons as the ones I gave you last night. I’ll be assigning someone new to take over on that end of things until the task force is up and ready to go. Should be any day now if the state police would finally get its collective head out of its ass. Anyway, with any luck at all, this one will last a little bit longer than poor Meghan. Sad as it is for me to say, I’m

afraid that we have another funeral to go to, Agent Blankenship. Tired of them yet? I know that I sure as hell am.”

“Yes, sir,” Blankenship answered. “*Sick* and goddamned tired of them.”

Blankenship paused, already dreading the upcoming religious ceremony they’d be attending. Hell, he’d barely made it through the fifteen

short minutes he'd sat through Dana's. He shook his head to chase away the thought. One step at a time here. He'd cross that hopelessly rickety bridge when he came to it, no matter how difficult the journey might be for him to make. "So," he asked, "who's taking over the lead on the Yuntz case then?"

Krugman grunted again. "Her name's Claire Wexler. Twenty-six years old. Three-year veteran, which is



still a little bit wet behind the ears, I realize that, but she's a real firecracker. Expert in profiling and jiu-jitsu, of all things. Top of her class at the Academy in 2008. She's young, Bruce, but she worked on the Buffalo Strangler case last year, so she had the chance to get her feet a little wet too, not just the backs of her ears. Anyway, she really knows her stuff. I trust her completely."

Blankenship searched his memory for any prior knowledge he might have of Wexler but didn't come up with anything. "Never heard of her," he said after a moment.

"Well, you have now. Anyway, what's going on with Helen Morgan?"

Blankenship took a deep breath and blew it out again slowly over his teeth, wondering briefly if Krugman

might be trying to replace Dana with someone who *reminded* him of her. If that turned out to be the case, he wouldn't have blamed the old man one little bit. Hell, he missed Dana, too. That being said, he knew that replacing her wouldn't be quite that easy. After all, you could never replace a snowflake once it had melted, now could you? Not exactly, anyway. And Krugman would probably find that out for himself pretty

soon. Not that Blankenship was about to tell the Director his business. Wasn't a good idea to tangle with a grumpy lion, after all, even an old one. *Especially* an old one. "Talking to Morgan now," he said, keeping his other thoughts to himself in the interests of self-preservation.

"Getting anywhere with her?"

"Yes, sir."

“In what respect?”

Blankenship glanced across the table at Morgan. She lifted her eyes to him and held his contemptuous stare with a tear-filled gaze of her own. “I’ll need to bring you up to speed on that later on, sir,” he said, looking away from Morgan again and not wanting to get himself even *more* riled up by the maddening sight of her. “I’ll call you

just as soon as I wrap this up.”

Krugman coughed softly into the receiver on his end, making Blankenship briefly wonder if the old man’s hectic schedule was finally beginning to catch up to him after all these years on the job. He didn’t know *how* Krugman did it in his seventies. It was absolutely *mind-boggling*. This demanding career was tough enough on him in his late thirties. He couldn’t even *imagine*

doing it for another forty years.

No two ways about it, Krugman was one tough old coot. Skin made of leather. “Make sure you do that,” Krugman said. “And Agent Blankenship?”

“Yes, sir?”

Krugman blew out a slow breath of his own. “Nail that heartless bitch to a fucking cross, would you? And you

can consider that an order coming directly from the top.”

Blankenship pressed his lips into a tight line. “With pleasure, sir,” he said. “With *pleasure*.”





## CHAPTER 24

Jack whizzed down the crowded highway at eighty-five miles an hour in the battered El Camino, metal sides shuddering, the smell of burning oil filling his nostrils, the sounds of *Turn the Radio Up* cranked full-volume on the car stereo. Eric Carmen had given him a very specific and direct order, and Jack was following it to the letter. After nearly eight hours on the road now, he

wasn't thinking about getting pulled over by the cops anymore.

He just wanted to *get there* already.

The trip was a straight line all the way through – you could have drawn it with a ruler on a map if you'd wanted to – which made for efficiency but numbed a driver's brain to the point of absolute insanity.

Finally, *blissfully*, crossing the bridge into the famed city of his birth half an hour later, Jack navigated his way over to Queens and parked the El Camino on Freeman Road, just about a hundred yards or so down the street from PS312, the place where Molly went to school these days.

Jack stretched his kinked-up neck in the driver's seat of the El Camino and

checked the time on his Timex, infinitely happy to have finally come to a stop after all of that maddening driving. He'd practically gone road-blind from the intense exertion, and as a direct result everything appeared a little bit fuzzy around the edges to him now. Almost *surreal*. He refocused his wavering vision and squinted at the watch strapped around his left wrist. 3:28 *p.m.* Good timing, at least. *Excellent*

timing, actually. Chalk one up for the home team. Another stroke of good fortune that he shouldn't have been able to count on but greatly appreciated nonetheless. He'd cut it ridiculously close – no debating that simple fact – but classes should be letting out in just about two more minutes now. Luckily for these particular kids, though, the pulse-pounding situation that had played itself

out over in the crowded hallway of St. Anthony's grade school in Lorain last Friday afternoon wouldn't be duplicated here today – non-lethal paintball rifle attack or otherwise. Jack wasn't even *armed* at the moment, as a matter of fact, had left his guns locked safely away in a storage unit back in Ohio. He figured it made for the smartest choice considering the circumstances. Because if he *had* been pulled over by the authorities while

he'd been taking his long journey to New York City, there had always existed the chance – however slight that chance might have been – that he might have been able to talk his way out of trouble. Stranger things had certainly happened in the history of the world. *Much* stranger things. And that chance went right out the window for a sixteen-year-old boy without a driver's license who



was illegally transporting assault weapons across state lines – locked, cocked and loaded for bear.

Locked, cocked and loaded for *human beings*.

Finally exiting the El Camino and stepping out into the weak afternoon sunshine that was struggling down from the gloomy gray skies above, Jack squatted down next to his beat-up vehicle and bounced up and down

several times like an Olympic hurdler preparing for a very important upcoming race. He might need to run here, after all, and if that was the case he wanted to be completely ready.

Taking a deep breath through his nostrils in order to steady nerves that were already humming in delicious anticipation of what would come next, Jack pulled down the black ski mask

over his face and began walking briskly toward the school. Every little bit of camouflage helped in these sorts of situations and with the frigid winter weather nipping away at everybody's noses today the mask shouldn't draw *too* much unwanted attention to his person. Jack didn't know if the FBI would be looking for him out here in Queens as well, but there was no point in taking any unnecessary chances at this

relatively late stage of the game.

He paused and shook his head as the cold wind kicked up even more, cutting through his body with all the efficiency of an electric chainsaw and nearly slicing him in half at the waist. At least, he didn't see any point in taking any *more* unnecessary chances. Coming out here to Queens today to see Molly was dangerous enough as it was. Out-

and-out *stupid*, actually. But he wanted to see his little sister again. *Needed* to see her again, for that matter. Needed the brief soul-refresher before he resumed his deadly little game of cat-and-mouse with the feds back in Ohio. After this, he'd leave Molly alone again until he could finally arrange for them to be reunited once and for all.

After a few more minutes of steady walking, Jack finally came to a

stop in the middle of a pack of parents who were waiting for their kids on the opposite side of the street from the school, immediately feeling safer in the crowd. Fifty feet in front of him, a pair of crossing guards wearing reflective yellow vests held large red STOP signs in their hands and stamped their sneakered feet against the pavement in the middle of the street in an effort to get

the blood in their toes flowing again, readying themselves to direct the impeding foot-traffic that would soon be crossing the wide road.

Just then, the long, sustained sound of a shrill bell sliced through the chilly afternoon air like a switchblade knife, signaling a long-awaited end to the school day. On the other side of the street, dozens of children immediately began to emerge from the building,

smiling happily and waving in anticipation of their impending reunions with their parents.

Brief, one-sided conversations rang out all around Jack, making him miss the days when he'd heard similar sentiments coming from his *own* mother, Stephanie Mann:

*“Hey, Sally! Over here!”*



*“Patrick? Honey? Ready to go?”*

*“Billy! It’s Mom. C’mon, boy. Let’s go already! It’s freezing out here today!”*

*“Elyse Mia Mull! You come here this instant, young lady! You are not to pull anyone’s hair!”*

Jack scanned the faces of the

children crossing the street, looking for his little sister. He frowned, not seeing her anywhere. And that was when a sickening thought occurred to him, dropping his stomach like a heavy lead anchor at sea. He was a fool. An idiot. An absolute fucking *moron*. He hadn't even *considered* the possibility that Molly might be sick today, hadn't even gone into school. Unbelievably, though, just then, an all-too-familiar voice

sounded on Jack's right side, maybe ten feet away, if not even closer than that. "Molly? Molly Yuntz! I'm over here, baby girl!"

Jack turned to his right. His jaw tensed briefly before practically smacking into the center of his chest on its downward journey. The voice calling out for Molly belonged to none other than his former foster mother, Mrs.

Macklin, who was waiting for his little sister near the curb, decked out in a bright red scarf and matching woolen cap.

Jack cut his stare back to the road. Molly's distinctive curly blonde hair bobbed up and down in the wave of children that was still streaming across the teeming street under the hyper-vigilant protection of the crossing guards.

He took a step in Molly's direction before he could stop himself, his heartbeat slamming painfully against his ribcage. Suddenly, the quick flash of a yellow reflective vest in the dull sunlight overhead diverted his attention away from his little sister. From the middle of the road, the large male crossing guard made eye contact with Jack. The man immediately dropped the

STOP sign in his hand, clattering it down onto the pavement at his feet. “You there!” he shouted accusingly, pointing a finger at Jack. “Freeze! FBI!”

Jack froze as he'd been instructed despite every last instinct in his body that was screaming out for him to just *move*. A moment later, the man's partner, a woman, joined him. Both moved toward Jack simultaneously,

reaching around to the rear waistbands of their jeans as they did so.

Molly looked over at Jack and caught his eye. Her own big blue eyes went saucer-wide. “Jack?” she asked in confusion. Then recognition set in and an excited smile lit up her beautiful face. “Jack? Is that really you?”

Molly’s voice slammed Jack’s brain back into gear, like the rusted

gears of a car's engine finally catching hold. Turning away from his pursuers in a fluttering of his trench coat around his legs, he sprinted down the street in the same direction from which he'd come, bumping shoulders with people in the crowd and thanking his lucky stars above that he wasn't carrying any weapons on him today that would have slowed him down.

Moving just as fast as his



furiously pumping legs would carry him, he hoped against hope that he could somehow make it to the El Camino in time to make his getaway.

Breathing hard, Jack turned his head and caught a glimpse of the crossing guards in hot pursuit over his left shoulder, people who obviously weren't *really* crossing guards at all. Guns drawn, they were catching up to

him steadily now that they'd extracted themselves from the crowd of people that had initially gotten in their way. If nothing else, the motherfuckers were *fast*. *Too* fast. Even faster than Jack, it seemed.

Jack's ears rang. Acrid stomach bile flooded into his mouth. He swallowed back the foul taste; grimacing against it. He wasn't going to make it to the El Camino in time; even he knew

that, not even close. Glancing desperately to his left, he spied a wide alleyway between two buildings and cut into it, hurting the tendons in his right knee badly in the process and knowing in his heart of hearts that it was all over for him now. There was nowhere left for him to run. Nowhere left for him to hide.

A large blue dumpster sat

halfway down the alley. A mountain of bulging black garbage bags were piled up against the side of the dumpster closest to him. *A hiding place*, however flimsy that hiding place might be. Jack headed for it. *One last chance*. Maybe his pursuers would be too stupid to check the dumpster, unlikely as that possibility might seem right now.

Only one way to find out.

He glanced back down the

alleyway behind him. The FBI agents still hadn't reached it yet. Good. Still a chance here. Still some *hope*. Reaching the dumpster, he began to climb in but stopped suddenly when he caught sight of two orange pylons on the far side of it.

Holy fucking *God*.

Holy fucking *Satan*.

The pylons flanked an open

manhole. The cover sitting next to it had  
NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC WORKS  
stamped across the middle.

Jack bolted for the opening in the  
ground, changing his plans on the fly.  
More hope, however slight. Entering the  
hole, he braced his feet against the  
attached metal ladder inside and reached  
back up for the pylons, throwing them  
down into the darkness below before  
struggling with the heavy manhole

cover. Using every last bit of his strength, he finally wrenched it into place above his head; afraid he might throw up his own *soul*.

Jack panted hard as his pulse pounded away madly in his wrists. His mind raced with a jumble of disjointed thoughts that slammed into each other before shattering away into a million glimmering shards like a dropped

mirror. Then he simply waited for the checkmate move to come from the feds; for the unreported beating they'd undoubtedly deliver to him right before hauling his murdering ass downtown and beating the crap out of him some more.

After all this time and after all the beautiful killings he'd gotten away with scot-free, Jack simply waited for the *end* to come.

Just as he'd known it would all



along.



## CHAPTER 25

Special Agent Terrance Langley reached the wide alleyway just off Freeman Road first, thrusting in his Bureau-issued Glock to lead the way. His partner, Annie Williams, caught up with him a moment later, coming a panting stop beside him in the entrance to the alleyway. Sweat slid down her temples from the intense and all-too-fresh exertion of the chase.

Langley was tall and black; Williams was short and blonde. The Odd Couple of the FBI, their fellow agents called them. Like Williams, sweat streaked down Langley's face despite the chilly afternoon air. And he too was breathing heavily from the heart-pounding footrace they were just about to bring to a thrilling end. In his mind's eye, he couldn't help but picture

medals, ribbons and an elaborate ceremony where the FBI served shrimp cocktail and *real* cocktails in their honor for being the ones to finally bring down Jack Yuntz – the bloodthirsty youthful lunatic who'd murdered nearly fifty people so far during his brief career as a killer.

Langley scanned the alleyway. It was long and wide, maybe a hundred yards from one side to the other, ending

with access to Phillips Road on the far side. No way Jack Yuntz could have made it all the way across already. He'd only been about thirty yards ahead of them when he'd turned into the alley himself.

Nothing, though. Not even the faintest *trace* of human movement coming from the alleyway that Langley could detect. No fleeing suspect with

the tails of his long black trench coat flapping wildly behind him in the stiff breeze.

Langley squinted his dark brown eyes in confusion, not understanding what was going on here. That was when Annie Williams tapped him on his shoulder. Tilting her head, she motioned to the large blue that was sitting halfway down the alley and lifted her thin eyebrows on her forehead.

Langley nodded. Made sense.

Nowhere *else* for Jack Yuntz to go.

Nowhere else for him to hide. “Yep,” he said. “Good thinking, partner. Let’s do this.”

Williams grabbed Langley by the arm to stop him, still wheezing as she attempted to catch the last of her breath.

‘We need to be careful here,’ she said, choking out the words between deep



inhalations. “He might be armed. Probably *is* armed, considering all the people he’s shot so far.”

Langley screwed up his handsome face into a mask of disgust and stretched his muscular neck. “Well, I can promise you this much: that little fucker isn’t going to shoot *us*. Maybe the other way around if he doesn’t cooperate with the arrest, but fuck *him*. I ain’t going out like that and I ain’t

letting you go out like that, either, sister.  
So just follow me.”

Langley took the lead as the two agents moved cautiously down the alley toward the dumpster with their guns still drawn. Papers and various bits of garbage fluttered past, driven along by the steady wind that was coming from the direction of Phillips Road. Reaching the dumpster a few moments later,

Langley glanced over at Williams before taking in a deep breath through his nostrils and flipping open the black plastic lid. Springing backward three feet, he pointed the barrel of his weapon inside. Williams did the same five feet to his left.

“Freeze, motherfucker!” Langley screamed, lacing his deep voice with the proper degree of intimidation. “FBI! You’re under arrest, fuckwad!”

Langley frowned when his words simply bounced right back into his ears from the empty metal container in front of them. “What the *fuck*?” he sputtered, completely dumbfounded. Who the fuck were they chasing here? Harry Goddamn Houdini?

Williams moved past Langley to the far side of the dumpster. She shook her head in exasperation and nodded

down to the manhole located there.

“Looks like Alice scurried down the rabbit hole,” she said. “Resourceful little bitch.”

Langley closed his eyes in frustration. Putting away his Glock, he reached into his pocket and dug out his cellphone before punching in a number. Thirty seconds later, he'd relayed the details to the four other agents who'd been watching Molly Yuntz's school.

Then he shoved his cellphone back into his pocket and turned back to Williams. “No choice but to go in after him,” he said. “It’s a shitty job, but I suppose somebody’s got to do it.”

Williams slipped her own Glock back into the rear waistband of her jeans. Approaching the manhole cover, she leaned down and inserted her tiny fingers into the small access recess;

started to pry off the cover. “Yep,” she said. “And I can’t believe I’m saying this in this particular instance – but ladies first.”





## CHAPTER 26

Jack finally descended into the foul-smelling, pitch-black darkness below him, maybe thirty feet down, deciding to make one last-ditch effort to escape. And why not? There was no point in giving up now when there still remained a chance – however slight that chance might be – that he might somehow make it out of this oversized toilet relatively unscathed. He wasn't a

pussy, after all, never *had* been a pussy, even when he'd been just a little kid standing up to the schoolyard bullies that had constantly taunted him for his so-called "nerdy" interest in chess, usually giving back to them every bit as good as he'd gotten. Sometimes even better.

At the very least, he needed to *try* here.

The revolting smell of raw

sewage filling his nostrils grew even stronger as he reached the bottom of the slippery ladder, making him retch painfully. Filthy water, ankle-deep, seeped into his combat boots and further numbed his already frozen toes. Temples pounding, Jack felt for the slimy wall at his right and began following it north, headed back in the direction of Molly's school and doubling back on his trail like a hunted

fox might do, seething as he went. Judging by the seemingly friendly tone coming from Mrs. Macklin outside Molly's school, his little sister had made amends with the woman following what had been a decidedly rocky start. After everything he'd done for Molly – after all the people he'd *killed* for her – she obviously didn't appreciate a single goddamn thing he'd done. Didn't

appreciate the way he'd put his *own* life on the line for her.

Jack gritted his teeth in annoyance. Fine. If that's the way things were now, then that was just the way things were now. *Fuck* Molly. He'd let live her happy little life with her new family while she pretended that her previous family had never even existed. That was her *own* form of death. Knock yourself out, kiddo. Have

fun with the rest of the Cleavers in your deluded little fantasyland.

Forging ahead into the darkness, Jack had made it about a hundred yards or so down when his shoulder suddenly banged into an unmoving obstruction that was jutting out from the slimy wall, stopping him dead in his tracks. Behind him, the clattering of the manhole cover he'd entered five minutes earlier

sounded on the pavement above, causing his heart to flip over inside his chest at the unwelcome noise. The FBI agents in pursuit had finally figured out where he'd gone. Good for them. Clever little fucks. *Resourceful* little fucks.

Jack felt along the obstruction he'd just banged into. His fingers wrapped around a slippery metal rung. *Another ladder.*

His hammering heart jumped up

into his throat. Adrenalin flooded through his veins. Getting his bearings, he shimmied up the rungs just as quickly as he possibly could manage without losing his grip and falling back down into the rank darkness of the sewage corridor below.

Reaching the top of the ladder ten seconds later, he pushed and pushed with all of his might in a frantic effort to



dislodge the manhole cover above his head, but the manhole cover wouldn't budge. The muscles in his shoulders burned with the effort, *sizzled* with the effort, sang a prolonged and soul-bracing song of exquisite physical pain as he continued to push with everything he had. Finally, the manhole cover started to give way just as one of the agents hit the filthy water behind him with an eerie, echoing splash.

Jack redoubled his efforts at the heart-stopping sound, not knowing where the manhole would let out, not even really *caring*. If the agents caught him, so be it. He'd given it his best shot here and he'd gotten a lot farther than most other boys his age would have. He just wished like hell that he'd at least brought along a small handgun with him so that he could go out in the final blaze

of glory that his concerted efforts over the past tumultuous year of his life so obviously deserved.

The manhole cover finally clattered onto the pavement above Jack's head with one last concentrated push, just as its partner down the corridor had done a moment earlier. Drawing a welcome breath of fresh air deep into his tortured lungs, Jack readied himself mentally for the next

step in this modified game of chess before daring to stick out his head, preparing himself to make one last frantic dash for freedom in an effort to escape the agents' greedy clutches against all the seemingly insurmountable odds that had been stacked up against him.

Readied himself to make one last frantic dash for freedom so that he could

finish off this deadly little game of  
modified chess *his* way.



## PART VII

“I’m not bad. I’m just drawn that way.”

– Jessica Rabbit, in the 1988 animated movie *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*





# CHAPTER 27

*Wednesday; 8:10 a.m.; downtown Cleveland*

Twenty-six years old, five-foot-ten even when she wasn't wearing heels (which as a rule she never did anymore) a n d *embarrassingly* well-endowed, Claire Wexler primped in front of the oversized vanity mirror located in the bathroom of her exposed-ducts loft apartment in downtown Cleveland – but in the opposite way most women did.

Claire wasn't vain. Not even a little bit. Never had been even when – at the relatively tender age of thirteen – she'd undergone the “magical change” that all women underwent during their teen years. Boobs sprouting from cherries to plums to oranges to grapefruits (she'd stopped approximating them to produce at that point in her life, hadn't seen the sense in

it anymore). Hips, butt and thighs filling out with a little bit of extra meat. The thoroughly unwelcome and colossally annoying entertaining of that first monthly visit from what her mother had so awkwardly termed “your special little friend”.

Still, despite this complete – practically *determined* – lack of pride in her appearance, Claire knew how attractive most other people considered

her. Pretty hard to forget about it when you were constantly being reminded by representatives of the male gender ranging in age from nine all the way up to ninety-five. *Literally*. It hadn't been too long ago that she'd found herself getting hit on by an old man in his mid-nineties at a nursing home over in Parma where she'd been investigating an insurance-fraud case – just the third or

fourth case of her fledgling career.

Grinning up at her with a gummy smile while he'd sat in his power wheelchair and fiddled playfully with his tiny joystick, he'd asked, "Can I give you a ride somewhere, sweetheart? No charge, of course."

Claire had rolled her bright green eyes in response to that hopelessly lame overture, just as she rolled her bright green eyes remembering it now.

Sadly, though, that hadn't even been the *first* time she'd been subjected to that particularly clever line. The last time had been when – just about four months ago now – a shiny yellow Lamborghini driven by a trust-fund baby in his early twenties had pulled over to the curb beside her while she'd been walking down Prospect Avenue in order to go grab a quick bite to eat during her lunch

break. Activating the tinted power window on the driver's side of his expensive vehicle, the man-child had slid down his mirrored aviator sunglasses smoothly on the bridge of his nose before delivering what he'd no doubt thought would be the knockout blow, one that would most likely sweep Claire right off her feet and directly into his daddy's private jet before they winged their way on down to the

Caymans for a little bit of well-deserved R&R: an all-too-rare chance to escape the daily pressures of their thoroughly overly privileged lives. To answer his supremely cocky and tooth-gratingly irritating overture, Claire had simply pulled aside the left-hand side of her navy-blue blazer to display the butt of her Bureau-issued Glock tucked into a holster there. A tad bit of overkill,



perhaps, but it had seemed to get her point across well enough, sending her now red-faced suitor screeching down the street away from her in a smoking trail of burning rubber.

Claire smiled at herself in the mirror now as she recalled the entirely satisfying encounter, but then the smile ran abruptly away from her pretty face as she studied her reflection more closely.

She shook her head in disapproval and pressed her full lips into a firm line, unhappy with her appearance despite the fact that most women would've *killed* to see the woman who was looking back at her from the mirror. Grabbing a thick beige rubber band off the counter in front of her, she pulled back her fiery red, shoulder-length hair into a painfully tight

ponytail and slipped a pair of prescription-free eyeglasses featuring heavy black frames onto her face in an effort to help conceal her naturally high cheekbones. Much like heels, Claire never wore make-up anymore, either – *especially* not to work – so that cut down considerably on her prep time each day. It was convenient, to say the least. So convenient that she often wondered why more women didn't

follow her lead.

Then again, most women probably hadn't come out on the other sides of their magical changes looking like living, breathing replicas of Jessica Rabbit.

Claire frowned at her reflection some more and shook her head again in exasperation. This just wouldn't do. Taking in a deep breath to give herself

just a little more room, she fastened the top button of her white blouse snugly around her throat, nearly choking herself out in the process but nonetheless managing to hide what little skin had been left showing. Then she studied her reflection again. A little better, but not much. Still, it would need to do. She needed to get this show on the road here. She had a *very* busy day ahead of her today.

A very *important* one, too.

Claire sighed heavily at the complete *unfairness* of the world as she hurriedly shoved her toiletries back into drawers. As infuriating as the aggravating realization might be for to get to grips with, though, she knew that looks mattered in this world. They mattered *a lot*. Especially for females – the supposed “weaker sex”: often having

a direct impact on women's paychecks. Total bullshit, of course, but what could she do about it? Nothing. Not directly, at least. That was just the way the world worked, however shitty those workings might be. Blissfully, though, thanks entirely to the wide safety net provided by her family's enormous wealth, she'd never needed to worry very seriously about money herself. One less thing, as Forrest Gump might say. And she knew

for a fact just how lucky that made her. *Supremely* lucky. Because much like coming out on the other sides of their magical changes looking like Jessica Rabbit clones, most women probably hadn't been born into fourth-generation pretzel fortunes, either. So money wasn't the reason why Claire did her job. Not even close.

No, she did her job for other, far



more *personal* reasons.

Turning to her left and slipping her feet into a pair of comfortable flats that were sitting next to the bathroom scale, she finally exited the bathroom. Just outside the bathroom door, Mischka and Milo waited for her – and none too patiently, either. Her year-old Morkie puppies hopped up and down excitedly and repeatedly at the sight of her, making heartbreaking little yelps of need and

scratching her shins with their tiny little claws in the process. Claire shook her head in bemusement and bent down to give them their demanded doses of love before the poor things died of twin heart attacks brought on by unconscionable neglect. “Relax, guys,” she said sternly. “*Relax.*”

Mischka – a black-and-tan puff of fur who favored the Yorkshire Terrier

side of his heritage and who'd weighed in at just four measly pounds during his last checkup at the vet's office the previous week – waved a miniature paw in front of his face, almost as if to say, “Ah, go on.” For his part, though, Milo wasn't quite so bashful about giving and receiving affection. A good bit plumper than his adopted brother at a solid seven pounds and having almost pure-white fur that only accentuated his huge brown

puppy-dog eyes (which somehow possessed the uncanny ability to stare directly into Claire's *soul* whenever he was angling for a second treat), Milo tended more toward the Maltese side of his heritage. Friendly. Faithful. Loving.

And above all else: downright *needy*.

Milo rolled over onto his back

for a quick belly rub while Mischka continued to pretend that he didn't want any part of the embarrassing PDA going on. Claire gave them both quick rubs behind their ears before rising to her feet again. She didn't want to be late for work today. Bill Krugman would roast her on a spit. "OK, guys," she said, wagging her non-manicured right index finger at her dogs while they continued to wag their little tails happily back at

her in return. “You two characters be good today.”

Claire paused and lifted her eyebrows halfway up her smooth forehead, giving them a long, meaningful look to underscore the seriousness of her point. “If you two get into any of my stuff while I’m gone today, I’m putting you right on Craigslist just as soon as I get home, and that’s a promise. For

*free*. You guys have been chewing me right out of house and home lately.”

Both her Morkies cocked their heads quizzically to the right side at the same time, not seeming to understand Claire’s words and making her want to *scream* with the overwhelming cuteness of if all. It was just about enough to make her want to call in sick to work so that she could spend the whole day with them. Not an option, though. Nice as he

was most of the time, she highly doubted Bill Krugman would have understood.

With her pups following closely at her heels, Claire made her way quickly through her huge living room that featured thirty-foot-high ceilings and stepped out into the dimly lit hallway of her converted-warehouse digs before locking the heavy front door behind her. Mischka and Milo immediately began



scratching at the wood from the other side, wanting desperately to go with her, no matter what their destination might be. Claire heaved a heavy, heartfelt sigh of longing as she walked over to the creaky old elevator at the south end of the corridor and pulled up the flimsy metal gate before stepping inside the car and maneuvering a rusty lever over to the ground-floor position. The ancient gears cranked to life with a pained groan

before the car lurched once and she began the slow descent.

Making it all the way down to the ground floor a few moments later, Claire lifted the gate there and exited the car before passing through what passed for the lobby of her apartment complex. Finally stepping outside onto the busy street and directly into the bracing wind that was whipping in hard off the boiling

gray waters of Lake Erie a hundred yards away, she pulled her coat tighter around her slender body against the cold. Thankfully, her recently applied ponytail – painful as it might be – kept her hair firmly in place even in the powerful gale. Claire didn't care how her hair *looked*; she just didn't want it getting in her eyes, and she was willing to suffer a little bit of physical pain to ensure that. Nothing in this world more

aggravating than rogue hairs finding their way into the corners of your mouth while you were trying to speak to somebody. Nothing more *unprofessional*-looking. Fifty feet away, her beloved 2005 Nissan Sentra sat waiting for her beside the curb like a knight in shining and extremely *cost-conscious* armor.

Heading for it, Claire smiled at her modest vehicle, absolutely *loving*

the way it looked. While she'd been attending college at Harvard during her senior year, she'd been absolutely mortified to drive the brand-new Bentley that her father had bought for her as a twenty-first birthday present. For a week or so, anyway. Hans Wexler was a great father – always had been ever since Claire had been just a little baby – but he'd never understood his daughter's desire to live a more normal kind of

life. *“Why on earth wouldn’t you want to enjoy the life that your great-great-grandfather worked so hard to create for you?”* he’d asked. *“And why the heck would you want to be an FBI agent, of all things? Sounds like a pretty silly idea to me. A pretty dangerous one, too.”*

As she always did in those sorts of situations, Claire had simply rolled

her eyes at her father's befuddlement and had kissed him softly on his whiskered cheek before thanking him warmly for his generosity and proceeding to trade in the Bentley in favor of the Sentra at the first opportunity she got, refunding the substantial difference in price to him a few days later. *"Well, you know I'm silly, Daddy,"* she'd answered. *"Always have been."*

*"And dangerous, too"* he'd

added.

Claire had nodded at that. “*And dangerous, too,*” she’d agreed. What she *hadn’t* added was: “*You just don’t know how dangerous I can be.*” After all, she didn’t want the poor old guy losing any sleep at night wondering what in the world his sweet, innocent daughter might be up to when he wasn’t looking. Hans Wexler already suffered from



enough insomnia as things were.

Making it to her beloved vehicle a moment later while the wind continued to push back against her like an abusive boyfriend who hadn't quite finished discussing all of the gory particulars of their stormy relationship yet, Claire switched off the Sentra's security alarm with the keychain-control and slid behind the steering wheel. Pulling shut the driver's-side door behind her against

the chilly northeast Ohio weather that was turning her ears into icicles, she shook off the cold with a hard shiver and reached up to angle the rearview mirror toward herself, wanting to take just one last look at her appearance before she headed off to work.

Claire lifted her heavy black eyeglasses onto the top of her head and rubbed the pad of her right index finger

lightly across the small brown mouse that was sitting just underneath her left eye, wincing a little at the slight pain. As an amateur mixed martial arts practitioner who specialised in jiu-jitsu in her spare time while she wasn't busy chasing down killers and various other dregs of society during the course of her professional duties, Claire had caught a straight left hand from an opponent in a local event the previous month and the

bruise from the punch still hadn't gone completely away yet. And a good thing, too. Much like her modest Sentra, Claire *liked* how the bruise looked. *Loved* how it looked, actually: another layer of her own kind of armor against a shallow world that had always placed far too much value in insignificant, skin-deep appearances.

Claire      smiled      to      herself

remembering the punch, relishing the memory of the exquisite physical pain the left jab had caused. Although she'd lost her first two fights in fairly brutal fashion, the arm-bar in which she'd caught Misty Malvern during her last fight had brought on a quick tap-out from the other woman just thirty-four seconds into their bout, thus raising Claire's record to a respectable four wins and two losses now. Claire was no Ronda

Rousey, of course – not even close – but even if she wasn't the best female MMA fighter on the entire planet (as the otherworldly talented Ms. Rousey had already claimed that title quite forcefully with a few tendon-tearing arm-bars of her own) Claire could hold her own when the conditions were right. And the conditions had been *exactly* right during her last bout. She didn't know when

she'd be fighting again, but she hoped it wouldn't be too long. Much like being a special agent with the FBI, she found the thrill of participating in combat sports, well, downright *thrilling*.

Just then, Claire's iPhone sounded in her pocket, knocking her out of reverie just as efficiently as Sally Jansen's devastating right cross had knocked her out during her very first MMA fight, leaving Claire dazed,

bloody and lying face-down on the blood-splattered canvas, not even knowing what *year* it was. She shifted in her seat and dug out the phone before checking the name on the caller ID: *Bill Krugman*.

She slid the digital answer bar at the bottom of the phone over to the right and placed the device against her left ear. “Wexler here.”



“Agent Wexler,” Bill Krugman said, sounding just as impatient as he always did. “Where are you right now?”

Claire placed her key into the Sentra’s ignition and lifted her left wrist to check her watch. A no-name, silver-plated contraption that she’d picked up for thirty bucks at the local Sears. She wasn’t in the business of conducting

metallurgy tests, after all. She just needed to know what time it was every so often, and the inexpensive timepiece on her wrist did every bit as good a job in providing her with that information as a ridiculously pricey Rolex would have done. And Claire would know. She had *three* Rolexes stuffed into a desk drawer back at her parents' summer place in Maryland. "Just leaving my apartment now, sir," she said. "I'll be over there

in just about five minutes or so.”

Claire breathed out deeply in satisfaction with the relaying of this information. Not unlike foregoing make-up each day, living downtown had its benefits time-wise. The FBI field office on Lakeshore Avenue was conveniently located just a mile and a half away from where she lived.

“Good,” Krugman said, “because

I want to get this briefing over with just as soon as humanly possible and I want you to get to work on this case immediately afterward. We don't have a single second to spare here." The Director paused. Then he cleared an obstruction from his throat and said, "So, tell me something, Agent Wexler."

Claire frowned, not liking the sound of her boss's tone. Sounded downright *ominous*. "What's that, sir?"

Krugman exhaled heavily into the receiver on his end of the connection, tickling her left ear. “Are you ready for this, Claire? I mean, *really* ready for this? I know you’re fairly young and all, but this is a pretty big deal we’ve got going on here. The eyes of the entire world will be on you from the start. You should probably know that going in.”

Claire leaned forward in her seat and turned the key in the Sentra's ignition. The engine rumbled to life at once, purring like a contented tiger beneath the hood. And where was the great surprise in that? Much like watches, you didn't need to spend a hundred thousand dollars to secure reliable transportation, either. The Sentra was proof positive of that much.

“Yes, sir,” Claire said, slipping the vehicle into gear and pulling away from the curb before merging with the heavy morning traffic that was flowing down the busy street. “I’m ready for this. As a matter of fact, I was *born* ready for this.”

Claire paused and hit her blinker. Checking her side-view mirror on the passenger side of the Sentra, she changed lanes and depressed the

accelerator a little harder. Then, for good measure, she added, “And *you* should probably know that going in, too.”





## CHAPTER 28

Jack jerked awake with a panicked start the next morning, shocked right down to his very *soul* to find himself in his seedy motel room on the east side of Cleveland and feeling as though hundreds – if not *millions* – of cockroaches were crawling all over his tingling, bug-ridden skin.

Jack bolted upright in his bed and slapped frantically at his arms and

legs in a terrified effort to chase away all the non-existent insects swarming over his body, at the same time zipping his petrified gaze around the room. Gradually, he realized that he was safe. Not to mention *bug-free*. At least, safe for *now*.

He breathed out a deep sigh of relief that deflated his chest completely while he tried desperately to control the

hammering of his heart. Didn't work. Not even a little bit. The goddamn thing felt like it was about to explode inside his chest cavity like a ripe tomato that had been left for too long in a microwave oven turned up full-blast before splattering against the opaque viewing window in pulpy streaks of red.

*Jesus Christ.* He'd been dreaming that the FBI agents back in

Queens had caught him. That they'd plucked him out of the manhole opening before dragging him downtown and kicking the living shit out of him in some dimly lit back room at NYPD Headquarters, concentrating on hammering their hard fists viciously and repeatedly against his ribcage and back so as to not alert the press to the illegal beating they'd just administered before

gleefully parading their prize in front of the press during his perp walk while outraged members of the citizenry lined the streets, cursing his name and spitting directly into his face.

Upon having exited the second manhole back in Queens, however, Jack had been stunned – not to mention downright *grateful* – to find himself standing in another long alleyway. A pair of homeless drunks had been

snoring off their latest benders next to a dumpster there, but the smelly old sots hadn't even twitched at Jack's sudden appearance in the alley. Thank God for the little things. Added together, sometimes they amounted to the razor-thin margin between life and death. For both himself and others this time.

Leaving the cover off the manhole in order to save precious time,

he'd managed to make it down into the relative safety of the subway system ten minutes later, hearing the unwelcome and downright *soul-freezing* sounds of dozens of sirens wailing in the cold New York City air on just about every city block he'd crossed. From there, a hundred and ten bucks to the thoroughly disinterested clerk manning the disgustingly grimy booth at the Greyhound station ten miles away had



secured his safe passage back to Cleveland.

Jack had ridden all night with an obese Mexican woman resting her greasy head on his right shoulder and snoring loudly enough to drown out the sound of the bus's groaning engine; unable to fall asleep himself until he'd finally made it out of the state that he'd never be returning to again. Unable to

*relax.*

Jack closed his eyes in his filthy room at the Manor Inn now and breathed out deeply in gratitude again. Skill was certainly nice to have, but you could never underestimate the value of just plain *luck*. And he'd gotten *incredibly* lucky back in New York City; even he knew that much. He'd need to be a lot more careful from here on out, though, that much was for sure. Not take any

more stupid chances. But with Molly apparently enjoying her brand-new life with the Macklins these days – thoroughly unappreciative little brat that might make her now – he only needed to worry about himself going forward, which should make things infinitely easier on him from here on out. Still, Jack certainly didn't represent the *only* person who should be worried about

him now. Not by a long shot. Not on their fucking *lives*. They'd backed their hissing, spitting wildcat into a corner, true enough – temporarily, at least – but now they'd need to deal with the repercussions of that. The feds weren't the only ones who could scratch, claw and bite, after all. And that's something they'd just need to learn for themselves again the hard way very soon.

*Today, as a matter of fact.*

Jack glanced down at his left wrist and strained his eyes in an effort to read the face of his Timex watch in the darkened room. Wasn't easy. As a matter of fact, it was damn near impossible to tell what time it was now with the heavy blackout curtains across the room that were blocking out the bright morning sunlight streaming down from the cloudless blue skies above just

outside his ground-floor window.

Jack refocused his vision some more, until he felt as though his eyes might cross with the effort. Finally, he figured it out. *8:15 a.m.* A little later than he'd wanted to sleep, of course, but not too bad, all things considered. And exhausted or not – and he was *supremely* fucking exhausted at the moment, no denying that simple fact – it was time to get back to work. Time for

him to execute Act Three in his beautifully written script.

The final act before the *real* show began.

Rolling off the uncomfortable mattress with a loud groan, he opened the curtains to let some light into the room and padded quickly across the dirty carpet in his bare feet, feeling crumbs and various other bits of

nastiness sticking to the bottoms as he went.

Making his way over to the scarred wooden desk that was sitting in the far corner of his filthy room, he unzipped his machinegun's cushioned nylon case and extracted the sturdy weapon that he'd used to wreak havoc over at the movie theater in Rocky River just a few days prior, enjoying its heavy weight in his hands for a moment or two



before reloading the machinegun with a fresh magazine for use in today's mission. As always, Jack knew *exactly* what to do now. That recent horror-show back in Queens notwithstanding, meticulous planning meant that you were hardly ever caught unprepared. Act Three in his beautifully written script would begin with a little bit of breakfast. And a good thing, too,

because he felt hungry again.

*Famished.*

Jack pressed his thin lips together in anticipation of what would come next, relishing the feeling of the calm before the storm that settled over his body like a heavy funeral shroud. He laughed out loud as the iconic jingle that he'd heard hundreds of times on TV and the radio played in his mind. He just couldn't help himself. Once again, much

as had been the case back at the movie theatre in Rocky River, this shit was *funny* to him.

He sang the catchy jingle out loud to himself while he stood barefoot in the middle of his unsanitary room in an effort to gear himself up for the thoroughly exciting events of the day:

“Ta-da-ta-ta-ta, I’m *lovin’* it.”



## CHAPTER 29

A thousand dollars cash – all in untraceable twenties, of course – secured Jack's newest vehicle at the rear of the Manor Inn an hour later. And his fresh new ride was an absolute beauty, too – no two ways about it.

With his trusty machinegun tucked and zippered into its padded case and slung safely over his left shoulder, Jack didn't feel particularly intimidated

even by the ferocious-looking black man in his mid-thirties who handed him the keys.

Jack lifted his eyebrows at the man, not wanting to look like a complete nerd here and wanting to appear at least *somewhat* street-wise. Tough task to accomplish when you were a gangly teenager who hadn't even started shaving yet and who barely tipped the

scales at a hundred and thirty pounds soaking wet if you were lucky, though.

“You *sure* this thing isn’t hot?” Jack asked, knowing how dumb that sounded but also knowing that he needed to play the game here. People like this man standing in front of him weren’t like most other people in the world. They were more *vicious*, more *predatory*, smelled fear on others just as easily as a rabid dog that had just glimpsed a flash

of bright red blood at a child's pale-white throat before succumbing to the overwhelming instinct to attack. Still, no huge surprise there. That sort of brutal attack instinct had been *bred* into people like this man in much the way that aggression had always been bred into pit bull terriers. It was in their nature. In their *blood*.

The black man – easily six-two



or six-three and no doubt recently released from a long stretch in prison judging by the convicted-felon look about him – wore only scuffed and untied Uggs boots, dirty blue jeans with grimy black streaks smeared deep into the thighs and a plain white wife-beater tank top that did a fine job of showcasing the rippling, tatted-up muscles in his bulging upper arms despite the freezing-cold weather

outside. A member of the Crips street gang, according to what Jack could decipher from the elaborate ink. “If by hot you mean totally fucking awesome then, yeah, dude, it’s hot,” the black man said, screwing up his hard face and shaking his head impatiently. “As a matter of fact, Chrysler Sebrings are just about the hottest fucking cars on the market right now.” The man paused and

laughed harshly. ‘My own personal black market, ya feel me? Anyway, you got any more cash on you, dude? Need anything else? I’ve got crank, coke, weapons... anything you need. Just name it. And if I ain’t got it, I’ll get it for you. Come to think of it, you should probably get yourself a heater if you’re gonna be walkin’ around this neighbourhood wearing that white skin of yours. I can hook you up with that.’”

Jack shrugged, trying to ignore the incessant crying of a baby that was coming from one of the ground-floor rooms at the Manor Inn. The ear-splitting cacophony hadn't subsided the entire time he'd been outside and the kid sounded absolutely *famished*. Jesus fucking Christ. Somebody should just *feed* the poor thing already, if only to stop the ear-splitting noise.

Jack shook his head quickly to chase away the thought, not wanting to get his mind off track here. The baby's hunger wasn't any of his concern. Much as he didn't want anybody sticking their noses into *his* business, he wasn't going to stick his nose into anybody else's business, either. Made for a much smoother ride for everyone involved when you approached life that way.

Live and let live. Die and let die. No judgments. No recriminations. No *bullshit*. Everybody had their own reasons for doing the things they did, no matter how horrible some of those things might seem at times. Hell, Jack knew that better than practically anybody else in the entire world. In any event, just as he'd never be returning to New York City again after what had happened there yesterday with Molly, he'd never be

coming back to the Manor Inn following this purchase, either, so the current transaction taking place represented the only one that would be going down between the two. That being said, he certainly didn't want his *trading partner* to know that. Gauging by the greedy look glittering in the man's badly bloodshot brown eyes at the moment, it wasn't very difficult to see that he was

sizing Jack up for a quick strong-armed robbery *right now*.

Jack took in a deep, bracing breath through his nostrils and held it tight in his lungs as the first pangs of nervousness finally began to flutter through the core of his being despite the reassuring weight of the machinegun slung over his left shoulder. In an effort to forestall such an unwanted fate – if not completely avoid it altogether – he



said, “Yeah, man, I’ve got *a lot* more cash, but not on me right now. Are you still gonna be here later on tonight, though?”

The black man nodded. As he did so, Jack could practically *see* the gears in the man’s brain working. The man would eat a full meal later on tonight in lieu of a quick snack right now. Smart thinking on his part. After

all, you didn't take everything from your marks all at once. *Good* businessmen bled them a little bit at a time. "Yeah, dude," the black man said. "I'll be here later on tonight. The name's Lester, by the way. Pleased to meet you and all that shit. Anyway, I'm in Room 146. Just knock on the door and tell 'em you're the white boy who bought the car from me this morning. They'll let you in. What are you gonna need, exactly?"

Jack shrugged again. “I don’t know. Do you have any nine-millimeters for sale?”

Lester laughed again. Turning his head, he spat on the ground and wiped at his mouth with the back of his left hand before turning back to Jack. “Yeah, dude. I got like three of them. Nice shit, too. Serial numbers filed off and everything. Completely

untraceable.”

Jack paused, wanting to sound as authentic as he possibly could. “Got any LSD?”

Lester lifted his thick eyebrows halfway up his forehead and laughed again. The contempt in his voice was audible this time, lurking just beneath the surface of his menacing tone. “Hell, yeah, I got LSD. I got a whole fuckin’ *sheet* of it, my man. Woodstocks.

Super-trippy shit.”

“How much do you want for everything?”

Lester paused while he turned the query over in his mind. “Tell you what,” he said. “I’ll make you a deal here. Three-fifty for the nine if you only want one of them and thirty bucks a hit for the acid. It’s a good deal, dude. You’re not going to beat those prices

anywhere.”

Jack pursed his lips. He didn't do drugs – never had – but even *he* knew that those prices were a complete and total rip-off. He didn't mention this knowledge to *Lester*, though, of course. No doubt the man would have beat the living shit out of him right then and there if he had. Besides, it was never a good idea to tangle with somebody whom obviously had nothing left to lose.

Somebody who'd probably never even *had* anything to start off with in the first place. "Sounds like a deal to me," Jack said, wanting to get this conversation over with already so that he could finally get back to work. "So I'll come to Room 146 at around eight-thirty tonight, OK?"

Lester tucked the wad of cash Jack had just given him into the front

pocket of his filthy jeans and stretched his muscular neck, clearly pleased with himself for having gotten over so easily on the dorky white boy. “You do that, my man,” he said. “Anyway, see you then.”

When Lester had finally gone – presumably to go pimp-slap a ho or something equally chivalrous – Jack slid behind the wheel of the Sebring he’d just bought and cranked the engine into life



on the first try. Adrenalin coursed hot through his veins as he put the car in gear and pulled out of the parking lot of the Manor Inn, never to return again. Just then, his soul's stomach grumbled loudly, practically *audible* to his own ears. Pressing down gently on the accelerator with his right foot, he smiled as another iconic jingle from the famous restaurant he'd be visiting now played in

his mind; slightly modified to meet his present needs, of course:

*Murder: it's what I do.*



## CHAPTER 30

Half an hour later, Jack pulled the recently purchased Sebring into the crowded parking lot of the McDonald's on Rockaway Street in Strongsville, more ready than ever to finally get back down to the bloody business at hand.

In the driver's seat of the car, he felt his chest swell with immense pride at the intensely satisfying memory of killing his father despite the melancholy

that came along with the recollection of his poor mother's horrific death at the hands of the Chessboard Killers. Though it had been just his first-ever kill, Jack had managed to pull off the grisly deed while Don Yuntz's twenty-two-year-old girlfriend had snored off her latest hangover fewer than twenty feet away, lying on her stomach on a sheetless bed and wearing only brief

white panties that framed her supple posterior beautifully, a tantalizing mound of exposed boob flesh peeking out teasingly from beneath her shapely body on her left side. Hot as she'd been, though, the stupid bitch had been completely *oblivious* to the events going on around her the entire time that Jack had been murdering his father in cold blood. Hadn't even *twitched*, as a matter of fact, not even when Jack had

ruthlessly plucked out his old man's spongy left eyeball from the unrepentant asshole's hopelessly thick skull with the same sharp pair of scissors that he'd later use to kill Special Agent Jeremy Brown in the Presidential Suite of the Fontainebleau Hotel in downtown Manhattan.

Jack breathed out deeply in contentment now, relishing the exquisite

memory. Not a bad way to start off a career as a killer by anyone's estimation. Still, he just hoped that his run of good luck would hold out a little bit longer. At least for the next ten minutes or so. Long enough for him to finish off the stunning thing he'd come here to do today.

Exiting the Sebring and reaching back inside for his machinegun, he slung the strap of its case over his left



shoulder and left the car running in order to expedite his impending getaway. The highway was fewer than a hundred yards away and visible from where he was standing in the parking lot, and this particular restaurant had been chosen for *precisely* that reason. From all appearances, everything was positioned properly on the makeshift chessboard laid out in front of him now. Everything

was a go. All the pawns had been lined up in a neat little row, just awaiting capture by the most important and powerful piece on the board. The most *deadly* piece on the board.

Once again, this was the *fun* part of the job.

Jack paused and stretched his aching neck in an effort to loosen up the badly knotted muscles there before he proceeded with the next step, wanting to

make one hundred percent sure that he was thinking clearly here. Even tucked away into its case, the machinegun might draw unwanted attention to his person, but with any luck at all the people who saw it would only think he was carrying a guitar. Jack smirked despite the clear and present enormity of his situation. Yeah, right: a real music lover; that was him, all right. Still, even on the unlikely

possibility that someone identified his cargo as the brutal weapon off mass murder it had become over at the movie theater a few days prior, by that point it would already be far too late for any no-good do-gooders out there hell-bent upon collecting the one-hundred-thousand-dollar reward that the FBI had so recently offered for Jack's *own* capture to do anything about it. Far too late for them to *stop* him.

Rolling his stiff shoulders forward one last time to release the remaining tension coiled up in his muscles, Jack made his way quickly across the parking lot with a stiff westerly wind whipping the tails of his long black trench coat wildly around his legs. His heartbeat thumped away painfully inside his chest as he pulled open the glass door to the restaurant

nearest to his vehicle and stepped inside the busy space before quickly scanning the interior with a discerning eye. From what he could see from where he was standing, at least twenty other people were inside. Some were eating at tables, laughing and enjoying each other's company. Others were emptying their finished trays into trash receptacles. Still *others* were lined up at the counter, waiting patiently to

deliver their breakfast orders to the six or seven paper-hatted workers stationed behind it. Judging by the brown skin everywhere he looked, all Mexicans: the most prevalent form of illegal immigrant in Ohio. Jack suppressed another smile. Again, he just couldn't help himself. Breakfast burritos all around.

Still trying to remain as inconspicuous as he possibly could with

a goddamn *machinegun* slung over his shoulder, Jack studied his fellow diners closely, taking in every last detail in sight. Thankfully, there didn't seem to be any children inside the place. No *ninos*. None that he could see, anyway. Weird for McDonald's, but another unexpected stroke of good fortune.

Jack pressed his thin lips tightly together as an uncharacteristic wave of regret suddenly washed over him,



dragging his heart all the way down into the pit of his stomach. Even with his cold and hardened outlook on the sanctity of life these days, he *still* felt bad for the four kids who'd died at the movie theater. The four kids *he'd* killed. And why *shouldn't* he feel bad? It hadn't been his intention to *hurt* them, after all, even while he'd been methodically spraying the screaming

crowd with gunfire and watching their heads explode like firecrackers on their shoulders. As a matter of fact, Jack had jerked the machinegun up toward the ceiling several times when he'd managed to make out a child's terrified face in all the madness.

Jack sighed heavily, deflating his thin chest. Like it or not, he supposed that was just the way war worked sometimes. Sometimes – no matter how

hard you tried to avoid it – collateral damage just couldn't be helped. A sad fact of life, perhaps, but a simple enough one to understand nonetheless.

Jack shook away the troubling thought and took in one last deep breath that puffed out his narrow chest against his trench coat, finally ready to get back down to the business at hand now that he'd paid his small mental penance for

having killed the children in the movie theater. Slipping the strap of his machinegun case off his left shoulder, he laid the case across the top of the garbage receptacle right next to the door he'd just entered before unzipping the case and extracting his weapon from inside.

All the feelings of remorse that had been weighing down his mind just a moment earlier completely gone now; he

lifted the machinegun chest-high and started firing again.

A moment later, he froze in place when a shockingly cold blast of air abruptly hit him in the back of his neck, chilling his brain into utter *uselessness* and causing him to pause in his very important work. Acrid bile flooded into his mouth, making it taste like he'd just swallowed a very tall glass of rat

poison. He couldn't *believe* his rotten luck.

Despite all the shooting that had been going on, *some idiot had just opened the door behind him.*



## CHAPTER 31

*Briefing* wasn't the word to use for it, Claire thought. Not even remotely. Nothing *brief* about it in any way, shape, fashion or form. At least, not in this instance.

She and Bill Krugman were seated at a large rectangular conference table in a back meeting room at the downtown FBI field office on Lakeshore Avenue with several stacks of files piled



up high between them. Claire and the Director were now an hour and a half into the rundown of all the gory details concerning the horrific mass shooting that had taken place at the movie theater over in Rocky River a few days prior – the same horrific mass shooting that had claimed the lives of nearly fifty innocent people so far, including four beautiful children who'd barely even begun *living*

their lives yet.

Claire stifled an impatient sigh, feeling like she had ants in her pants right now. She wanted to get out of her seat and get to *work* already, not sit around rehashing stuff with Krugman that she already knew like the back of her hand. Wanted to get on a plane out to the bustling and mean streets of New York City, where agents stationed there had reported a near-miss of Yuntz the

previous day outside his little sister's school.

Claire tried her best to remain stationary but it wasn't easy. Hell, she'd been squirming like a worm on a hook ever since the *beginning* of this briefing. A good twenty minutes of it had been spent going over the paintball-shooting at St Anthony's grade school in Lorain and the subsequent cold-blooded

murder of Special Agent Meghan Shaughnessy a few days later. And they'd started things off by examining the genesis of Jack Yuntz's brief-but-all-too-chilling career as a killer, beginning with when he'd mercilessly shoved a sharp pair of scissors deep into the exposed throat of Jeremy Brown in the Presidential Suite of the Fontainebleau Hotel in downtown Manhattan the previous year, collapsing the poor man's

windpipe on itself and causing him to choke to death on his own blood.

Claire shook her head in disgust as all the particulars from that infuriating case flashed through her mind again. She gritted her teeth so forcefully that she was afraid she might chip one of her expensive porcelain veneers. From all reports, this Yuntz kid was a real piece of work.

A real piece of *garbage*.

Claire balled up her fists at her sides and dug her fingernails deep into her palms, relishing the pain.

Thankfully, though, she was just the sort of person who knew *exactly* how to take care of garbage. You simply took it out.

No fuss, no muss, no room for negotiation. Once you got over all the moral implications involved (some of

those moral implications *specious*, at best), it wasn't difficult to see that it was the *only* way to deal with garbage, whether it came in its human form or otherwise. At least, it wasn't all that difficult for *Claire* to see. Frustrating as it might be for her, though, sometimes she felt like the rest of the world still remained blind to that simple fact. Probably the main reason why so many repeat offenders were out there on the

streets raping and killing innocents with an unassailable sense of impunity *right now*.

Knowing that she was taking a chance with the movement, Claire snuck a quick glance down at her watch beneath the table despite Krugman's proximity, hoping the Director wouldn't notice. Make that running clock on the briefing an hour and *thirty-five* minutes



now.

And counting.

“Got someplace else you need to be, Agent Wexler?”

Claire snapped her attention back up to the Director and shifted in her chair uncomfortably, immediately feeling stupid. And why *shouldn't* she feel stupid? Krugman had just caught her red-handed, no two ways about it. From where he was sitting, she might as

well have told him to hurry the fuck up already. “No, sir,” she said, shaking her head in a weak attempt to reassure her boss that she was still there in the room with him. She plucked an invisible piece of lint off the sleeve of her gray blazer and lifted her eyes to him again, held his stare. “Right here is the only place I need to be, sir. The only place I *want* to be.” A slight lie, perhaps, but

one Claire felt like she needed to tell right now. After all, even if she didn't need any of the *money* from her profession thanks to the safety net provided by her family's pretzel company, the *other* perks of her job were pretty much irreplaceable. And she knew that annoying Krugman wasn't the best way to continue enjoying those perks. Quite the opposite, as a matter of fact. Another fairly simple equation for

her to figure out.

“Good,” the Director said. “So let’s get back to it.”

Claire nodded, studying Krugman’s face as he reached out to pluck yet *another* file off the table in front of him. She frowned at what she saw. Deep grooves were carved into Krugman’s countenance, and not just from his age, either. *Exhaustion* was

clearly visible there, too. She wondered briefly why he didn't just retire already and leave all the heavy lifting to the younger people like her, people who were better equipped to handle the heavy load. Would've been a hell of a lot easier on him at his age; that much was for sure. Still, she supposed that the Director had his reasons for continuing his career, just like she had *her* reasons for continuing her career. But Claire

also knew for a fact that Krugman's reasons weren't anything like hers. Not even close. Pity, really, because they probably could've had a pretty good talk about it over a pair of smoking Glocks in a back alley somewhere while they stood over the lifeless bodies of the bad guys at their feet.

Claire waited as patiently as she could for the Director to proceed while

Krugman flipped through his newest file for several moments, apparently in no great rush to get on with things. If nothing else, though, the Director's good humor that had been present at the start of this briefing had run its course now. No more light-hearted jokes coming from his side of the table along the lines of "I like what you're doing with your hair these days, Claire" or "Nice glasses, Agent Wexler. If I'm not

mistaken, however, your jacket on file down at Quantico says that you have twenty-twenty vision. What gives?"

Now that Krugman had really gotten his teeth into the meat of this case, he was all business. *Had* been all business ever since he'd informed her that the highly anticipated task force they'd been waiting on would be ready to go by the following day at the very latest, if not



even sooner than that. Not what Claire had wanted to hear, of course – having always preferred to do her special sort of work alone – but no great surprise to her, either. This was the FBI, after all. Most agents played things by the book. And Krugman *definitely* played things by the book.

Krugman finally cleared his throat forcefully and looked back up at her. He seemed just about to say

something when he suddenly frowned and reached into the inside pocket of his blue suit jacket to extract his beeper. He studied it closely and deepened his frown. From her position across the table, Claire watched the Director's face drain completely of blood while she felt in her jacket pocket for her *own* beeper before suddenly realizing that she'd left it sitting on her coffee table back home.

No doubt Mischka and Milo had chewed it into unusable shreds by now. The destructive little rascals. Another expense added to their running total; maybe ten grand now. However tempting the thought might be at times, though, Craigslist wasn't an option for her pups, no matter what she'd threatened the with earlier. She *loved* Mischka and Milo. And why the hell *wouldn't* she love them? They were so

much *better* than almost every human being she'd ever come across in her entire life. "What is it, sir?" Claire asked, deepening her own frown now. "Is everything OK?"

The Director glanced back up at her with a haunted look flashing in his tired brown eyes, and Claire could practically *see* him age another ten years right in front of her face. "No, Agent

Wexler,” he said, his deep and usually steady voice wavering slightly. “Everything’s *not* OK.” Krugman paused and let out a deep breath that deflated his chest completely, looking thoroughly defeated now. *And old.* “As a matter of fact, I can’t possibly imagine how things could be any more fucked up than they are right now.”

Claire grimaced and felt her blood begin to pump hot through her

veins. Sounded *exciting*. “That bad, huh?” she asked.

Krugman shook his head sadly and closed his eyes. Blowing out another slow breath that fluttered his lips, he said, “No, Agent Wexler. It’s even *worse* than that.”



## CHAPTER 32

Amped-up ticker thumping away madly inside her badly constricted chest, Claire drove ninety-five miles an hour the entire way with her magnetic siren slapped to the roof of her car, its shrill and screaming voice telling everyone in her general vicinity to *get the fuck out of her way* while her beloved Sentra did every bit as good a job as the fancy-schmancy Bentley would have done.



Probably better.

Even after factoring in a couple of heart-stopping near-misses along the way where she'd needed to swerve wildly onto the shoulder of the highway in order to avoid bone-jarring contact with her fellow motorists – hearing the crunch of sliding gravel beneath her crazily spinning tires as she'd done so, the Sentra fishtailing out of control

before she'd finally managed to right the vehicle again and make it back onto the highway – it took Claire just eighteen minutes door-to-door from the FBI field office downtown to the McDonald's over in Strongsville, scene of Jack Yuntz's latest mass-shooting.

Claire gritted her teeth in anger as she pulled the Sentra all the way up to the yellow police tape strung around the perimeter of the parking lot. Jamming

the car into park mode, she left the keys dangling from the ignition before exiting her vehicle without bothering to shut the driver's-side door behind her. She flashed her ID at a uniform who was standing outside the DO NOT CROSS line and checking IDs like a bouncer outside a nightclub. The man studied it briefly before obediently lifting up the tape for her to duck under.

Claire scrunched up her face as she went. She could practically *feel* the man's eyes on her ass as she marched purposefully across the parking lot with a stiff westerly wind pushing back at her chest. She sighed heavily as the unsubtle stare warmed up her rear-end. Men: they were all the same, no matter what the circumstances. Horrific mass shooting or not, there was always time to

sneak a quick peek at a woman's backside, wasn't there? Of course there was. A cheap thrill just *waiting* to be taken. And the sad truth of the matter was that Claire had grown quite accustomed to it by this point in her life. Was *used* to it by now. It had been the same old, incredibly *boring* story ever since she'd turned thirteen years old and her T-shirts had stopped laying flat against her chest.

Reaching the restaurant a moment later, Claire pulled open the glass door on the side entrance and stepped inside before scanning the interior quickly with a well-practiced eye. Three distinct areas of blood that she could see from the entranceway where she was standing. The first splash of blood had streaked a window on the northeast corner of the restaurant. Another had

splashed up against the façade of the counter twenty feet away. The third measure of blood had splattered across the smiling face of a four-foot-tall Ronald McDonald statue that was standing guard next to a plastic-encased display of the *Wreck-It Ralph* toys available in this month's Happy Meals.

Claire stretched her neck until she felt the compressed vertebrae there pop in a long string. Despite the visual

rape to which she'd just been subjected, it felt *great* to finally get back to work again. *Amazing*, actually. Not as much blood as she would have expected to find in a mass-shooting incident, though. Not even close. *Odd*. Finding an important-looking local, she flashed her ID again before pulling the woman into a short hallway where the bathrooms were located. "How many dead?" Claire



asked.

The local – a silver-haired gal in her mid-forties with two wide gold stripes on her navy-blue shirtsleeves that identified her rank as a lieutenant – pressed her wind-burned lips together.

“None that I know of, ma’am.”

Claire lifted her eyebrows in surprise. More like in total *shock*, actually. She could hardly believe her ears. “*None?*” she asked incredulously.

“What the hell do you mean *none*?”

Krugman hadn't given her an exact body count back at the field office, but she'd expected the number of casualties to be in the *dozens*, at the very least. After all, machineguns did a whole hell of a lot of work in a very short space of time. Efficient killing machines if efficient killing machines had ever been created.

The other woman shook her head and shrugged, holding up her delicate hands chest-high. “None, ma’am,” she repeated. “No deaths here today. Apparently the shooter was interrupted before he could get off too many shots. Thank God for the little things, huh?”

Claire narrowed her bright green eyes suspiciously and looked around the restaurant again. Didn’t make any

sense. This had to have been like shooting fish in a barrel for Jack Yuntz, assuming that it had been *him* again – which, of course, she did. Keeping an open mind about things was all well and good – the mark of a good investigator and all that shit – but you didn't need to be a member of Mensa to figure out the identity of the shooter. Hell, you didn't even need to be a member of the *Mickey Mouse Club*, for Christ's sake. Besides,

Claire *was* a Mensa member – not that the silly and completely meaningless recognition had ever done her any good in her life. Her parents had *forced* her to take the stupid test over her loud teenaged objections when she'd been sixteen years old, and the plain truth of the matter was that it hadn't been very difficult for her to place in the top two percent of the world's population

intelligence-wise. Hell, not even taking into consideration the unfair cultural bias so prevalent in standardized testing, a never-ending string of private tutors and Claire's attendance at Hathaway Brown – the most prestigious all-girls elementary school in Ohio – had made good and goddamn *sure* that she'd succeed both on the test and in life. It had been a can't-miss proposition for her ever since the very beginning. And

it hadn't been very tough for her to ace a test when she'd already known most of the questions beforehand. Pretty hard to fail at life, too, when your family had in excess of a hundred million dollars sitting in their bank accounts to ensure the opposite of that. As always, playing with house money meant that you never *really* lost at anything. Another unfair aspect of life, Claire knew, even if she'd

taken advantage of it herself. “How many injured?” she asked, getting her mind back onto the right track. No time to go strolling down memory lane here. She had much more *important* things to do at the moment. Like catching a cold-blooded killer, for one. What she’d do *after* she caught him still remained to be seen at that point. At least by others.

The local held up a trio of slender fingers in response to Claire’s



question. “Just three injured, ma’am,” she said. “One guy got hit in the lower leg over near the counter, a woman was hit in her right ear while she was sitting in a booth near the window on the northeast side of the restaurant and the third victim was struck in his shoulder over by the Happy Meal display. EMTs said that none of the wounds appeared to be life-threatening, though. Victims

were all taken to the Cleveland Clinic.’\”

Claire breathed out a grateful sigh of relief, feeling her heartbeat finally begin to slow a bit in her chest. They’d gotten lucky this time; she knew that. *Incredibly* lucky. Chalk one up for the good guys. Still, there’d be more shootings after this one. *A lot* more shootings. She knew that, too. Maniacs like Jack Yuntz *never* stopped until

they'd been caught. And now Claire was ultimately in charge of catching him. Good. Game on, asshole. "Who interrupted the shooter?" she asked.

The female cop jerked her head over to a middle-aged Hispanic man who was sitting in one of the booths that had managed to stay blood-free during the shooting fifteen feet away and talking to another local uniform. "That guy," the

woman said.

Claire thanked the woman, then made her way immediately over to the booth. She flashed her ID a third time at the local seated there, prompting the man to nod and slide out. Claire slid into his place after him and got straight down to business. Now that she'd finally made it onto the track, she wanted to *sprint*. Chases usually ended a whole hell of a lot faster when you did things that way.

“My name’s Agent Claire Wexler,” she said to the Hispanic man on the other side of the table. “What happened here today? How did you interrupt the shooter?”

Wearing a loose-fitting tan shirt and a faded brown fisherman’s cap that had a shiny silver hook tucked snugly into the wide band, the heavily mustachioed man in front of her

furrowed his thick eyebrows in confusion. “*No comprende,*” he said.

Claire closed her eyes in frustration and breathed out slowly through her nostrils, trying her best to control her overwhelming irritation. Wasn't easy. Pretty hard to sprint when you could barely even *walk*, for fuck's sake. For the millionth time in her life, she wished to God that she'd paid closer attention in her Spanish classes. For all

her many academic achievements over the years – and there'd been *plenty* of plaques and certificates testifying to her supposed “genius” – learning another language hadn't been among them. More room for personal improvement, she supposed. That being said, she still hadn't jumped out of an airplane or scaled the sheer face of Mount Everest, either. Still, only one of those

accomplishments would have helped her right now.

She shouted out the question without bothering to open her eyes again. “Who here speaks Spanish?”

A light touch on her left shoulder five seconds later prompted Claire to open her eyes again. The same local who she’d displaced a moment earlier stood next to the booth. “I do, ma’am,” he said.



Claire nodded. “Great. Could you please translate for me here?”

“Of course, ma’am. What do you want me to ask him?”

Claire shifted in her seat. “For starters, ask him how the hell he managed to interrupt the shooter.”

The local turned toward the Hispanic man and passed along Claire’s question in the foreign tongue that she

could barely even follow, rolling his *Rs* expertly on the tip of his tongue in a way that she'd never managed to do, even just for fun. Getting his answer in another rapid-fire rolling of *Rs* a moment later, the uniform turned back to Claire. "He says that he was just coming in to order some breakfast, didn't *mean* to interrupt the guy, it just happened that way. The shooter fled when Mr. Ramirez opened the door. Mr.

Ramirez was listening to his iPod at the time, didn't hear the shooting, otherwise he says that he wouldn't have even come in at all."

Claire nodded again and filed away the information mentally before providing the local with the next question for translation. "What did the shooter look like?" she asked. Though she already knew the answer to that

query, Claire also knew for a fact that Bill Krugman would yank her ass off this case fast enough to make her goddamn head spin right off her shoulders if she failed do things by the book here. Like most of Claire's other colleagues in the Bureau, the Director was a *stickler* for the rules, always had been ever since the very beginning, according to all reports. No great surprise there, though. The entire FBI was his baby, after all. Made

sense that he would want to protect it.

More *R*-rolling came from the local, followed a moment later by more *R*-rolling from the witness who was playing the part of the happenstance hero today. The uniform nodded to the other man before turning back to Claire again. “He says that it was a tall guy. Skinny. Young. A teenager, maybe. Wearing a trench coat.”

Claire pressed her lips together and felt a hot jolt of adrenalin flood through her veins. Jack Yuntz, all right, no two ways about it. To a *T*. Leaning forward, she reached out across the table and touched the witness's knobby and gnarled left hand with her fingertips. “*Gracias*, Mr. Ramirez,” she said.

Ramirez nodded and gave her a

small smile. “*De nada, seniorita.*”

Claire smiled back at the man and felt an unexpected wave of warmth wash through her body. She just couldn't help herself. Despite any lack of vanity she might have, she appreciated the witness's classification of her person. Fluent in the language or not, even she knew that *seniorita* meant that she still looked pretty young to the guy. Nice to hear. After all, even *she*

wasn't completely immune to compliments – especially when they were coming from a guy who wasn't desperately trying to get into her pants at the moment. Welcome change of pace, if nothing else.

Sliding out of the booth, Claire looked on for the next few minutes as several crime-scene techs processed the scene. Breathing in excitedly through



her mouth, she heard a faint ringing sound echoing in her ears, knowing *exactly* what Jack Yuntz had been thinking when he'd selected this location for his latest despicable act of terror. When other kids her age had been reading *Goosebumps* to get their heebie-jeebie thrills, Claire had used her spare time to devour true-crime books. Hell, she felt like she practically knew Ann Rule personally after all the time the two

of them had spent together over the years. And combined with the way that Jack Yuntz had played out a Columbine-like scene at the grade school in Lorain and the way he'd recreated the events in Aurora, Colorado at the movie theater in Rocky River, from all appearances he'd been attempting to recreate the horrific mass-shooting executed by James Oliver Huberty at a San Ysidro, California

McDonald's in 1984, a grisly massacre that had killed twenty-one people – including five children – and injured nineteen others. Thankfully, though, Yuntz hadn't managed to duplicate that feat here today. Not even close. And Claire figured that had probably rattled the sadistic little punk. And why not? Up to this point in the game, the murdering bastard had been living a very charmed life, indeed. He'd gotten away

scot-free thus far with both of his two previous shootings, and he'd narrowly escaped capture out in New York City just the previous day. But even Yuntz had to know that the wheels were coming off now. That this trip would ultimately culminate with him crashing into a concrete wall at a hundred and twenty miles an hour, smashing his worthless skull in a dozen places like a

shattered eggshell in the process.

But where the hell would the arrogant little jerk strike *next*?

Claire stretched her neck again; mentally preparing herself for the next series of moves that would take place in this high-stakes game of cat-and-mouse.

*OK, you little shit,* she thought.

*You want to play games with me? Fine, then let's play some fucking games.*

*You might not know it yet, but this is*

*something you're going to learn the hard way very soon: you're not dealing with Dana Whitestone and more – some namby-pamby chick who can't handle the pressure and who needs to go running off to heaven in order to escape all the hurtful things that you do to her and others.*

*Not. Even. Close.*



## CHAPTER 33

After having gathered all of his weapons from the storage facility where he'd kept them for the past month just half an hour earlier, Jack now stood on the jagged rocks at Lakewood Park on the west side of Cleveland.

He stared out at the boiling waters of Lake Erie that were crashing into the shore at his feet and attempted to collect his fractured thoughts in much the



same way he'd recently collected his guns while a cold, misting spray sprinkled lightly across his cheeks.

Jack took a deep breath through his nostrils that chilled his lungs and resisted the sudden urge to shiver against the cold wind that was whipping in hard off the lake and fluttering his trench coat wildly around his body with an audible *whap-whap-whap*.

He sighed heavily, producing wispy puffs of gray vapor from his mouth and nostrils with the forceful exhalation. Following the hopelessly botched shooting over at the Strongsville McDonald's – a shooting where he'd been interrupted in his very important work by some oblivious wetback who'd been blasting brain-bending salsa music into the earbuds of his first-generation

iPod and not paying any attention *at all* to the historic events taking place around him – Jack had fled the scene in the Sebring before finally making it to the relative safety of a Greyhound bus station parking lot over in Parma. Sliding into an open space there, he'd jammed the car into park mode and had seethed in pure *frustration*, gritting his teeth hard in his mouth until they'd nearly crumbled into bits of chalk.

It had taken him several long minutes before he'd finally managed to calm down enough to figure out how he could *begin* cleaning up the enormous mess he'd just made. Wouldn't be easy, that much was for sure. Still, he'd made it much too far along in his long journey to just turn back now. Much as had been the case in the dark sewer back in Queens, he at least needed to *try*.

Gathering himself mentally, he'd left the keys to the Sebring dangling from the ignition before going into the bus station and purchasing a ticket to New York City. Paying in cash, he'd then dug out his iPhone from his pocket and caught a wi-fi connection in the bus station before navigating the phone's Web browser over to Google, typing into the search bar what he'd wanted to

know. And then he'd waited. And then he'd waited some more. And then he'd waited even *more*.

With the iPhone struggling to work with the weak Internet connection at the Greyhound station, it had taken nearly a full minute before the link to a recently published *Plain Dealer* newspaper article had finally popped up. Jack had read through the text just as quickly as he could possibly could while

the first details of his *new* plan had begun to form slowly in the back of his mind, tickling his brain lightly with all the enormous promise it held:

## FBI LEADING TASK FORCE TO FIND TEEN KILLER

By Justin Williams

*Plain Dealer staff reporter*

CLEVELAND – FBI Director William

Krugman on

Wednesday said that he's finally put the finishing touches on a task force assembled to track down Jack Yuntz, the young killer suspected of several recent mass shootings in the northeast Ohio-area.

“Special Agent Claire Wexler will be heading things up from our end,” said Krugman, who's led the FBI since 1979. “Though young, she's



experienced beyond her years and I have complete and total faith in her. Agent Wexler is more than capable of doing this job; I feel entirely confident in that fact. If she *weren't* capable, I wouldn't put her in this demanding position in the first place. The people of Cleveland can also rest assured that I will personally monitor each and every aspect of this troubling case from start to finish. I

won't be returning to Washington, DC until Jack Yuntz is finally caught and locked safely away behind prison bars. That's my direct order from the President."

Jack had stopped reading for several long moments at that point in the article, attempting to arrange all the many disorganized puzzle pieces that were floating around inside his mind

into a complete picture of what he should do next. Bill Krugman would play a major part in it, of course. No other option for the old fart now. If Krugman had known what was good for him, he would've kept Jack's name out of his mouth entirely. Too late for that now, though, obviously. Now the Director would need to *pay* for his bold-faced arrogance.

Jack fought back a hot surge of anger in his chest that warmed up his blood briefly against the inclement weather that was freezing him solid to the jagged rocks. He'd kept a *very* careful eye on the venerable Director ever since the Chessboard Killer slayings in Manhattan the previous year, once even getting close enough to glance over the old man's shoulder while

Krugman had sat alone in a downtown New York City coffee shop fiddling with his phone. What Jack had seen on the small screen in Krugman's hands had nearly stopped his heart dead in his chest. From all appearances, it seemed that Jack hadn't been the *only* one hiding secrets in his closet. Not even close. Even the head of the FBI had a few skeletons of his own tucked safely away out of the prying sight of the general

public. Good for Krugman – it only made him that much more interesting – but how best for Jack to exploit those skeletons *now*? How best for him to make those old bones rattle and dance and do *his* bidding?

And that was when the last piece of the puzzle finally snapped into place in his mind.

Taking another deep breath

through his nostrils, Jack finally allowed himself to shiver, feeling frozen all the way down to his bone marrow now. But he didn't shiver against the cold. Not even close. Why would he? The cold couldn't *touch* him now. Nothing in this *world* could touch him now. Instead, he shivered in delicious anticipation of what would come next. It was so goddamn simple that he needed to resist the powerful urge to smack his palm

forcefully against his forehead as punishment for his own unforgivable stupidity. *Why the hell hadn't he thought of it earlier?* he wondered. Odd as it might sound, though, it seemed that Dana Whitestone *wasn't* dead, after all. She was still alive and kicking and out there on the streets trying to track him down *right now*.

Though she'd tried her very best



to escape his wrath with her recent and incredibly cowardly suicide, her part in this deadly little game hadn't ended when she'd killed herself the previous week. Hell, Jack had practically *watched* the woman come back to life in the words of the newspaper article he'd read at the bus station. She had a different name now, true; looked a little bit different now, too. But it was *her*: Jack had absolutely zero in his mind

about that. And judging by the picture of her that he'd seen next to the *Plain Dealer* article, she was a whole lot *hotter* these days, too – not that Agent Whitestone had ever been all that hard to look at in her original form. Still, she was even *hotter* in her new form now. *Smoking* hot, as a matter of fact.

Jack allowed himself a small smile while his heart began to sing a

song of pure and utter *joy* deep inside his chest. Unbelievably, against all odds, Dana Whitestone would still die by his hand. Or at least by the hand of the *character* he'd be playing from here on out.

All five of his senses tingling in electric anticipation now, he leaned down and removed all his weapons from their cases. One by one, he hurled his weapons out into the choppy lake just as

far as he could possibly fling them, hurting his shoulder badly with the effort and afraid that he might tear a tendon or two in the process. Still, even that sort of excruciating physical pain would've been worth it. Because after all this time of thinking that he'd missed out on his chance to kill Dana Whitestone, Jack finally realized that he'd been wrong about that. *Dead* wrong, actually.

He whispered the name softly to himself, enjoying the way the beautiful words tasted on his lips. “*Claire Wexler.*”



# PART VIII

“If one took no chances, one would not fly at all. Safety lies in the judgment of the chances one takes.” — Charles Lindbergh, world-famous aviation pioneer whose infant son was kidnapped from his crib in the dead of night and brutally murdered in 1932. When investigators dug up the baby’s badly decomposed body two months after the abduction, a massive skull fracture was

cited as the primary cause of death.





# CHAPTER 34

*Thursday; 5 a.m.; FBI field office; Lakeshore Avenue; downtown Cleveland*

Bruce Blankenship sat at his desk long before any of his colleagues had even made it into work yet, yawning loudly and feeling absolutely *exhausted* all the way down to his tired old bones.

He tapped into his email and leaned forward in his seat, narrowed his eyes, staring in disbelief at the computer

screen in front of him. The bold subject line at the top of his inbox had immediately caught his attention – had *demand*ed his attention, actually – completely chasing away all the exhaustion he'd been feeling just a moment earlier:

**AVOID THE PLANE CRASH,  
AGENT BLANKENSHIP**

Blankenship leaned forward in his seat even closer to the computer screen and zipped his confused gaze over the odd words, feeling the muscles in his throat constrict painfully. He clicked on the link to open up the email. What he read inside made him want to vomit up his own stomach:

ATTN:                      AGENT                      BRUCE  
BLANKENSHIP, FBI

*This correspondence comes from the group that has kidnapped Zachary Paulson's baby. The child is still unharmed at this point, and he will remain that way for as long as you follow all forthcoming instructions to the letter. Do not deviate even one iota from the instructions you will be given*

*or the game will end in a horrible and thoroughly bloody fashion before it even has a chance to begin properly. So tell us something, Agent Blankenship, are you ready to play a game with us?*

Blankenship's ears rang. His palms flooded with sweat. Fingers flying, he punched a series of commands into the computer and waited anxiously

for the results to pop up.

In a matter of minutes, he'd matched the ISP the email had originated from to an address over on the east side of town, using the same technique of computer tracking that had recently brought down CIA Director David Petraeus, blowing the lid off Petraeus's extramarital affair with his female biographer and prompting the former

Army general to resign from his lofty position in well-chronicled disgrace.

Scribbling down the address on a Post-It note and jumping to his feet, Blankenship grabbed his coat off the back of his chair and sprinted for the elevator at the end of the hall, calling Bill Krugman as he went. The Director answered after just one ring. “What is it, Agent Blankenship? I’m just on my way into work now. Coming all the way



from Lorain, though, so I probably won't be there for another half an hour or so. Anyway, what's going on?"

Breathing hard through his mouth as his stomach continued to turn a nauseating series of somersaults deep within the core of his being, Blankenship brought Krugman up to speed just as quickly and coherently as he could under the circumstances, wondering briefly

what the Director had been doing all the way out in Lorain this early in the morning before quickly shaking away the thought. Probably something connected to the paintball-shooting and subsequent murder of Agent Meghan Shaughnessy over at St. Anthony's. In any event, wasn't important now. What *was* important here was saving that poor baby. And until the kidnapping task force was up and running and fully

functional it was up to Blankenship to do that on his own.

When he'd finished relating all the details to his boss, Krugman said, "Get backup before you go out there, Agent Blankenship. Anyone, I don't care who it is. Call some locals if you need to. I don't want any lone wolves patrolling the prairie out there. Hasn't worked out too well for us in the past."

Blankenship fought back an intense wave of irritation in his chest and only barely resisted the urge to shout at his boss. “No time for that, sir,” he said, finally reaching the ground floor of the FBI field office building and bolting out of the elevator before racing for his 4-Runner that was sitting in its assigned space out in the parking lot fifty feet away. “I need to act fast here.”

Krugman's thunderous response exploded in his ear. "I said *get backup*, Agent Blankenship. I wasn't asking you a goddamn question there. That was a goddamn *order*."

Blankenship gritted his teeth, knowing full well that he didn't have time to engage in a pissing contest with his boss. Not when that poor baby's life could be on the line. Reaching his

vehicle, he jumped inside and paused briefly when the thought occurred to him. Not the most original idea in the world, he knew, but worth a shot, anyway. Any port in a storm. “I’m losing you, sir,” he said, reaching over to slam shut the driver’s-side door behind him before cranking the engine into life and putting the 4-Runner into reverse. “I’ll call you back just as soon as I can get a better connection.”

The Director's voice clapped in his left ear again. "Goddamn it, Blankenship! Did you hear what I just--"

Blankenship switched off the phone with the Director before Krugman could finish his sentence. "Sorry, sir," Blankenship said to himself. Tossing his Motorola Razr onto the passenger seat beside him, he slammed the 4-Runner into drive before peeling out of the

parking lot in an ear-bending screech of spinning tires. “But like I just told you, I don’t have *time* for that.”





## CHAPTER 35

Weaving dangerously in and out of the early morning commuter traffic that was clogging up I-90 but still managing to drive nearly a hundred miles an hour the entire way despite all the maddening congestion, Blankenship made it to the Manor Inn in just under fourteen minutes, calling Krugman again along the way as he raced down the busy highway but hanging up once more

before the Director could get out even a single word this time.

Blankenship grimaced, knowing full well that he'd fucked up. *Badly*. Unlikely as the possibility might seem right now, though, he hoped that the act of calling Krugman again might somehow provide him with a measure of protection against the formal reprimand that would no doubt go into his service

jacket on file down in Quantico for having so blatantly disobeyed his boss's direct order, however flimsy that protection might ultimately prove. Still, Blankenship hadn't been lying to the old man when he'd told Krugman that time was of the essence here; that he needed to act fast. According to the timestamp on the email, it had been sent just five minutes before Blankenship had seen it. If he was lucky, Blankenship might even

catch the sender unawares before the kidnapper could realize that Blankenship was hot on his heels and baying for blood. Waiting for backup to arrive would've completely eliminated that crucial element of surprise.

Finally coming to a screeching halt in the parking lot of the Manor Inn, he flung open the driver's-side door of the 4-Runner and banged into the lobby

of the rundown motel in a matter of seconds. A young Hispanic female was working behind the front desk. A pegboard lined with room keys was visible over her slender left shoulder, and the entire space smelled of badly burnt popcorn. Blankenship wrinkled up his nose against the offending odor. Breakfast of champions.

Flipping open his ID, he showed it to the woman while at the same time

trying to control the dizzying flood of  
adrenalin coursing through his veins and  
causing the fringes of his vision to blink  
in and out of focus. Didn't work. The  
edges of his world started to go black  
before everything in his line of sight  
suddenly cleared up again in a brain-  
stabbing flash of color. "Do you have  
any guests here with infants?" he asked,  
squinting his eyes against the horrific

pain slamming away at his temples.

The young woman in front of him casually smacked the gum in her mouth, clearly uninterested by Blankenship's breathless query as his stomach continued to boil over with nausea. "Yeah, we got babies here," she said, screwing up her pretty face and pressing together her full lips in thinly veiled annoyance. "As a matter of fact, we got *lots* of babies here. You in the hood



now, you know. Take a look around you. You ain't in Kansas any more, Dorothy.”

Blankenship ignored the girl's tone, knowing he had a much more important fight to pick at the moment. If nothing else, he'd deal with her later on. Obstruction of justice immediately came to mind as one of the possible charges. And if that baby were hurt, God help

her, too; there'd be a whole hell of a lot more charges than that. "Do you have a n y *white* babies here?" he asked, fighting back his own powerful wave of annoyance by clamping down his teeth hard in his mouth.

The clerk lifted her right hand and studied her elaborate nails. Long, acrylic and painted blood red. "Yeah, we got *one* of 'em."

"What room?"

The young woman looked up at him again and arched her left eyebrow sardonically. “Really? I mean, *really*? C’mon, dude. You know better than that.” She paused and held his stare. “How much are you willing to pay for that kind of information, Tonto? Nothin’ in this world’s free, you know. Not even for good-lookin’ cops like you.”

Blankenship closed his eyes and

resisted the urge to reach for the gun at his side. Instead, he reached around for his wallet and extracted the beat-up leather from his left-rear pocket before counting out the bills inside as quickly as he could. “How does sixty-eight dollars sound to you?” he asked, holding out the bills. Three wrinkled twenties, a crisp five and three ones.

The clerk lifted both of her overly plucked eyebrows at him this

time and reached out to take the proffered cash. “Well, now, whaddya know?” Plucking the bills from his trembling fingers and folding the money in half lengthwise, she tucked it away into the lacy black bra peeking out teasingly from the chest area of her low-cut, ruffled white blouse. “That just so happens to be *exactly* how much the information costs.” Flipping open a

ledger on the counter in front of her, she traced a column with one of her sharp red fingernails. “Room 129,” she said without bothering to look up at Blankenship again. “You’d better hurry, though. If I’m not mistaken, I think I might have seen them packing up not too long ago.”

Blankenship frowned. “How many of them were there?”

The young Latina shrugged. “I

don't know. Three, maybe. A man, a woman and a baby.”

“What name did they sign in under?”

“Sarkozy.”

Blankenship turned and bolted out of the office, jangling a tinny bell as he went. No more time for talking. It was time for *action*. Scanning the room number on the door nearest to him, he

figured out the direction the numbers were going and headed north.

Stopping outside of Room 129, he yanked his Glock from its holster and felt his world begin to seesaw crazily again. He took a quick breath through his nostrils to steady his nerves and switched off the safety of the Glock. Then he took one quick step back and kicked in the door without announcing his presence. *Fuck* a search warrant.



Bureaucratic red tape sure as hell wasn't going to mean the difference between that little boy's life and death. Not today.

Blankenship's heart thumped madly against his ribcage as the door flew open with a deafening *crack* and a small shower of splintering wood.

Then his heart stopped dead inside his chest at what he saw next.



## CHAPTER 36

Blankenship blinked hard, so stunned there for a moment that he could barely even *breathe*. Finally, he managed it. A cool rush of air invaded his lungs and steadied his nerves. Still, it didn't make what he was looking at right now any less shocking. Not even close. There were *three* babies inside the filthy room, all of them propped up on pillows without cases on the unmade

bed.

But none of them were *human* babies.

Blankenship stepped inside the foul-smelling space (stale cigarette smoke and, as near as his nostrils could figure it, moldy cheese) and cleared the bathroom – the only other room in the place – before making his way quickly back over to the bed and picking up the

baby nearest to him. A Cabbage Patch Kid – apparently modified to look just like *him*. Wavy brown hair and a mostly shapeless plastic key featuring a Toyota 4-Runner keychain dangling from its left hand. The female baby in the middle of the trio of dolls had bright green eyes and fiery-red hair and had been positioned right beside a second male baby whose curly hair had been spray-painted a distinguished silver. Claire

Wexler and Bill Krugman, obviously.

Blankenship                      shuddered.

Whoever had left these dolls here knew *exactly* who they were, knew exactly what they *looked like*, too. Though he still hadn't met Claire Wexler in person, he'd seen a picture of the youthful-looking agent in the *Plain Dealer* newspaper article detailing the construction of a Jack Yuntz task force.

A real looker, that much was for sure, and *way* too young to be heading up something as important as the mass-shootings investigation, if you asked him.

Still, no one had asked him, now had they?

All three babies had crude, homemade paper FBI badges attached to their chests by safety pins: badges that had been fashioned out of the same kind

of lined notebook paper that schoolchildren used. Extracting a fresh new pair of latex gloves from the front pocket of his black dress pants, Blankenship pulled on the gloves before removing the badge pinned to the baby's chest that had clearly been meant to represent him, not wanting to smear any possible fingerprints with the action. He turned the badge over in his hands and



took a quick breath, feeling his heartbeat begin to rev up again inside his chest. On the reverse side of the homemade badge, a dollar figure and what looked to be an overseas bank account number had been written neatly in what appeared to be a woman's feminine script:

*\$250,000 – 792600010003*

Blankenship swallowed away  
the bile that flooded into his mouth and  
removed the other two badges before  
studying those next:

*\$500,000 – 927852620302*

*\$1,000,000 – 8320000018462*

“What the *fuck*, Blankenship?

This is completely unacceptable! I

should have your fucking badge and gun for pulling some amateur bullshit like this! Who the fuck do you think you *are?*”

Blankenship’s already overworked heart nearly exploded inside his chest at the sudden sound of a *very* angry voice booming out from the doorway. He cut his startled stare over to the doorway to see Bill Krugman standing there. The Director’s usually

calm face was mottled red with fury. His usually impeccable silver hair sat wildly askew on the top of his head. Dark brown circles of exhaustion ringed the bottoms of his eyes. “Sir, I’m sorry-“ Blankenship began.

Krugman cut him off with an enraged look. “Shut the fuck up, Bruce,” the Director snarled. “Just shut the fuck up before I fire your insubordinate ass

right here on the spot just for being so goddamn *stupid*. We'll deal with your insubordination later, though, don't you worry about that. Anyway, what have you got here?"

Blankenship lifted one of the babies from the bed, the one with the silver hair. Krugman stared at it from across the room and squinted his dark brown eyes in disbelief. "Is that supposed to *me*?" he asked

incredulously.

Blankenship nodded. “I believe so, sir.” Placing the silver-haired doll back down onto the bed, he picked up the other two babies at the same time next. The Director looked at both of those before he closed his eyes in frustration. “You and Agent Wexler, I presume,” he said, breathing out slowly through his nostrils.

“From all appearances, sir.”

Krugman opened his eyes again.

“So, how long ago did you get here?”

Blankenship checked his watch.

“Just about five minutes ago, sir. These dolls are the only things I’ve found so far.” He held up one of the paper badges and turned it over so that Krugman could see the reverse side.

“Dollar amounts and overseas bank

account numbers. The email I got earlier this morning leads me to believe that this is just the first step in the game. More instructions to follow.”

Krugman shook his head.

“Great. Just fucking *great*. Exactly what we need right now with Jack Yuntz shooting the shit out of everyone out there like the entire world’s his own personal goddamn shooting gallery.”

Krugman paused and glanced down at



Blankenship's gloves. "Got any more of those things on you?"

Blankenship shook his head, relieved beyond words to have Krugman's mind back on work. With any luck at all, the Director might even forget about his blatant insubordination altogether. Who knew? Stranger things had certainly happened in the history of the world.

Letting out a small breath he hoped Krugman wouldn't notice and knowing that only time would tell his fate on *that* particularly unpleasant issue, Blankenship said, "Not on me, sir, but I've probably got a spare set out in my car."

Krugman stretched his neck from left to right until Blankenship heard a string of vertebra pop. A dark blue vein

throbbed crazily on the left side of the Director's throat, all thick and fat with blood. Pressing his lips together into a firm line and putting his hands on his hips, it looked like Krugman had reached the end of what had already been a very short rope now. "Well, Blankenship," the Director barked. "What the hell are you waiting for? Go get the goddamn things already. We'll search this room together."





## CHAPTER 37

Pulling on the fresh pair of thin latex gloves that Bruce Blankenship had just handed him, Bill Krugman felt his veins flood with adrenalin as Blankenship began to search under the bed. The potent chemical raced through his system and made it nearly impossible for him to even *think* straight, much less process the many jumbled thoughts that were bumping around inside his skull.

Krugman's body tingled with an almost indescribable high. His mind buzzed with the electric thrill of the chase, every synapse in his brain seeming to fire at once. His muscles tensed, preparing to spring into action at a moment's notice.

Krugman breathed deeply through his nostrils in satisfaction, smelling the plastic-y odor of the gloves

and *loving* the way the familiar scent tickled his nose and set his olfactory sense on fire. He'd missed that smell.

“I’ve got something here, sir.”

Blankenship’s voice knocked him out of his reverie. As Blankenship emerged from under the bed, Krugman could see that he was holding a small, shiny silver object in his hands. “What is it?” Krugman asked, squinting his tired brown eyes for a better look. He patted



at his left breast pocket for his reading glasses. No luck. He'd left them sitting on the dashboard out in his rental car.

Blankenship finished getting to his feet and handed the object over. Krugman took it and studied the etched lettering on front: *HD*. "A cigarette case," Krugman said, stating the obvious but not giving a crap. Pressing a tiny button on the side of the case to open it,

he saw a single Gitane cigarette nestled inside. “A French brand, if I’m not mistaken,” he said, smelling the pungent scent of tobacco. He looked back up at Blankenship. “Initials, probably, so that could be good.” He turned the cigarette case over in his hands and examined it some more. “Anyway, do you think our kidnappers left it behind? You said there were two of them, right?”

Blankenship nodded. “Yes, sir.

*At least* two of them, according to the girl out front. Could be more than that, though. Or fewer. Hard to say for sure until we get more to work with.”

Looking around the filthy room, Blankenship then answered Krugman’s first question. “As for the kidnappers leaving the cigarette case behind – either by mistake or on purpose – that’s also tough to tell, sir. This place is a real

shithole. Probably doesn't get cleaned more often than once a month, if that. I'll have the case checked out for prints, though, of course. Still, I find it pretty hard to believe that our kidnappers left it behind by mistake, especially with the engraved initials on front. Seems to me like they're running a pretty sophisticated operation so far and they wouldn't do something that stupid. Hell, they knew I'd be over here just as soon

as I got the email.”

Krugman nodded. Made sense. And putting aside for now the usually reliable man’s uncharacteristic display of insubordination just half an hour earlier, Blankenship was a damn fine agent – one of the finest under Krugman’s command. Really knew his stuff. Always *had* known his stuff ever since Blankenship had first signed on

with the Bureau back in the 1990s. A real good family man, too, which Krugman knew from firsthand experience, having met Madison and the couple's adorable twin girls several times over the past few years during various FBI social functions. Blankenship marked *exactly* the kind of person that the FBI went well out of its way to recruit but very rarely ever found. And Krugman didn't think he

wanted to risk losing a man of Blankenship's caliber over a mild case of insubordination that might be difficult to prove anyway. So fuck it. He'd let the insubordination ride. No sense in losing a war just to win an ultimately unimportant battle. "True," Krugman said in response to Blankenship's estimation of the kidnapper or kidnappers' skill level that may or may

not have resulted in the mistake of leaving behind the engraved cigarette case, “but the best laid plans of mice and men and all that.’

Blankenship looked around the room some more and sighed. “Could be either one of them, I suppose – mice or men – considering the state of this place. Perfect habitat for rodents, if you ask me. Including the human kind.”

Krugman lifted his eyebrows,



duly impressed. “Nice turn of phrase there, Agent Blankenship.” He shook his head to chase away the thought and handed the cigarette case back to the agent. No time to play word games, however clever those word games might be. “Anyway, bag this thing up and get me a list of all the kidnappings for ransom in the United States over the past ten years. If you’re right about these

creeps having experience in the field, it might provide us with another useful lead to follow.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll get on it right away.”

While Blankenship did as he was instructed — *this time*, at least — Krugman made his way into the unsanitary bathroom twenty feet away and opened the mirror hanging above the disgusting sink: the second-most obvious

hiding place in the filthy motel room right after the underside of the bed. The steady *drip-drip-drip* coming from the rusty faucet filled his ears and gave him a pretty good idea of why Chinese water torture had always been so particularly effective.

When the mirror was opened, he wasn't surprised to find the sheet of lined notebook paper taped to the back

that was facing two empty shelves meant for storing medications. The message the note conveyed had been scrawled in blood-red lipstick and written in a more masculine-looking script this time:

*Pay first installment by two p.m. today. Further instructions will be provided to you upon receipt.*



## CHAPTER 38

Back at the FBI field office two hours later, Blankenship worked on his computer while Krugman pored over a list of kidnappings for ransom in the United States over the past ten years.

Blankenship leaned back in his chair and smacked his keyboard with the palm of his right hand in frustration, rattling the plastic rectangle on his desk and nearly spilling his long-cold coffee

all over his desk blotter. World's greatest dad or not, as his mug so boldly claimed, he'd been at it for forty-five solid minutes now but as far as he could tell the email he'd received this morning had been bounced around among various servers located overseas before reaching him via the Internet connection at the Manor Inn. Clearly, as he'd theorized earlier to Krugman, they

weren't dealing with amateurs here. Instead, they were dealing with cold-blooded *professionals*.

Krugman looked up at the sudden noise and wrinkled his drawn and weathered face. "Jesus Christ, Bruce. You scared the living shit out of me over here. Don't do that to again, OK? I'm *way* too old to take it and I can't afford to skip a single heartbeat at this point in my life. Anyway, what is it? What's



going on?”

Blankenship shook his head in irritation and flicked a loose paper clip that was sitting on the corner of his desk onto the floor. “Sorry, sir,” he said, “but this goddamn email is just about impossible for me to trace without getting a search warrant first. And I highly doubt that we’re likely to get a search warrant from the Cambodian

government, where the originating server is located, as far as I can tell.”

Krugman flipped a page on his printout from his seat five feet away in a faux-leather armchair beneath the overhanging fronds of a plastic palm tree. “No way to get around it?”

Blankenship shook his head again. “Nope. None that I can figure out, anyway.” Computer whiz or not, Blankenship was stumped. Though

they'd stumbled onto his turf by sending him the email, it seemed that the people he was chasing here weren't computer illiterate themselves.

Smart and heartless: always a dangerous combination.

Krugman pursed his lips and moistened his right index finger before flipping another page on his printout. "Well, just keep at it. Maybe you're

missing something. Remember: even if we find ourselves in a marathon here instead of a sprint we can still win the race.”

Blankenship sighed heavily and checked his watch. Almost noon already. *Speaking* of sprints. Though he'd feared it would drag ass all day long when he'd first made it into the office this morning, time was absolutely *flying* today, which certainly didn't mark

a *good* thing considering the circumstances. After Krugman had discovered the ransom note taped to the reverse side of the mirror back at the filthy motel, additional forensics personnel had showed up *en masse* at the scene to sweep the place, descending on the Manor Inn like a swarm of hungry locusts descending on a Nebraska wheat field. Nothing else had been turned up,

though, even after the room had been thoroughly flipped upside down. No prints to be found *anywhere* – not even on the engraved cigarette case bearing the initials *HD*: the perfect surface for yielding such results. Another promising lead that had seemed to go up in a quick puff of smoke right in front of their eyes.

Blankenship sighed again, even more heavily this time. Add that one to the ever-growing list. He'd checked in

at the Four Seasons yesterday afternoon in an attempt to review the security video there, but the manager on duty had told him that the entire system had been shorted out on the night that Helen Morgan had done the mattress mambo with the dashing former president of France.

Blankenship closed his eyes and gritted his teeth in disgust, still unable to

believe the *stupidity* of some of the people in this world. No doubt the shorting out of the security system had been the work of the good “Nicholas Sarkozy” himself. And the guest log at the prestigious hotel had revealed that the kidnapper had actually *signed in* under the ridiculous pseudonym, paying in cash and somehow escaping notice of all the political experts stationed behind the front desk in the process. An hour



later, speaking with the staff on duty the previous Friday night over at the Oak Barrel Bar on Euclid Avenue had just turned up another dead end. Nobody remembered a goddamn *thing*. No ATMs or gas stations around the bar that might've provided him with video evidence of what the male part of kidnapping team looked like, either.

Blankenship took a deep breath

through his nostrils and cursed his rotten fortunes. Still, with any break at all in this seemingly never-ending run of horrendous luck, maybe Helen Morgan's soiled underwear would yield some traceable DNA. Certainly worth the effort of finding out. But he was still waiting to hear back from Maggie Flynn down in the DC lab about the results of the testing. The panties had been prioritized, she'd told him, but these

things still took time.

Too bad time was the one thing they didn't have here.

Blankenship blew out a slow breath through his mouth and stretched his aching neck before looking down at his watch again. “You absolutely *sure* you don't want to pay the first installment of the ransom, sir?” he asked. “Seems to me like we're

gambling with the baby's life by *not* paying. Zachary Paulson's got plenty of money, so that shouldn't be a problem. Hell, he probably wouldn't miss even the quarter-million they're asking for first. It wouldn't be any skin off his nose. One fewer fancy car, maybe. If nothing else, though, it might buy him some peace of mind." Blankenship paused. "I know that *I'd* sure as hell pay if I were in his shoes. You can't trade

money for the life of your kid after they're gone, after all.”

Krugman lifted his silver eyebrows on his wrinkled forehead and let out a slow breath of his own. “I know, Agent Blankenship,” he said, “but the first rule in these situations is to not negotiate with terrorists, no matter how hard they might come at you. I know that it seems counterintuitive at times,

especially with the Paulson baby still out there and in clear and present danger, but we're actually playing the percentages by withholding the cash. Keeps the kidnappers hungry. They didn't go to all this trouble just to teach us a lesson if we don't listen, you know. They want to be *paid*."

Blankenship nodded. Made sense, he guessed. Love of money was the root of all evil and all that: one of the

few things the Bible had seemed to have gotten right and hadn't subsequently contradicted itself on. And hard as it might be for him to get to grips with at the moment while he dealt with the enormous mental pressure of being ultimately responsible for a baby's life or death, he knew that the Director hadn't chosen his course of action randomly. Krugman knew what he was

doing here, and he'd play things by the book that he'd practically written himself, just like he always did. After all, you didn't get to his lofty position in the FBI by making the *wrong* calls. And after more than forty years with the Bureau the old man wasn't likely to change his stripes anytime soon, anyway. Tigers never did. Especially the alpha males.

For the next two hours,



Blankenship and Krugman stayed mostly silent, speaking to each other only occasionally while they dutifully plugged away at the work in front of them, both trying their best to ignore the thunderous ticking of the circular clock on the wall. Blankenship couldn't help but to check both the clock and his watch every ten minutes or so, though, hoping against hope that the rapidly approaching

two p.m. deadline wouldn't live up to its extremely ominous-sounding name.

At exactly two-oh-five p.m., Blankenship's computer chimed, signaling an incoming email. He sat up straighter in his chair and felt a hot jolt of adrenalin flood through his veins. The subject line of the email continued the aviation theme from earlier in the morning, obviously a reference to the horrific kidnapping and murder of the

Lindbergh baby back in the 1930s – the most infamous case of child abduction and subsequent murder in the history of the United States:

**RIGHT ENGINE OUT, ONLY  
ONE ENGINE LEFT TO GO**

Blankenship turned to Krugman, his heart pounding away so forcefully

inside of his chest that he wouldn't have been surprised to find out that Krugman could hear it from five feet away. "We've got another communiqué from the kidnappers, sir," he said.

Krugman rose to his feet and crossed the few feet separating them. Standing behind his subordinate, he looked on over the Blankenship's left shoulder while Blankenship opened the email. The words they read inside the

email were even *more* chilling than the ones in the message Blankenship had received earlier that morning. Seemed like several *lifetimes* ago now:

*Bad choice, Agent Blankenship.*

*Very bad choice, indeed. You were clearly instructed to deliver \$250,000 to the Caymans bank account number provided to you by 2 p.m. yet you failed*

*to do so. As a direct result, the right engine on your plane has now flamed out. Only one engine remains now. If that one should happen to flame out, your plane will surely crash and the baby will surely die a horrific death. Stand by for your punishment.*

Blankenship turned to face Krugman and wrinkled up his face in confusion. “Stand by for your

punishment? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Krugman shrugged. “No idea, Bruce. But it sure doesn’t sound good.” The Director paused. “As a matter of fact, it sounds pretty fucking *bad*.” Just then, a knock sounded at Blankenship’s office door. Both he and Krugman snapped up their heads, tracing the noise to find a UPS deliveryman standing in

the doorway. “Agent Bruce Blankenship?” the man asked.

Blankenship rose to his feet and crossed the office, his heart in his throat now and his legs shaking with a potent combination of trepidation and fear.

“That’s me,” he said. “What’s up?”

The deliveryman held up in his right hand a yellow package that had been cushioned on the inside with bubble wrap. “This is for you, sir,” he



said. “Could you please sign for it for me?”

Blankenship reached out and took the plastic stylus the man was offering. Quickly scribbling his name into the digital box of a handheld computer screen, he handed the electronic device back to the deliveryman. The deliveryman then took the device in his left hand and handed

Blankenship the yellow package in return, giving him a polite smile as he did so. “Thank you very much, sir. Have a wonderful day.”

When the deliveryman had gone, Blankenship ripped open the package while Krugman looked on eagerly. Blankenship tipped out its contents onto the cluttered surface of his desk, dreading what they might find inside.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Krugman

breathed.

Standing next to the Director, Blankenship fought back the overwhelming urge to vomit at the horrific sight in front of them. Wasn't easy. Unlikely as the possibility might seem, though, he felt entirely capable of vomiting up his own *soul* right now.

Nestled in a clear Ziploc baggie on his desk was an infant's severed

pinkie finger.

Blankenship looked back up at the Director and tried his best not to cry. That wasn't easy, either. One of the hardest things he'd ever needed to manage in his entire life, as a matter fact. "I don't think Jesus Christ had anything to do with this, sir," he said in a voice cracking with emotion.

Krugman reached back into the package and extracted a folded-up piece

of paper before unfolding it to reveal the same distinctive feminine script they'd found on the homemade paper badges back at the Manor Inn.

“What does it say?” Blankenship asked.

Krugman handed over the note and closed his eyes. “Have a look for yourself.”

Breathing heavily, Blankenship

looked down at the paper and scanned the words with tear-filled eyes:

*Pay first and second installments to the second bank account number by 9 p.m. tonight. Should you fail to do this, refer to your recently received package for an example of the repercussions. The baby is still alive, at least for now, but sadly he can't play a full game of the*

*Finger Family on his right hand anymore. Shocking, isn't it? Anyway, let's keep his left hand intact, shall we? Disobey us again and it won't be a finger you receive the next time.*

*It'll be a fucking heart.*





## CHAPTER 39

Krugman shouted in a strong voice while he and Blankenship stood in the middle of Blankenship's office, a dead space that felt like it had just had all the air sucked out of it and left them struggling to breathe in a giant, lung-bending vacuum. Still, at least *one* of them was keeping their shit together. "Agent Wandstedt!" the Director bellowed. "Get the hell in here!"

A middle-aged female agent with short black hair stuck her head into the office a moment later. Working in the office directly next to Blankenship's cut down considerably on the length of her journey. Thank God for small favors: a much-needed bonus right now against the maddening ticking of the racing clock. "Yes, sir?" she asked.

Krugman jerked his head toward

the hallway over her left shoulder. “Go catch that UPS guy who just left here before he leaves the building. See if you can’t find out who sent us this package he just delivered.”

Erin Wandstedt glanced over at the baby’s severed pinkie that was still sitting in a Ziploc bag on Blankenship’s desk. Her face went ghost-white at the horrific sight, then flooded with an additional series of colors: first red,

then blue, then purple. “Jesus fucking Christ,” she breathed.

The Director nodded. “Yeah, we know. We’ve already had that discussion. Anyway, hurry up already. Go catch that guy before he leaves. Find out everything you can about both him and the package, then report directly back to me.”

“Yes, sir.”

When Wandstedt had scampered away, her pretty face now green, Krugman turned back to Blankenship. “She’s probably not going to turn up anything useful but we still need to cover all our bases here. I’m starting to think you were right, though: we’re dealing with some real pros here, Bruce. Some real vicious animals.”

Blankenship grunted, still feeling

sick to his stomach. Thankfully, though, Krugman's steadfast display of professionalism in the face of this atrocity in front of them had rubbed off on him somewhat, helping him to deal with the intense nausea swirling around in his gut. No big surprise there, though. The old man had always been a *great* role model, ever since the very beginning. And after all these years, Blankenship knew that he could still

learn a thing or two from the man.

“Understatement of the century, sir,”

Blankenship said in response to

Krugman’s classification of the

kidnappers as animals. “But, yeah,

there’s no way in hell they’d be sloppy

enough to send the finger under their real

names. Hell, Wandstedt will probably

find out that Barack Obama himself sent

it from the West Wing of the White

House. Still, how the fuck could they have known we weren't going to pay so *quickly?*”

Krugman grimaced as he studied the infant's finger some more, which had been severed cleanly at the bottom joint with what looked to have been some sort of industrial-strength scissors. “Well, clearly, they did it in advance,” he said. “Still, I think we would've received the finger whether or not we'd paid. These



assholes want to show us they mean *business* here.”

Blankenship looked down at the baby's finger himself. He'd never seen anything more gruesome in his entire life. Not even close. “Message received,” he said, blowing out a slow breath that deflated his chest. “Loud and clear and then some. They've sure as hell convinced the shit out of *me*. I'm

ready to empty out my own bank account to pay the ransom. Take out a second mortgage on my house. Whatever it takes.”

Krugman’s face hardened. Obviously, his anger was boiling inside him now just as hotly as was Blankenship’s, a crack in the Director’s calm façade, however slight. Blankenship was happy to see it. Seemed that the old man was human,

after all. “Me, too,” Krugman said. “I’d pay whatever it took. Too bad that’s not an option for us here. We don’t negotiate with terrorists, no matter what they do. Anyway, get the Ziploc bag on dry ice and ship the finger down to Maggie Flynn in DC stat. Tell her I said to fast-track the DNA results. Tell her I said to drop everything else she’s working on and to work on only that

until it's finished. Then get over to Bay Village and talk to the Paulsons again. Bring them up to speed on what's going on here but don't tell them about the finger until we're absolutely sure it's what the kidnappers told us it was. No sense in traumatizing them any further at this point in the case when even we're not sure what's going on ourselves. We need to dot all our *I*s and cross all our *T*s before delivering any messages of

mutilation we don't understand yet. Don't mention the ransom demand to them, either. It'll only make things more complicated than they already are."

Blankenship had already slipped on his jacket by the time the Director had finished speaking. He was chomping at the bit to get out there on the streets and actually *do* something already. To somehow, some way, save that poor

baby before the unthinkable happened.

“Yes, sir,” Blankenship said. “I’m on it.”



## CHAPTER 40

On his drive over to Bay Village five minutes later, Blankenship phoned up Maggie Flynn down in DC just as a light snow began to fall, the first appearance of the white stuff of the season. The fluffy white flakes settled onto the 4Runner's windshield before immediately melting away, the resulting moisture whisked off by the windshield wipers that had been fixed to their



lowest setting.

The FBI's lead lab tech answered her phone after just two short rings while the steady *shoop-shoop-shoop* of the wipers filled Blankenship's ears and threatened to pull him off into dreamland despite the high-octane events of the day. Both the adrenalin and coffee had worn off by now and now he was operating only on fumes. He just

hoped *fumes* would be enough. “Maggie Flynn here,” she said.

Blankenship angled the 4-Runner onto I-90 and merged with the heavy traffic that was flowing down the busy travel corridor, at the same time stifling a loud yawn. Leaning forward in his seat, he turned up the heater in the vehicle before straightening again. Though the extra warmth further threatened to lull him off to sleep, he

was absolutely *freezing* right now. The lesser of two evils, he supposed. After all, he hadn't read of too many human popsicles catching bad guys. "Maggie," he said, "it's Bruce Blankenship up in Cleveland. How are you doing today?"

The lab tech known to everyone around the FBI by her nickname of "Google" due to the sheer efficiency of her computer-like brain cleared her

throat softly. “Agent Blankenship,” she said. “I’m so glad you called. As a matter of fact, I was just about to call *you*. I finally finished up with the analysis of Helen Morgan’s soiled underwear. Sorry it took me so long.”

A chill passed right through Blankenship, icing his core. He shivered against it, feeling even *colder* now. Still, at least it woke him up a little. He’d felt halfway to

unconsciousness before receiving the welcome news. “What did you find out?” he asked, feeling his pulse begin to pound away in his wrists. This could be it. Just the major break they’d been waiting for. “Any DNA material you can track?”

Flynn shuffled some papers on her side of the connection. “Well, that’s where things get weird. I found semen

but no sperm.”

Blankenship frowned, not quite understanding the lab tech’s meaning. “What does that mean?” he asked. “How is something like that even possible?”

Flynn blew out a slow breath. “It’s possible because your suspect is what’s known as an aspermatic non-secretor. Rare, but certainly not unheard-of. Only affects a very small

percentage of the world's male population. Anyway, I'll save you the explanation of all the technical mumbo-jumbo involved, but basically sperm is what we extract DNA from so since I found no sperm on the underwear it also means I found no DNA. I'm very sorry, Bruce, but I'm afraid it's a dead end. Entirely useless for what we need."

Blankenship grimaced. Seemed

to him like dead ends were the *only* kind of ends they'd been coming up against during the entirety of this maddening case – more dead ends than a fancy housing development featuring cul-de-sacs down every cobbled street. Or more dead ends than a cemetery; probably a more appropriate comparison considering the circumstances. “Damn,” Blankenship growled, feeling his cheeks heat up with



a fresh flood of anger. “If it weren’t for bad news in this case I wouldn’t get any news at all.”

Flynn clucked sympathetically.

“I’m very sorry, Bruce. I wish I had happier news for you but I just don’t.”

Blankenship reached the exit for Bay Village and maneuvered the 4-Runner off the highway, feeling his temples begin to throb now. “Not your

fault, Maggie,” he said, turning down the loudly blowing heater to hear her better.

“Anyway, I’ve got something else I need for you to work on now. Krugman says you should drop everything else just as soon as you get it, make it your top priority.”

“What’s that?”

Blankenship brought the lab tech up to speed on the recent delivery of the baby’s severed finger to his office,

trying his best to make the details sound just as un-gruesome as he possibly could. Wasn't easy. This wasn't a Dr. Suess story here, after all. More like Stephen King giving a dramatic midnight reading of *The Shining* in a pitch-black graveyard.

Flynn sucked in a sharp breath when he'd finished relating all the gory particulars. "Oh my God," she said.

“That’s absolutely horrific.”

“Yeah, I know. Anyway, can you do it for us, Maggie? We’d really appreciate it.”

“Of course. Don’t be ridiculous. That won’t be any problem at all. When will I get the baby’s finger?”

Blankenship checked his watch. The baby’s finger should be leaving on a plane for DC right now. The only cargo

on the hastily arranged flight. “Maybe three hours before it arrives at your doorstep, Maggie,” he said. “Thanks again for this. It really means a lot to me, both personally and professionally.” Blankenship knew the lab tech’s day had just been extended indefinitely. A salaried position that had never adequately considered the grueling hours Flynn put in on a regular basis.

Flynn said, “Don’t be silly, Bruce. There’s no need for thanks. It’s my job. It’s *exactly* what I’m here for.”

She paused, then added, “I was really sorry to hear about Dana Whitestone, Bruce. Such a horrible thing to happen to such a wonderful woman. She’ll be missed terribly, please know that. I felt absolutely awful that I couldn’t make it to Cleveland for her funeral but I had

two sick kids at home that day and I just couldn't swing it. I *still* feel terrible about it. Probably always will."

Blankenship fought back a sudden wave of melancholy at the unexpected mention of Dana's name. He sat up straighter in his seat and shook his head in disappointment with himself. He hadn't thought about his partner in almost a full day now, and that made him feel guilty as hell. And why *shouldn't* it

make him feel guilty as hell? He pursed his lips, not particularly liking himself right now. *What kind of partner had he been?* he wondered. What kind of *man* was he now? He only hoped that the people in his life remembered him better once he was gone. Not that he would've deserved it after the way he'd so efficiently filed away Dana's memory.

He cleared a small lump from his



throat as he reached the front guardhouse to the Paulsons' ridiculously opulent housing development and lifted his eyebrows, duly impressed. So *this* was how the other half lived. Not a bad gig if you could find the work. "Thanks again, Maggie. I've got to go deliver some bad news to the parents of the kidnapped baby so I need to let you go now. I'll talk to you soon."

Flynn sounded puzzled. "You're

not going to tell them about the finger, are you? I'd really like to examine it first before you do something like that."

Blankenship let out a heavy sigh, missing Madison and the girls for what seemed to be the millionth time today. He couldn't *wait* to get home to them tonight. He just hoped that he didn't crush their ribcages with his powerful hugs when he did. "Nope," he said,

feeling the enormity of what he needed to do next weighing so heavily on his exhausted shoulders that he feared they might actually *collapse* under the excruciating burden of it all. “I’m just going to tell the Paulsons that I still haven’t found their baby yet.”



# CHAPTER 41

Flashing his ID at the uniformed guard out front and receiving a collegial nod in return, Blankenship waited for the security barrier to rise before pulling the 4-Runner into the prestigious housing complex. As he weaved his way through the curving, brick-lined streets of the Village Walk development in Bay Village – multi-million-dollar estates on either side seeming to stare down their

haughty patrician noses at his sorry wheels the entire way – Blankenship's eyeballs nearly popped out of his skull at the pure *luxury* of it all. The smell of money hung in the air just as noticeably as the smell of burning leaves in more modest suburban neighborhoods during the fall months. Maybe even *more* noticeably. Nothing subtle about this place in the least. The residents here

were rich – *goddamn* rich – and they wanted all the lowly commoners who dared to step foot in their hallowed domain to damn well know it, too.

Blankenship had punched the address of his destination into the GPS sitting on his dash to save himself some time but he couldn't have missed the Paulson mansion even if he'd tried. It rose up higher, more magnificent than the rest, even considering all the other

stunning estates surrounding it. In a neighborhood where cash was clearly king, Zachary Paulson sat comfortably upon the gilded throne, the head upon which his glittering, jewel-encrusted crown rested obviously not at all *uneasy* by any stretch of the imagination.

A few moments later, Blankenship navigated the 4-Runner up the long, winding driveway of 823



Poplar Lane – a driveway that ended with a circular cement rotary inside of which stood an exact-replica statue of Michelangelo's *David*. He lifted his eyebrows in admiration again, suitably impressed with the artist's precise and detailed handiwork on the piece as he killed the 4-Runner's engine and parked behind a shiny black 2012 Maybach that hadn't even been garaged despite the threatening weather conditions outside.

From all appearances, the brand-new Maybach in front of him was just Zachary Paulson's tooling-around-town car. No big deal. A *toy*. A massive garage fifty feet away from the main house stored God-only-knew how many more expensive vehicles – the ones the man probably wanted to keep in mint condition. Images of cherry Rolls-Royces, untouched Lamborghinis and all

other manner of fully restored classics flashed through Blankenship's mind as he exited his own hopelessly mundane 4-Runner and made his way up the short walk to the set of enormous double doors out front that were standing guard against the unwashed riff-raff of the world such as himself. When he rang the bell, Beethoven's *Fur Elise* played in his ears. Nice touch. *Classy*.

A tuxedoed butler opened the

door on Blankenship's right-hand side a moment later. Sixtiesh, slender, distinguished-looking. "Yes, sir?" the man asked in a heavily accented British voice, nodding slightly as he did so. "How may I help you?"

Blankenship flashed his ID again and told the butler what he was there for. When he'd finished, the Brit stepped aside and swept an arm

gallantly in front of his trim waist.

“Please come in, sir. You may wait in the drawing room while I inform Mr. Paulson of your presence, if that’s agreeable. May I get you anything to drink in the meantime? Coffee? Tea? Water?”

Blankenship shook his head and resisted the urge to call the butler “Jeeves” as he stepped inside the elaborate, marble-tiled foyer and

glanced up at the enormous glass chandelier that was hanging thirty-five feet above their heads. Should the sturdy braided chain supporting the chandelier ever snap, anyone standing underneath it at the time would've been a goner in an instant, flattened right there on the spot like a human pancake. "No thanks," Blankenship said. "I'm not thirsty."

The butler nodded again. “Very well, sir. Then please follow me.”

As he trailed the butler through the awe-inspiring dwelling – surprised as hell that he hadn’t been asked to take off his shoes at the front door so as to not dirty up anything in the spotless place – Blankenship couldn’t help but to shake his head in wonder again at the unmitigated display of pure *wealth* all

around him. The interior of the mansion continued the Renaissance theme from outside, with faithful reproductions of Michelangelo and other renowned artists' work scattered everywhere he looked. He glanced to the left as they walked down a long hall laid out in the finest Italian marble and saw a billiards room that had been stocked with three tables for shooting pool and another for snooker. A framed and autographed



poster of Minnesota Fats hung on the east wall, complete with its own miniature spotlight. The pristine green felt on all of the tables looked freshly cleaned, if not brand-new. Nice place to pass the time; to unwind after a long, grueling day of making money hand over fist.

A moment later, they'd made it to the drawing room, and Blankenship

wasn't at all surprised to find that the ceiling there had been painted to look exactly like the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. He wouldn't have expected anything less. After all, rich people needed to do *something* with all their cash.

“I'll be just a moment, sir,” the butler said. “Please make yourself at home.”

Blankenship resisted the urge to

laugh at the absurdity of the man's statement. Only by the slimmest of margins did he keep himself from rolling his eyes. *Make himself at home?* Yeah, right. How? *His* home wasn't anything like this place. Not even close. Instead of Michelangelo reproductions, *his* home featured worn-out furniture, threadbare carpets and *mountains* of unwashed laundry stacked up high in the

leaky basement. To be perfectly honest, he and Madison thanked their lucky stars above each night if they even managed to *feed* the girls and keep them *breathing* over the course of the day, much less engage in any pricey home-improvement projects during their non-existent spare time, the costs of which no doubt ran in the millions of dollars.

Blankenship sighed, not even caring if the butler noticed. On the

financial end of the things, he and Madison had precisely eight hundred and twelve dollars and thirty-four cents in their shared bank account at the moment. Not even enough to cover the mortgage at the end of the month until Blankenship got paid again. “Thanks,” Blankenship said, not bothering to share this bit of personal financial information with the butler. No point in it, even if

the butler should deign to share a few hot stock tips with him in return. “Appreciate it.”

When the butler had gone following another slight bow, Blankenship made his way over to the massive fireplace along the south wall and studied the knick-knacks arranged on the mantle. Faberge eggs, of course, just *one* of which probably exceeded a year’s worth of his salary. He shook his

head again, this time in disappointment with himself and the career path he'd chosen. Clearly, he'd gone into the wrong line of work by becoming a special agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The FBI might pay the bills – even if just barely at times – but computer networking clearly *obliterated* the bills, causing them to turn tail and hot-foot it the hell out of there like the

screaming cowards they were to people like Zachary Paulson.

“Agent Blankenship. Thank you so much for coming.”

Blankenship turned around at the sound of the male voice coming from behind him. He blinked hard before he could stop himself, then frowned. In stark contrast to the breathtaking luxury surrounding them, Zachary Paulson wore only loose-fitting blue jeans and a plain



white wrinkled T-shirt with some sort of food stain on front. Maybe mustard, gauging from the yellow tint of it. There were no shoes on the man's bare feet. His striking blue eyes looked badly bloodshot and were ringed with dark-purple half-moons along the bottoms. His short blonde hair looked uncombed and unwashed. Judging by the thick growth sprouting from the man's cheeks,

Paulson hadn't taken a razor to his skin in at least three days. And who the hell could blame him? Blankenship probably would've looked the *exact* same way had he been in the man's shoes. Or bare feet, in this case. Probably a lot *worse*. After all, when you had a missing child, nothing else in the world mattered. *Nothing*. Certainly not something as ultimately unimportant as basic personal hygiene.

“Mr. Paulson,” Blankenship said, striding across the room and gripping the man’s hand in a firm handshake that he immediately lessened the pressure on as soon as he felt the weakness of Paulson’s grip in return. “Thank you so much for seeing me today.”

Paulson dispensed with the pleasantries at once, and again

Blankenship didn't blame him. No time for idle chit-chat here. Not when that poor baby was still missing and maybe not even *alive* any more. "Zachary Jr.," Paulson said worriedly. "Have you found him yet? Is he still alive?"

Blankenship's stomach dropped at the hope lacing the other man's voice. "I don't know, sir," he admitted. "Could we sit down for a moment?"

Paulson stood his ground. "I'm

just fine standing up, thank you. Just tell me what the hell's going on with my son.”

Blankenship took a deep breath through his nostrils and readied himself mentally to do what he needed to do next. This was the part of the job he'd been dreading the entire drive over. He cleared his throat softly before delivering the mixed bag of news.

“We’ve received two communications from the kidnappers in the past eight hours, sir,” he told Paulson, attempting to keep his own voice steady in an effort to put Paulson just as at ease as he possibly could. “No change in the circumstances, I’m afraid, but we’re pretty sure the baby’s still alive. We’re working on tracking down the communications electronically now.” Blankenship didn’t bother mentioning to

Paulson the fact that the baby might be missing his right pinkie finger now. Not only had both Krugman and Maggie Flynn advised him against it, just how the fuck did you pass along that kind of devastating information without bringing on a complete mental breakdown?

Paulson asked, “Did they demand any money? I’ll pay whatever it takes, Agent Blankenship. I don’t care

how much. My son's life is worth more to me than all the wealth in the world combined. I just want my little boy back alive."

Blankenship fought back another powerful wave of guilt that nearly buckled his knees. Krugman had also advised him to keep the ransom demand secret from the Paulsons, at least for now, saying that it would only further complicate already complicated



matters. Made sense strategically, Blankenship knew, but on a personal level he couldn't help feeling like a no-good, low-down rotten liar. And why the hell *shouldn't* he feel that way? That was *exactly* what he was right now, after all. Exactly what *all* of them in the FBI were right now. Sins of omission were every bit as bad as sins of commission, no matter how good your

intentions might be. Sometimes even worse. He just hoped that the greater good would be served in the end. If not...

He shook away the unsettling thought. No use in worrying about that right now. If the hammer was going to come down on his head in the end, the hammer was going to come down on his head in the end. Nothing he could do to stop it at this point. Clearing his throat

again, he said, “Before we get to that, sir, could you please try to remember if there’s anyone out there who would have done this sickening thing just to hurt you personally? Anyone at all?”

Paulson grunted and waved a hand in the air in irritation. “Hell, Agent Blankenship, there are *plenty* of people out there who would want to hurt me personally. They’d *murder* me if they

had the chance and thought they could get away with it. Business is a dirty game, you know. Sometimes a few feathers get ruffled while you're playing."

Blankenship nodded and pursed his lips. Seemed that Paulson's line of work – however lucrative it might be – had its own set of pitfalls. The rewards were great, obviously, but the penalties were even greater. At least in this case. Not all that much different from the

pitfalls that were found in his *own* line of work as an agent with the FBI, actually. “And your wife?” Blankenship asked. “How is she holding up through all this?”

Paulson lifted his eyebrows and sighed. “She’s absolutely *devastated*, as I’m quite sure you can imagine. She barely even got to hold the baby before he was taken away from us.” Paulson

paused and shook his head angrily. “I wish to *God* I’d been there that day. I had a stupid fucking conference call with some Japanese distributors that they wouldn’t reschedule, no matter how hard I pushed them to do so. Worth fifty million dollars in the end, not that I give a shit about that now.” He paused again as the anger on his face faded away, replaced by a melancholy look that further crumpled his already drawn and

haggard countenance. “To tell you the truth, Agent Blankenship, Ann Marie and I were having some marital troubles before all this happened, but in a strange way I think this has brought us closer together.”

Blankenship                      frowned.

“Troubles, sir? What *kind* of troubles, exactly?”

Paulson shifted uncomfortably.

Clearly, the subject wasn't one he felt at ease discussing with Blankenship. No huge surprise there, though. After all, who the hell wanted to discuss their personal lives with what basically amounted to a complete stranger? Blankenship knew *he* sure as hell wouldn't. "The marital kind," Paulson said, "like I said. As a matter of fact, we were going to get a div--"

"Gentlemen, am I interrupting



something?”

Blankenship snapped up his head at the sudden sound of Ann Marie Paulson’s voice. Zachary Paulson did the same three feet to his left. “Honey,” Paulson said, looking startled by the unexpected interruption. “Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous. I was just telling Agent Blankenship here that...”

Blankenship      lost      Zachary

Paulson's words as his brain began to buzz with an intense electrical charge. His muscles tensed, coiling up like a hissing nest of cobras preparing to strike and deliver their venomous payload deep into a terrified animal's throbbing jugular vein. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up in a quick row as every last piece of the maddening puzzle he'd been working on snapped into place inside his mind at once.

*She's in on it*, he thought, fighting back the overwhelming rush of adrenalin coursing hotly through his veins and making his limbs tingle. *I'd bet my fucking life that she's in on it.*

He turned toward Ann Marie Paulson and barked out the accusation before he had a chance to change his mind. “Where’s the baby?” he asked. Resting his hand on the butt of the Glock

holstered at his side, he took a menacing step toward her. “Who’s got the baby, Ann Marie?”

Ann Marie Paulson’s breathtakingly gorgeous face blanched for a split-second before she was able to recover. Barely noticeable, but definitely there. “What the hell are you talking about?” she snapped icily, pulling back her slender shoulders in offense as the color flooded back into

her porcelain cheeks in a hot red rush.

“And just who the fuck do you think you’re talking *to*?”

Zachary Paulson’s voice cut through the heated exchange. “Now, just wait one goddamn minute here, Agent Blankenship. What the hell are you-”

Blankenship ignored him and kept his stare fixed squarely on Ann Marie Paulson’s lovely form. Unlike

her husband, she looked absolutely *flawless*, decked out in five-hundred-dollar tailored jeans and a silk blouse that had probably cost her husband twice that much. Make-up perfect and not a single hair out of place. “I know that you’re in on it, Mrs. Paulson,” Blankenship snarled. “I can see it written all over your face.” He slipped his Glock out of its holster and fought back another hard shudder as he leveled

the barrel of his weapon directly at the center of her beautifully developed chest, feeling like he was having an out-of-body-experience right now. And why the hell not? If he were wrong about this, it would mean the end of his career at best and felony charges at worst.

But he knew he wasn't wrong.

Blankenship took another menacing step toward the woman and

repeated the startling accusation, trying his best to ignore the cacophonous ringing in his ears that was rattling his brain so badly he felt as though he were descending the steepest drop on a rickety old wooden rollercoaster. “Now, like I said, Mrs. Paulson,” he growled, “where’s the fucking baby?”





## CHAPTER 42

An hour later, Blankenship and Krugman were sitting with the Paulsons in their extravagant drawing room, Ann Marie in cuffs and tears now while her husband sat on a leather couch opposite twenty feet away from his blushing bride, a woman who was a good twenty-five years his junior. Zachary Paulson's own face looked as white as a sheet as he stared in disbelief at his beloved,

whose extremely attractive features would have looked right at home on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Arm candy; trophy wife; the May half of a May-December romance. Call it whatever you wanted, Blankenship thought, but clearly things hadn't worked out between the two.

“We’ve got you dead to rights, Ann Marie,” Krugman said, leaning

forward to rest his elbows on his knees and holding her watery stare. The old man didn't sound angry with the woman, just absolutely *convinced*. Still, Blankenship wasn't surprised by Krugman's matter-of-fact tone. No doubt the Director had come across this *exact* sort of situation dozens of times in the past over the course of his lengthy career. *Always look to the families first.* "Just come clean with us now

while there's still a chance for us to save the baby," Krugman went on. "You're his *mother*, for Christ's sake."

Ann Marie Paulson, *nee*

D'Arbinville, stifled a sob that sounded to Blankenship like it started somewhere deep in her stomach, but he couldn't quite bring himself to feel sorry for her.

This was no *mother* here in front of him, after all, no matter what Krugman had

just said. *Madison* was a mother. *Peggy Krugman* was a mother. His *own* mother was a mother. But Ann Marie Paulson? Not in a million fucking years.

“We’ve got the cigarette case with your brother’s initials on it, Ann Marie,” Blankenship cut in, passing along the recent bit of welcome knowledge that had come courtesy of Maggie Flynn down in DC with some deft computer tracking. Though the

baby-snatching asshole had managed to stay out of all the fingerprint databases, he hadn't been able to erase the record of his *birth*. Blankenship stretched his neck six inches to the left and made a quick mental note to send Maggie Flynn a huge bouquet of flowers in thanks for her tireless dedication to her job. The least "Google" deserved for all the hard work she put in behind the scenes on

every case, day after day, year in, year out.

“Horatio D’Arbinville,”

Blankenship went on. “So where is he now? Where’s the baby?”

Ann Marie looked up at him with tear-filled eyes: sea-green orbs that were dotted with light flecks of grey that danced beautifully in the irises, not unlike those of the “Afghan Girl” in the famous, prize-winning photograph. *Otherworldly*. “I don’t *know* where they



are,” Ann Marie said, her shaking voice laced with plenty of emotion but not even the *trace* of an accent that might’ve put Blankenship and Krugman onto her trail earlier. “I swear to *God* I don’t know. Horatio wasn’t supposed to *hurt* little Zachary. He was just supposed to scare you guys a little bit so that you’d pay the ransom. I had no idea about the finger; you have to believe me. I *never*

would've agreed to anything so cruel.”

From his post on the couch opposite her, Zachary Paulson curled his upper lip into a menacing sneer. “You *disgust* me, you stupid whore,” he spat, biting off the words with his teeth. “All this for *money*? You were a goddamn *flight attendant* when I found you, for Christ’s sake.”

He paused and waved a hand in the air at the luxury surrounding them. “I

gave you *everything*.”

Ann Marie cut her hypnotizing stare over to him. Her already unsteady voice trembled even more. “You told me we were getting a *divorce*, Zachary. The pre-nup you made me sign is ironclad, a lawyer told me so. I would have been left with *nothing*.”

Zachary Paulson shook his head in undisguised anger, his unshaven

cheeks flushing bright red with the liters of boiling blood that were no doubt pumping hard through his frazzled system. “Nothing?” he asked incredulously. “*Nothing?* What about your *son*, you fucking loser? Not to mention God-knows-how-much in child-support payments each month.” Paulson stretched his neck violently. Blankenship could hear the tension-filled pop of vertebrae from across the

room. “God, you’re a stupid bitch. You should have asked the lawyer about *that*. You’re in *America* now, dummy, not smelly France anymore.”

Blankenship interrupted the testy exchange. Not only did he know that Paulson was ridiculously far off base with his assessment of the French legal system and the protections it afforded – not to mention the personal-hygiene

habits of its citizenry – the conversation wasn't accomplishing anything. They needed to stay on subject here, however hard that might be for them to accomplish with all the heightened emotions swirling around the room. Anger could wait here, though. Plenty of time for indulging that later on. The little boy *couldn't* wait, however. Not even for another second. The baby's continued life or horrible death

depended on the tiniest fractions of time at this point in the case, so they needed to speed things along. “Now, listen to me very carefully, Ann Marie,” Blankenship said, holding her gorgeous gaze with his own in a viselike grip that he refused to let himself drop even for a millisecond. “You’re going to do *exactly* what we tell you to do from here on out. If you *don’t* do exactly what we

tell you to do from here on out, you're facing life in prison without parole. Do you understand that? Can you possibly wrap your feeble little mind around that fate? Cooperate with us, though, and maybe, just *maybe*, you'll get out someday. You're still a young woman. You've still got plenty of years left in front of you. So if you ever *do* get out of prison someday, there's still a chance that you can rebuild what's left of your



destroyed life.”

Ann Marie slumped her slender shoulders in complete and utter defeat, all the fight and false protestations that had been coming from earlier gone now. Boiled down to brass tacks, she'd clearly been *beaten*.

Blankenship's skin tingled as he took in the look on her face, *relishing* it. *Savoring* it. This was the *good* part of

the job. The *fun* part of the job. Catching the bad guys. Or, in this case, catching the bad *girls*. Solving the seemingly unsolvable mystery and protecting the innocent. Still, he knew that now they needed to defeat Ann Marie Paulson's brother and whoever else was working with him. Blankenship only prayed they could do it in time to save the baby – if the poor little thing was even still *alive*.

He shook himself, wanting to believe that was true. *Needing* to believe that was true. Only chance in hell of him keeping his shit together long enough to do what he needed to do from this point forward.

Ann Marie Paulson's voice cracked with the asking of her next question. Happy ending or sad, the end was coming now; Blankenship knew

that. Barreling at them like a goddamn *freight train*. If they were lucky, though, he and Krugman would have more than just a minor say in how the baby's story ultimately wrapped up.

Blankenship sighed heavily. One way or the other – happy ending or sad – he knew they were about to find out.

“What do you need me to do?”  
the woman asked.



## CHAPTER 43

In the sumptuous living room of his luxurious suite over at the Four Seasons Hotel & Resort on Ontario Street in downtown Cleveland – the same suite in which he'd stayed while wooing the lovely and hopelessly naïve Helen Morgan right out of her pants and her freedom at the same time and chosen for *precisely* that reason (no way in *hell* the feds would think to look for him

twice in the same place) – Horatio D'Arbinville patted at the left breast pocket of his perfectly tailored suit jacket in frustration. He gritted his teeth angrily and exhaled heavily in irritation, not believing his rotten luck. He'd looked *everywhere* for it, but he still hadn't been able to find his goddamn cigarette case *anywhere* yet. He'd probably dropped it back at that shithole

motel they'd been staying at previous to this, the Manor Inn. Stupid mistake on his part, no two ways about it. An *amateur* mistake on his part. Seemed that an affectation that had worked so very well for him over the years was now working *against* him. No doubt his fingerprints would be all over the damn thing, considering the way *he* chain-smoked. Not to mention the fact that he'd just given the authorities his fucking



*initials.*

D'Arbinville shuddered as his brain began to buzz with a vague, unidentifiable dread. Turning away from his splendid window-view, he shook his head in disappointment with himself for the uncharacteristic display of personal sloppiness that now threatened to unravel everything he'd worked so hard to weave. No use in

getting all worked up about it now, though, he knew that. Bad as things might seem at the moment, the authorities wouldn't find his prints in *any* database, not even in the fabled one maintained by INTERPOL. After all, he'd never been *caught* before. And as for the initials? Shit, there were *millions* of people out there with the initials "HD", weren't there? Of course there were. So all things considered, he should still feel

safe as a house, shouldn't he?

So why the hell *didn't* he?

D'Arbinville ran a hand over his freshly shaven scalp, still not accustomed to the smoothness there. It hadn't been easy for him to lose his beloved locks but he'd known it had been a necessary move on his part in this rapidly accelerating game of cat and mouse that would soon draw to a heart-

stopping conclusion one way or the other. *Whose* heart would stop at the finale of this match-up of good versus evil still remained to be seen.

D'Arbinville again shook his head in annoyance. Much as it had hurt him to lose his hair, though, he'd needed to change his appearance before coming back to the Four Seasons. That much had seemed only obvious. The only *smart* thing to do under the

circumstances. He'd lost his beloved mustache, too, and that had been even *more* difficult for him to part with. A sacrifice for the greater good, no matter how badly that particular sacrifice might sting. He could always grow his hair back – facial and otherwise – once this thrilling game had been completed. He just hoped he wouldn't be growing it back from a cold prison cell somewhere

in the middle of a Nebraska cornfield while he served out the remainder of his life in a federal penitentiary where the inmates who ran the place didn't look very kindly upon those who hurt babies to further their own greedy ends.

D'Arbinville sighed again and reached into the front pocket of his dress slacks. Shaking out a fresh Gitane from the plain cardboard packet they were now nestled in, he tucked it between his

lips and lit up before tilting back his head and letting loose with a long, smooth stream of grayish-blue smoke that filled the air above him while Louise fiddled away with God-only-knew what in the master bedroom.

Just then, the prepaid cellphone sitting on the coffee table rang. Frowning, D'Arbinville walked quickly across the oversized room and picked it

up. He gritted his teeth again as yet *another* powerful wave of irritation threatened to make his brain implode. The cellphone was to only be used sparingly, if *ever*: he'd made that point good and goddamn clear from the very beginning. So this had *better* be good. D'Arbinville flipped open the phone and placed the untraceable device to his left ear. "What is it?" he barked.

His sister's voice came across



the line, full of drama, as usual. Presumably, she had her palm covering the exposed corner of her mouth, judging from the muted sound of things on her end of the connection. All cloak and dagger and hide-and-seek; that was Ann Marie, all right. A real double-agent if ever there'd been one. "I need to see you right away, Horatio," she said.

D'Arbinville wrinkled up his

face in confusion despite his intimate knowledge of his sister's hopelessly flaky character. Not a promising way to start a conversation at all, though. "For what?" he asked, attempting to keep his own tone level now. If he couldn't keep his shit together here, no way in *hell* his little sister would be able to keep *her* shit together. So tough as it might be for him to get to grips with right now, D'Arbinville needed to remember that

he was the *leader* of this outfit. The most powerful and important piece on the chessboard. The most *deadly* piece on the chessboard, even considering Louise's ugly penchant for performing unthinkable acts of torture just as easily as if she'd been pouring herself a fresh cup of tea. As D'Arbinville went, however, so did everyone else involved. That was just the way things

were. The way things had *always* been. And the way things always would *be*, right up until the end – whether that ending proved bitter, sweet or some combination of both.

“I think Zachary’s on to me,” Ann Marie said, speaking in short breaths now, practically *whispering* the words. “I need to know what I should do.”

D’Arbinville rolled his eyes and

felt his jangled nerves finally smooth over. He breathed out a slight sigh of relief that deflated his chest, feeling silly for having let his sister work him up into such a lather in the first place. Ann Marie was a worry-wart; always had been ever since she'd been a little kid. Talk about someone who made mountains out of molehills. She was a goddamn *miracle worker* of a

landscaper when it came to those sorts of things. “What makes you think Zachary’s on to you?” he asked.

Ann Marie sniffled, not surprising D’Arbinville in the least. As he’d noted earlier, Ann Marie had always been a drama queen ever since she’d been old enough to wipe her own nose. No chance of her changing that particular aspect of her personality now, no matter how high the stakes might be.

His little sister might have gotten most of the looks in the family – even if his *own* looks were certainly nothing to sneeze at – but *he*’d definitely gotten all the brains. “I don’t want to talk about it over the phone,” she said.

‘Why not?’

“Because I always feel like someone’s *listening* to me.’

D’Arbinville shook his head and

checked his watch. An irritating job settling down his sister's frazzled nerves, but a crucial one nonetheless. He needed to keep Ann Marie calm for just a few more hours now. After that, they'd all be on the next plane out to the south of France, where thirty-year-old Scotch by the oaken barrel and Gitanes by the caseload waited for him for the rest of his life. "Not possible," he said. "We need to check out of here in an



hour. There's no time for us to meet now. I'll call you once we reach our next destination. Maybe we can meet then."

Ann Marie paused for a long moment then. Blowing out a slow breath, she finally said, "OK, Horatio, but you never should've put me in this situation in the first place. It wasn't fair."

A hot wave of anger flared up D'Arbinville's chest before he could fight it back. He swallowed away the bile in back of his throat, grimacing at the unpleasant acidic taste dancing on his lips. "Don't kid yourself, Ann Marie," he said evenly, slowly flexing the fingers of his right hand and studying his manicured fingernails while wisps of smoke from the Gitane floated up toward

his eyes and made them water. “You wanted this every bit as much as I did.”

“That’s not true. You *forced* me to do this.”

D’Arbinville pulled back his head six inches in surprise. He just couldn’t help himself. This had been his *sister*’s idea the entire time, after all, ever since the very beginning. An insurance policy against her impending divorce. So why the fuck was she trying

to rewrite history now? What was the point? Unless...

“What the hell are you talk-“ he began, but the words died in his throat as the doors to his suite suddenly flew open with a violent bang. Twenty feet across the room, a sandy haired agent trained a huge black pistol squarely at his head. Bruce Blankenship.

“Hands up!” the agent screamed.

“Put your hands over your fucking head  
*now!*”

D’Arbinville dropped both the phone and the cigarette to the plush carpet at his feet at the same time; stunned stupid as he did what he’d just been told without thinking. He lifted his hands over his head as his heartbeat hammered away madly inside his badly constricted chest. For one long, terrifying moment there, he couldn’t even

*breathe.* He struggled to form a coherent thought but couldn't manage do so through the dizzying waves of confusion racing through his brain and making any sort of cogent thinking impossible. Finally, his strangled voice produced a single, disbelieving word while the smell of burning carpet floated up into his nostrils. The still-smoldering Gitane going to work on the expensive

flooring at his feet. “*How?*” he croaked.

The youthful-looking agent advanced farther into the suite and glanced quickly to his right before returning his burning stare to D’Arbinville, practically sizzling a hole right *through* him. “Just shut the fuck up and keep your hands over your fucking head, asshole, or I’ll blow your goddamn brains all over this place.” The agent paused and curled his face

into a menacing sneer. “*I* sure as hell wouldn’t want to pay the cleaning bill around here. Living the good life here, aren’t you, Horatio? Too bad that’s over for you now. Now, where the fuck is the baby?”

Just then, from D’Arbinville’s left, Louise suddenly emerged from the bedroom, holding the now-screaming baby cradled in her left arm.



D'Arbinville cut his gaze over to her and saw the cushioned handle of a hammer gripped tightly in her right fist. *Now* he saw what his cousin had been fiddling with in the master bedroom. She'd been *practicing*. The sight of her with the hammer in her gnarled hand was enough to turn even *his* stomach – no small feat to accomplish. The sick, sadistic bitch.

Louise        glanced        over        at

Blankenship, stunned stupid herself. Clearly, she was also in a state of shock brought about by the unexpected and thoroughly unwelcome intrusion of the shouting agent. A look of pure *rage* flashed across her ugly face. Then, in one quick motion, she jerked up the hammer and brought the solid steel head of it streaking down toward the baby's fragile skull.

A flash of movement originated from the doorway. D'Arbinville snapped his gaze over to it. Silver hair and another black pistol. The thunderous clap of a gunshot in the enclosed space, shattering D'Arbinville's eardrums and making him feel as though his ears might *bleed* from the jarring, brain-bending noise.

A split-second later, Louise

D'Arbinville's head exploded on her wide, matronly shoulders.

When everything had been said and done and after all the costs had been added up, the cleaning bill would run in the thousands of dollars. And why not? After all, gelatinous gray brain matter, small bits of shattered white bone and bright red bloodstains that seeped deep into the flooring weren't especially easy to remove from pristine white carpeting,

now were they?



## CHAPTER 44

Bruce Blankenship dropped his Glock and sprang forward to catch the baby just as the brown-haired woman holding him crumpled hard to the carpet in the luxurious suite over at the Four Seasons. Never in a million years would he be able to understand how he'd accomplished the feat. A single clear thought hadn't crossed his mind the entire time he'd performed it. He'd just

*acted.*

From behind him, he heard the sudden sound of dress shoes scraping against the carpet, originating from where D'Arbinville had been standing. Blankenship gritted his teeth in annoyance with himself, thankful beyond words to find that the baby was still alive and appeared mostly unharmed but pissed off at himself for having so



stupidly put Krugman and the baby in harm's way by dropping his loaded weapon within D'Arbinville's reach. No doubt the baby-snatching asshole was going for the Glock right now, one last chance for him to escape the seemingly inescapable mess in which he found himself at the moment. One last chance for him to *win* this deadly little game of cat and mouse they were playing.

Blankenship had just enough time to cover the baby's tender ears before another cacophonous gunshot rang out from the doorway of the luxurious suite. After that, everything went deathly silent.

Blankenship turned around tentatively to see what had just happened behind him, his heartbeat hammering away so madly inside his heaving chest

that he feared it might actually *stop* altogether.

He breathed out a grateful sigh of relief at what he saw. Then he smiled widely despite the pulse-pounding circumstances. Fifteen feet away, Horatio D'Arbinville lay sprawled out on the carpet, a neat bullet hole where his left eye had been just a moment earlier. Blankenship widened the smile on his face even farther. After all these

years and all the miles the old man had put on his creaky knees, it seemed that Bill Krugman still had what it took to make it as an agent out in the field, after all.

Not only that, the old man was a *damn* good shot.

Blankenship glanced up at his boss while simultaneously trying his best to soothe the wailing baby in his arms.

“Nice shooting, sir,” he said, nodding respectfully as he balanced the squirming child, bringing back memories of when his girls had been infants.

“Nice shooting, indeed.”

Krugman tucked his Glock back into its holster at his side and waved a hand nonchalantly in the air, trying his best to appear matter-of-fact about the whole thing but falling miserably short. The satisfaction on Krugman’s face was

as clear as day to Blankenship. And why not? If it were possible for the Director to be promoted for his heroic actions here today that was *exactly* what would have happened for him. Nowhere for you to go when you were already the top dog, though.

“All in a day’s work, Agent Blankenship,” Krugman said, stretching his neck casually before finally allowing

himself a small smile that brightened up his lined and weathered face like an abrupt sunburst suddenly breaking through a batch of gray storm clouds.

“All in a day’s work.”





## CHAPTER 45

Forty minutes later, Zachary Paulson and his son were finally reunited at Fairview General Hospital, the same place from which the baby had been abducted almost a week earlier. The software king looked up at Blankenship and Krugman with tears filling his eyes while nurses worked frantically to re-hydrate the badly malnourished boy fifteen feet away.

Thankfully, despite everything that had happened to the little guy over the past week, doctors had predicted a full and complete recovery from the harrowing experience. The tiny little tyke wouldn't even *remember* it. Should make for some rather interesting reading for him once he was old enough to figure out the Internet, though. "I don't know how to thank you guys," Paulson said in

a voice cracking with emotion. “You not only saved my baby’s life, you saved *my* life, too. I was going to put a bullet in my brain if anything happened to little Zachary. I just wouldn’t have been able to go on living.”

Blankenship smiled softly. He could understand the sentiment. He’d have felt the exact same way if anything had ever happened to either one of his own kids. He also knew that the person

Paulson should be thanking right now was Maggie Flynn down in DC. By triangulating all the cellphone usage in Cleveland and removing all the registered numbers from the equation, she'd found five signals coming from prepaid devices while Ann Marie Paulson had been speaking with her brother. Once Flynn had rattled off the coordinates of those five signals, the

address to the Four Seasons had jumped out at Blankenship and Krugman like a rapist lurking in the night, making *their* part of the job relatively easy. Blankenship made a mental note to add a nice bottle of champagne to the bouquet of flowers that he'd be sending Flynn's way later on tonight. The good stuff, too. Again, the least "Google" deserved for all her invaluable work.

Paulson said, "What about the

pinkie finger, though? That's what confusing the hell out of me. Little Zachary still has all his fingers. So where did it come from?"

Krugman shook his head sadly. "Case of grave robbery out in Elyria a few nights ago," he said, pursing his lips with the relaying of this sobering information. "It was just a bluff on your brother-in-law's part. A very *sick* bluff,

but a bluff nonetheless.”

Paulson grimaced. “Jesus fucking Christ.” He paused and blew out a slow breath that sagged his chest. “I want to pay for all the costs of a new funeral for that baby,” he said. “I *insist* on it. It’s the least the parents deserve.”

Blankenship grimaced. “No need for that,” he said, feeling a pang of grief cut hard through his heart even though he hadn’t known the baby

personally. “The child died in a car crash with her parents last week. Barely a week old. The poor little thing.”

Paulson blanched. “Dear God.”

“Yeah,” Blankenship said. “I know. Dear God.”

Just then, a nurse called for Paulson. “Sir,” she said, “you can come see your baby now if you’d like. We have him stabilized enough now for



contact.”

Paulson shook both Blankenship and Krugman’s hands before he left, his grip considerably stronger than it had felt just a few short hours earlier back in the man’s sumptuous drawing room. When Paulson had gone, Blankenship turned to Krugman and lifted his eyebrows on his forehead. “So, sir,” he said. ‘What’s next for us? Where do we go from here?’”

Krugman stretched his neck, looking absolutely *exhausted* from the intense exertions of the day. And why not? The Director had *killed* two people today, after all. A pretty tough concept to wrap your brain around even considering how *bad* those particular dead people had been. “Now, Agent Blankenship,” Krugman said, blowing out a slow breath of his own, “you get

*exactly* what's been coming to you.”

Blankenship tensed his shoulders and felt his stomach dropped all the way down to his toes. The insubordination coming back to bite him in the ass, just as he'd feared it would ever since he'd had the temerity to go against the Director's very specific orders earlier in the day. Though he'd hoped it would never materialize, here it was, right here, right now and staring him right in

the face, practically *mocking* him for his stupidity.

Blankenship swallowed hard.

“Yes, sir,” he said, slumping his shoulders in defeat. “I understand completely.”

Krugman wrinkled his already wrinkled face even more, looking confused. “Hell, there’s no need for you to look so goddamn *glum* about it,

Bruce.” He reached out a hand and clasped it firmly onto Blankenship’s left shoulder. “What I mean by that is now you finally get to join Agent Wexler on the Jack Yuntz case. That *is* what you wanted, isn’t it?”

Blankenship’s heart skipped several beats in a row inside his chest. He was almost unable to believe his luck. In the space of about ten seconds he’d gone from being the ugly girl at the

dance that nobody wanted to be seen with to the queen of the entire \ prom.

Gathering himself, he breathed out a grateful sigh of relief and set his lips in a tight line, readying himself mentally for the upcoming showdown with the bloodthirsty youthful lunatic who'd caused the suicide of his partner and the deaths of *scores* of other innocent people along the way over the

course of his brief-but-all-too-deadly career as a killer.

*Jack Yuntz.*

Blankenship gritted his teeth in anticipation. It was payback time now, and he had *plenty* for which to pay Jack Yuntz back, too. Time for him to settle the score for Dana and all those other innocent people who'd died by the youthful murderer's ruthless hand. He only prayed that he could remain

*professional* when the time came to dish out the retribution, and not transform into some wild-eyed vigilante with no thought at all for either his family or his career. “Yes, sir,” Blankenship said, knowing that it wouldn’t be easy to stay professional when he finally met up with Jack Yuntz but also knowing that he’d need to try. “It sure as hell *is* what I want. *Exactly* what I want, as a matter



of fact.”

Krugman nodded. “Good. So get the hell out of here and go rest up. Go hug your wife and kids. Give them a hug for me, too, while you’re at it. Because starting bright and early tomorrow morning, you’re back on the job. That OK with you?”

Blankenship nodded back. “*More* than OK with me, sir.” He paused and frowned. “Hell, sir, I feel

like we should give *each other* a hug right now or something. Are you feeling that way too?”

Krugman closed his eyes briefly and breathed out a frustrated sigh. “Just get the fuck out of here, Blankenship,” he said, pinching his nostrils with his eyes still closed and shaking his head in exasperation. “Just get the fuck out here before I change my mind about all this

and put you on traffic detail outside the field office for the next six months.”

Blankenship snapped his heels together smartly and gave the Director a stiff salute. “Yes, *sir*,” he said.

Pivoting on his heel, he began to walk away. “Agent Blankenship now getting the fuck out of here before you change your mind about all this and put him on traffic detail outside the field office for the next six months.”

Krugman stopped Blankenship before he could get too far away. “Agent Blankenship?” he said.

Blankenship turned around to face him. “Yes, sir?”

The Director held his stare, all business now again. “Don’t *ever* disobey a direct order from me again, do you understand? Do it again and be prepared to hand over your ID and gun.

Are we clear on that?”

Blankenship nodded and dropped his frivolous tone at once. He felt infinitely sorry that he'd been stupid enough to push his luck with his boss. He should have known better. Despite his warm and caring nature, the Director wasn't a man to be trifled with. Not if you wanted to keep your job, at least, which Blankenship most certainly did. That mortgage payment at the end of the

month was coming up fast and furious, after all, and it wasn't going to pay itself. "Yes, sir," Blankenship said, averting his gaze. "We're crystal clear on that."

What happened next caught Blankenship completely by surprise. As a matter of fact, he couldn't have been any more shocked if the Director had just torn off all his clothes right there in

the hospital to display a pink tutu hidden underneath in an unsubtle homage to the late, great, cross-dressing J. Edgar Hoover.

Krugman burst out into a loud peal of laughter.

“You should have *seen* the look on your face just now,” Krugman said, barely managing to choke out the words around the waves laughter coming from deep within his chest. “Now come over

here and give me that hug you were just talking about, you oversized son of a bitch.”





# PART IX

“I believe in everything until it’s disproved. So I believe in fairies, the myths, dragons. It all exists, even if it’s in your mind. Who’s to say that dreams and nightmares aren’t as real as the here and now?” – John Lennon



# CHAPTER 46

*December 15<sup>th</sup>*

Jack laid low for almost two solid months after having escaped relatively unscathed from the harrowing debacle over at the Strongsville McDonald's, until right before Christmastime.

To say the least, he felt thankful beyond words that he wouldn't be spending the holidays in a cold jail cell

somewhere while he waited for his upcoming murder trials for having butchered nearly fifty innocent people in cold blood with his trusty machinegun over the course of the past several months.

Merry Christmas, indeed.

Flipping on the television set in his rented room down in Columbus – the Ohio state capital located a three-hour

drive away from Cleveland – Jack sat down on the queen-sized bed and watched the breathless news coverage of the recent school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut that had captured the entire world's attention. The previous day, a mentally unstable teen named Adam Lanza had burst into the Sandy Hook Elementary School and had proceeded to mow down twenty schoolchildren and the six courageous teachers who'd been

trying to protect them. Predictably, the media were linking the Sandy Hook shooting to Jack's *own* crimes, causing Jack to roll his eyes in exasperation. He and Adam Lanza were *nothing* alike, for Christ's sake. Jack had used a fucking *paintball* rifle at St Anthony's. He wasn't a monster, after all. What was so goddamn hard about seeing the difference in that?

A lot, apparently.

*“If you ask me, we need to ban all assault weapons in this country,”* a perfectly coiffed female was saying to the other members of a roundtable panel on NBC. *“How many more Jack Yuntzes and Adam Lanzas do we need to suffer through before we finally smarten up?”*

The portly man seated to the



woman's left took umbrage at that.

*"You've got to be kidding me, Michelle,"* he snapped, hijacking the conversation with his gruff voice and even gruffer demeanor. Looking remarkably sloppy for television in a wrinkled white dress shirt that had some sort of food stain on front and sweating heavily from the bright overhead lights, he'd already loosened the ugly paisley tie strapped around his tree-trunk throat.

*“When are you going to smarten up? Guns don’t kill people; people kill people. Do you want to ban all forks and spoons too because we’re the fattest country in the entire world?”*

To her great credit, the woman named Michelle passed on taking a mighty swing at the softball the oversized man had just served up. Displaying an admirable amount of

restraint considering her fellow panelist's impressive girth and aggressive attitude, she simply said, *"No, Michael, I don't want to ban forks and spoons because we're the fattest country in the world. I do, however, want to ban assault weapons because they're killing innocent children."*

*"What about the Second Amendment?"* the man shot back, shifting hard in his seat and getting even

*more* riled up now. His pockmarked face turned a terrifying shade of red that made Jack wonder for a moment if he might burst a blood vessel in his brain right there on the spot and keel over dead on the table. If nothing else, certainly would've made for compelling television. *“What about our Constitutional right to bear arms?”*

The woman screwed up her own

pretty face, not cowed in the least little bit by the man's overbearing nature.

Jack lifted his eyebrows on his forehead, duly impressed. Looked to him as though the chick had quite a bit of moxie despite her remarkably diminutive stature. He liked her already. *"If you want to cite documents, Michael,"* the woman said coolly, *"what about the Declaration of Independence? You know, the right to life, liberty and the*

*pursuit of happiness – with an emphasis on life? Or are you just going to twist things around to meet your own selfish purposes? The Second Amendment was written when the government didn't have aircraft carriers, smart bombs and nuclear weapons. How do you plan on fighting a tyrannical government with the assault weapons you're proposing we*

*continue to allow killing children?”*

Blissfully, the moderator cut in at that point. Jack nodded his head in approval. Couldn't have happened soon enough for his taste. He'd already grown weary of this stupid exchange that wouldn't solve a single aspect of the gun-control debate. *"I'm very sorry, Michelle and Michael,"* the woman in charge said, glancing up at someone off-screen and pressing a finger to the tiny

transmitter tucked into her right ear, “*but I’m afraid I’m going to have to interrupt you there. The President is just about to address the nation.*”

Jack sat up straighter on the bed and watched with interest as the roundtable discussion gave way to Barack Obama. Dressed in a dark black suit that had a tiny American flag pin tucked into the left lapel, Obama made



his way slowly across the television screen to the front of a candlelight vigil for the Sandy Hook victims out in Connecticut.

Clearing his throat quietly, Obama gave a short speech praising the teachers who'd lost their lives the previous day while they'd been trying to protect the murdered students. Then he read out loud the names of each of the deceased children in a somber voice,

pausing briefly between each name.

*“Charlotte. Daniel. Olivia.  
Josephine. Ana. Dylan. Madeleine.  
Catherine. Chase. Jesse. James.  
Grace. Emilie. Jack. Noah.  
Caroline. Jessica. Benjamin. Avielle.  
Allison.”*

Obama paused again for a long moment then before continuing, letting the enormous gravity of the situation sink

in. *“God has called them all home,”* he said with a slight hitch in his voice.

*“For those of us who remain, let us find the strength to carry on and make our country worthy of their memory.*

*May God bless and keep those we’ve lost in His heavenly place. May He grace those we still have with His holy comfort. And may he bless and watch over this community, and the United States of America.”*

Jack flipped off the television as polite applause sounded from the vigilgoers, angry that the media were still using his and Adam Lanza's names together in the same sentence. Lanza was an *amateur*, for Christ's sake. A *coward*. Someone who'd turned one of his own guns on himself at the conclusion of the bloody events that had taken place at Sandy Hook, killing

himself in much the same cowardly manner that Dana Whitestone had killed *herself* several months earlier. In Jack's book, that made them *both* amateurs and losers.

Jack, however, was a *winner*. Always had been and always would be. Not to mention a *professional*. And now it was time for him to remind the rest of the world of that indisputable fact.

Digging his iPhone out of his

pocket while he continued to fight back the hot surge of annoyance in his chest brought about by what passed for journalism these days, he caught an Internet connection at the motel and navigated the Web browser over to FriendFinder, a site that matched up people with similar interests for online chats. Jack smiled despite the overwhelming irritation still burning in

his veins as he checked his contacts list and saw that *lawdog71* was online again. *Excellent.* Using his own username of *bullets4justice*, he tapped out a quick greeting to his computer mate, a man with whom he'd spent the last two months building a friendship:

*bullets4justice: hey, man,  
what's up? what's going on tonight?  
can you talk right now?*

The response came a moment later.

*lawdog71: Yeah, I can talk.  
Still at work right now, but I've got a  
few minutes to spare. Anyway, what's  
going on?*

Jack's skin tingled. *A lot* was



going on, actually. Maybe only in his brain right now, but that would change soon enough if all went well for him with the conversation from here.

*bullets4justice: not much. just bored. anyway, i'm coming into cleveland tonight. wanted to know if you could get together with me for a drink later on.*

A full twenty seconds passed before the response came, causing Jack to worry briefly that he'd overstepped his mark. He gritted his teeth at his own unforgivable stupidity while he waited. He was an idiot, a fool. He'd jumped the gun, so to speak, and now he'd lost his chance to continue executing his bloody script – maybe even forever.

Blissfully, though, just when he'd

begun to think that all had been lost and he'd never get another chance like this again, another high-pitched chime sounded on his iPhone, signaling lawdog71's response. Jack breathed out a deep sigh of relief that deflated his chest completely at the extremely beautiful and highly welcome sound. More pleasing to his ears right now than Johnny Cash belting out an unplugged rendition of *Ring of Fire*.

*lawdog71: I'm not sure what time I'll be done with work tonight, but to tell you the truth, a drink sounds pretty good to me. I've been up to my ears in paperwork lately. Anyway, what time will you be in town?*

Jack checked his watch and tried his best to control his excited breathing.

Wasn't easy. The air in the motel room might as well have been molasses right now for all the good it was doing him. Still, where lay the great surprise in that? He had the old man squarely in his sights now. It *should* be hard to breathe. And if nothing else, he knew that he'd need to navigate the conversation *very* carefully from this point forward if he wanted to avoid fucking things up beyond all repair,

which he most certainly did.

Nearly seven p.m. now. If he left in the next ten minutes or so, he could probably make it into Cleveland by ten. Giving himself half an hour to prepare from there and barring any sort of unforeseen delay, the next scene outlined in his exquisite and recently rewritten script could get underway before the clock had even struck eleven. Jack

hadn't been lying to his conversation partner at the beginning of this discussion, after all. He *was* bored. *Deathly* bored, as a matter of fact. Had been for the past sixty days now. Thankfully, though, he knew *precisely* how to take care of that.

Turning his attention back to the smartphone in his hands, he pecked out his response:

*bullets4justice: i'll be in town  
around ten-thirty or so. would that  
work for you?*

Lawdog71 paused again before  
answering. Even *longer* this time. The  
wait was *excruciating*.

*lawdog71: Actually, that's a  
little late for my blood, partner. How*



*long will you be in town for, though?*  
*Maybe we could do it tomorrow night,*  
*if you're not busy then.*

Jack shook his head in  
aggravation. Tomorrow night simply  
wouldn't work for him. He wanted to  
get back to work *now*. To begin  
executing the rest of the script *tonight*.  
He'd waited for far too long already as  
it was and if he had to wait another

single day, he felt sure that he'd lose his mind from the boredom. He told his conversation mate as much.

*bullets4justice: can't do it tomorrow night, man, just tonight. c'mon. what do you say? one quick drink won't kill you.*

A major lie, of course, but one

Jack couldn't resist telling.

Bill Krugman's next response seemed to take an eternity to appear, leading Jack to believe once again that he'd fucked up his chance. When Krugman's response finally came, though, Jack's pulse crashed hard in his wrists:

*lawdog71: OK, Barry. I guess*

*you've talked me into it. Just one quick drink, though, OK? What hotel are you staying at?*

Jack's heartbeat thundered in his ears. His palms flooded with sweat. His stomach swam with nausea. His skin crawled. *This was it.* The payoff for which he'd been waiting ever since seeing the FBI Director on the friendship

site while the old man had been fiddling with his phone in that coffee shop back in New York City during the Chessboard Killer investigation. Krugman had never revealed his true identity to Jack during the two months they'd been talking on the site, of course, but he hadn't needed to. Jack knew *exactly* whom he was talking to.

And now it was time for the venerable old Director to find out

exactly whom *he*'d been talking to, too.

*bullets4justice: i'll be in the  
holiday inn downtown. how about this:  
i'll shoot you a quick message through  
the site when i get there and we'll go  
from there. play things by ear. sound  
good to you?*

Blissfully, Krugman answered

him immediately this time.

*lawdog71: Yep, sounds good to me. See you tonight, buddy. Looking forward to finally meeting you in person.*

Jack rose to his feet with an odd ringing sound echoing in his ears. A delicious sense of anticipation crackled through his brain. Shoving the iPhone

deep into the front pocket of his jeans, he grabbed his beat-up brown leather backpack off the bed and shoved in the bottle of vodka that he'd convinced a homeless man outside a liquor store ten miles away to purchase for him earlier in the day in return for being allowed to keep the change: six dollars and thirty-two cents. Then Jack added the syringe loaded with crushed-up and liquefied



sleeping pills.

He paused, hoping the crude gambit would prove successful again. He was no chemist, certainly, but the sleeping pill trick had worked out fairly well for him the last time he'd tried it, right before he'd killed his idiot father with a sharp pair of scissors while the man's whore of a girlfriend had snored off her latest bender on a sheetless bed fewer than twenty feet away with a

tantalizing mound of exposed boob flesh peeking out teasingly from beneath the left side of her exquisite body and just crying out for Jack to *touch* it already.

Time to see if the trick would work just one more time.

Sliding the straps of the backpack over his shoulders, he headed for the door to the motel room and checked his watch once more. Seven-

oh-eight now. He'd really need to hustle if he wanted to make it into Cleveland by ten and give himself enough time to transition properly into his new, knife-wielding persona.

*Don't look now, Crawford Bell,*

Jack thought as he pulled shut the motel room door behind him without bothering to lock it, *but Nathan Stiedowe is on his way to see you again.*

*Is on his way to murder you*

*again.*

For good, this time.



# CHAPTER 47

*10:35 p.m.; FBI field office; Lakeshore Avenue;  
downtown Cleveland*

Bill Krugman was in Bruce Blankenship's office downtown, the last person left in the place as he talked on the phone with his wife. "Hey there, darlin'," Krugman said, leaning back in his seat and propping up his feet on Blankenship's desk blotter beside a coffee mug that read WORLD'S

GREATEST DAD. “How’s my favorite gal in the entire world doin’ tonight?”

Peggy laughed, no doubt rolling her beautiful brown eyes as she did so. Krugman could *picture* her gorgeous face in his mind as her soft voice filled his left ear. Peggy’s beautiful features hadn’t changed one little bit – to Krugman, at least – in more than fifty years. And, God, how he *missed* those

features. And the feel of his fingertips as he brushed them lovingly against her soft cheek. And the subtle scent of her perfume in his nostrils as they lay cuddled close together in bed before falling asleep at night. Seemed to him more like two *decades* than two months since he'd last seen, touched or smelled her. Far too long by anyone's estimation and an absolute *lifetime* to Krugman. Along with the annoyance of needing to



conduct press conferences every now and then, one of the few parts of his job that he truly despised. Being away from Peggy was harder than almost anything else about his work, and he'd *killed* two people a couple months ago, for Christ's sake. "I'm fine, you silly old flirt," Peggy said, breaking into his thoughts. "Are you still at work?"

Krugman lifted his left wrist and

checked his watch, sighing heavily. He'd been at the office for nearly four hours already after having worked ten straight hours earlier in the day, trying desperately to cram two workdays into one. Still, tough as the hectic pace might be on him at his age, that was *exactly* how his schedule would look for the foreseeable future until he could get some sort of lead on where Jack Yuntz might be at the moment.

Krugman gritted his teeth. The murdering little prick hadn't made a peep for two solid months now, which certainly marked a good thing for the general populace, but only made catching the sadistic bastard that much more difficult. And as a direct result of the machinegun-wielding teen's suddenly shy nature, the inter-agency task force of more than thirty people

assigned to this case had been doing little more than sitting on their hands for the past sixty days. After all, you couldn't very well follow any clues if no clues were being left behind for you to follow; no matter *how* many well-trained people you had at your disposal. "Yep," Krugman said, sighing even more heavily now. "I'm still at work. Just wrapping things up now."

Peggy clucked her tongue.

Krugman could almost see her lying in their bed in her nightgown as she did so, her hair still wet from her recent shower. He'd give just about anything in the world to be there with her right now. And why not? He was old, after all, not dead. Not yet, at least. "You need to slow down, Bill," Peggy said. "And I mean, *way* down. You're much too old to be keeping these crazy hours.

You're no spring chicken anymore."

Krugman laughed.

Understatement of the century right there. “Yeah, I know, honey,” he said, shaking his head in bemusement. Peggy had never been the type to pull punches, and she sure as *hell* wasn’t the type to pull punches when it came to the issue of his health and wellbeing. No big surprise there, though. Being a nurse for the better part of her life hadn’t stopped

for her when she'd finally retired from the noble profession back in 1997. Officially, at least. "Thanks for reminding me of that unpleasant little fact, hon," Krugman said, shaking his head some more. "Anyway, I'd *like* to slow down but it really isn't an option for me right now. Won't be until we can finally catch Jack Yuntz. If you know where he is, though, you should just go

ahead and tell me already. That way I could finally get home to you.”

Peggy sighed herself. As she did so, Krugman could hear the longing in her voice. A pretty easy emotion to identify when you felt the exact same way yourself. “Can’t help you there, dear,” she said. “I have no idea where that monster is. If I did, I’d arrest him myself. Anyway, why are you calling me so darn late? You must be absolutely



exhausted. Quit wasting your time talking to me on the phone and get back to your hotel already and go get some sleep. You need it.”

Krugman smiled. That was his wife in a nutshell right there: always worried about *him*, even when she'd been a Stage Four breast cancer patient who could barely manage to get out of bed to use the bathroom, sometimes not

making it all the way down the short hall in their bedroom to the restroom, which must have seemed like a million miles away to her at the time. “Never a waste of time when I’m talking to you, Mrs. Krugman,” he said, widening his smile and meaning it more than she would ever know. “And I’m not going back to my hotel quite yet, anyway.”

Peggy grunted. “Why not?

Where are you going?”

“Meeting up with a friend for a quick drink.”

“Who?”

Just then, a chime sounded from the computer in front of Krugman. He glanced over at the screen.

*Finally made it here. Room 421. You still up for that drink with me?*

Krugman put his feet back down on the floor and tapped out a quick response, cradling his cellphone between his cheek and shoulder as he did so. *Yep, be over there in ten.*

Rising to his feet, he answered his wife's question. "Barry Ronson," he said, shrugging his shoulders into his heavy gray overcoat and leaning down to

press a button on the computer to turn off the monitor. “He’s an old retired county sheriff from Columbus that I’ve been chatting with online for the past couple months. Only in town for one night, so I can’t stand him up.”

Peggy grunted again. “Jesus, Bill. You’re meeting up for a drink with some guy you met in a *chatroom*? Are you out of your ever-loving mind? You’re worse than one of those love-

struck teenagers I'm always reading about. The ones who always wind up in a drainage ditch off the highway with no head attached to their shoulders.”

Krugman lifted his left wrist to check his watch again. “Guilty as charged on the count of being out of my mind, sweetheart, but what can I say? Nobody I know in real life ever wants to hang out with me. I get bored

sometimes. I need the break.”

Peggy clucked her tongue. “Fine, Bill, but just be careful. And tell me something before you go.”

“What’s that, babe?”

“Why doesn’t anyone ever want to hang out with you?”

Krugman lifted his eyebrows on his forehead. “I don’t know, babe,” he said. “Because I’m the boss, I guess.”

“Well, guess what?”

“What?”

*“I want to hang out with you.”*

Krugman's veins flooded with warmth. Seemed that his wife was something of a hopeless old flirt, too. And her playful nature right now only made him miss her that much more. “And I want to hang out with you, too, Peg. More than you'll ever know.”

“You'd better, mister.”



Krugman flipped off the light in Blankenship's office and headed for the elevator, nodding to a janitor who was mopping the floor as he went, the headphones over the man's ears blasting some sort of heavy metal music deep into the center of his brain. Krugman crinkled up his face in distaste. Coming from Oklahoma himself, he'd always been more of a country-western fan

himself. Nothing beat Waylon Jennings and an ice-cold six-pack on a Saturday night. “You know I will, honey,” he said. “I *always* miss you.”

Peggy’s paused for a long moment then. Then she said, “You know what, Mr. Krugman?”

“What’s that, honey?”

“I love you more than I love life itself.”

Krugman frowned despite the

tenderness of the sentiment. He just couldn't help himself. Still, his wife hadn't sounded quite right at the moment, causing him to worry briefly that her cancer might be back. If it were, he knew she wouldn't tell him about it until he'd finally finished up with this maddening case and gotten home to her, would probably think that she'd be *burdening* him with the information.

Nothing could be further from the truth, of course, but that was just Peggy being Peggy. It's the way she'd *always* been ever since the wonderful day more than fifty years earlier that he'd first met her, he in his best seersucker suit and she in a beautiful dress that her mother had sewn for her out of leftover curtain fabric as he'd arrived on her doorstep in Norman, Oklahoma to pick her up for their very first date, hat in his hand and his heart

pounding wildly in his throat. “Is everything OK, Peg?” he asked, furrowing his eyebrows in concern.

Peggy blew out a slow breath. “Yeah, everything’s just fine, Bill. I just miss my husband, that’s all.”

Krugman’s eyes misted over at that. He just couldn’t help himself. If it were possible for him to love Peggy any more than he already did, he thought that

his heart would probably burst from the emotional overload. Never in a million years would he understand what he'd ever done to deserve her. Whatever it had been, though, it must have been something pretty darned special for him to end up with a woman like her. If all of life were one big dance, she'd always be the queen of *his* prom. "I miss my wife, too," he said, again meaning it more than she'd ever know. "Anyway,

I'll call you first thing in the morning,  
OK?"

"Yep. Promise to miss me until  
then, though?"

"Always, honey."

"Always and forever?"

"And then for a million years  
after that."

After exchanging a few more *I  
love yous*, Krugman flipped off his

phone and tucked it into the side pocket of his coat, at the same time pressing the button on the elevator for the ground floor.

That was when he suddenly felt a hot pain slice across his throat.

Krugman tried to inhale but found that he couldn't breathe. He jerked up his hands in a panic and wrapped them around his severed windpipe, trying frantically to staunch



the heavy flow of blood that was squirting through his trembling fingers and splattering down onto the marble floor at his feet in a polka-dot pattern. The inefficient attempt at self-cauterization didn't work. Not even a little bit. Spinning around in confusion, he saw the janitor that he'd just passed standing there with a long knife dripping in his right hand, the heavy metal music

still blasting from the headphones fastened over his ears. Only it wasn't a janitor. Not really. And it wasn't a man, either. Not a full-grown one, anyway.

It was Jack Yuntz.

Shocked, Krugman tried to choke out a question but only a wet, gurgling sound emerged from his sliced throat. He wanted to ask the boy how he'd made it past the security desk downstairs

but then he realized that it was a question to which he'd never receive an answer. Not in this lifetime, anyway. He only had time for one last thought now.

A maniacal smile spread slowly across Jack Yuntz's thin lips as Krugman collapsed hard to the marble floor with a rapidly expanding pool of bright red blood spreading out around him.

Krugman's last thought, of course, had been reserved for his lovely wife. And why not? He loved her more than anything else that he'd ever loved in this world. Always had ever since the wonderful day more than fifty years earlier that he'd first met her, he in his best seersucker suit and she in a beautiful dress that her mother had sewn for her out of leftover curtain fabric as

he'd arrived on her doorstep in Norman, Oklahoma to pick her up for their very first date, his hat in his hand and his heart pounding wildly in his throat.

Bill Krugman's last thought, of course, was of his beloved wife:

*Peggy.*



## CHAPTER 48

Half a mile away from the field office downtown, Bruce Blankenship was having coffee at the Arabica shop on Ontario Street with Claire Wexler, the young spitfire with fiery red hair and an attitude to match who'd been his *de facto* partner for the past two months now, ever since Bill Krugman had finally given in and allowed Blankenship to begin working the Jack

Yuntz case. Unfortunately for Blankenship, however, everything had seemed to come to a dead stop in the case right after he'd joined it. Not so much as a single *peep* from Yuntz in the past sixty days. Still, he and Wexler had *plenty* of paperwork to go through – from psychiatrist reports to profiles genned up by the FBI's famed Behavioral Analysis Unit down in DC to



Jack Yuntz's fucking *report cards* from grade school. Unless they could somehow slide the sharp edge of one of these pieces of papers across Jack Yuntz's throbbing jugular vein, though, Blankenship knew that shuffling around already well-shuffled paperwork wouldn't stop the murdering little prick from killing anymore innocent people.

He and Wexler would need to do it.

Blankenship sighed heavily before blowing off a thick cloud of steam from his boiling drink and lifting the Styrofoam cup to his lips. Taking a tentative sip, he studied the buxom redhead seated across the table from him. Though she'd done her very best to disguise the fact with her conservative clothing, heavy black eyeglasses and no make-up on her face, Wexler was a real

looker any way you sliced the bread. Whatever marked the opposite of putting lipstick on a pig was what she'd tried to do here tonight. What she *always* tried to do. Hadn't worked out very well for her, though. And to put things mildly, Wexler's drop-dead good looks hadn't made Madison especially happy when his beloved wife had popped her head into his office unexpectedly the previous week with the twins in tow to see if he'd

wanted to go grab some quick lunch with them.

“Jesus Christ, Bruce,” Madison had hissed, pulling shut his office door behind her so that Wexler couldn’t hear what she was saying and glaring a hole right through him. “You told me that she looked like a cartoon character when I asked you about it six weeks ago.”

Blankenship had felt frozen to the

spot despite the sheer *heat* of Madison's angry stare, not having the faintest clue on Earth of what to say. For some reason or another, his brain had gone completely numb, rendering it pretty much useless for any sort of cogent thinking. Still, no huge surprise there. His brain *always* felt that way whenever Madison glared at him. "Well, she *does* look like a cartoon character," he'd protested feebly.

Madison had only increased the intensity of her stare at that, until Blankenship had thought laser beams might shoot of her eyes. “She looks like *Jessica Rabbit*, for Christ’s sake, you big goddamn idiot.”

Blankenship’s cheeks had flushed hot, and he’d immediately felt guilty, even though he hadn’t had the slightest reason in the world to feel that

way. He'd never cheated on Madison before and he had no plans to do so in the future. He *loved* her, for God's sake. She was the mother of his *children*. Besides, Wexler was young enough to be, well, his *little sister*, anyway. "I didn't say *which* cartoon character she looked like, honey."

That clever little remark had cost Blankenship three-hundred-dollar earrings that he couldn't afford and solo

laundry duty for the next month. Still, he knew that he'd gotten off cheap with the punishment. He was fairly certain that he'd read somewhere before that divorces were fairly expensive propositions.

Blankenship was just setting his coffee back on the table in front of him beside a small stack of files dealing with the Jack Yuntz case when Wexler broke



into his thoughts. “I think I left a file we need back at the office,” she said, flipping back her long red hair over her left shoulder and pursing her full lips in irritation. “I’ll just run over and get it real quick. Be back in a jif.”

Blankenship frowned and checked his watch. Nearly eleven o’clock already. Way too late for *any* woman to be walking the streets alone, much less one who looked like Wexler.

Besides, they'd walked over here together, so that was the same way they'd walk back. Better safe than sorry, and that was what his mama had taught him to do. "I'll go with you," he said, rising to his feet and sliding his shoulders into his faded brown leather bomber's jacket. Wexler was a pretty tough cookie – an amateur MMA fighter in her spare time, for Christ's sake – but

Blankenship's deep-seated sense of chivalry wouldn't allow him to allow *her* to walk alone, especially at night. Way too many weirdoes out there looking for a quick, non-consensual sexual tryst.

Wexler rose to her feet and put on her own coat, nodding down at his barely touched drink that was still sitting on the table next to the Jack Yuntz files and belching out impressive amounts of

steam. “What about your coffee?” she asked. “You just bought it, and the damn things cost six bucks apiece. No use in wasting your money on my account.”

Blankenship waved a hand in the air and pretended not to see his drink. “What coffee’s that, Claire?”

Wexler narrowed her bright green eyes at him suspiciously. Somehow, it only made her look even

prettier. Blankenship shook his head; pretty sure that she'd make a *burlap sack* look good. Good thing he was such a faithful guy. If not... "Is this some sort of knight-in-shining-armor thing, Blankenship?" Wexler snapped.

"Because if it is then you can just shove it right up your male-chauvinist ass. I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself." She pulled back the flap of her coat to display the shiny black Glock tucked

into a leather holster at her side.

“Besides, I’ve got a goddamn *gun*.”

Blankenship wrinkled up his face and tried his best to look offended by the accusation, at the same time reaching down to scoop the files off the table.

“No, this isn’t some kind of knight-in-shining-armor thing, Claire,” he said, straightening back up and pursing his own lips in an effort to underscore the

validity of the statement. “Don’t be silly. I just feel like taking a walk, that’s all.”

Wexler held his stare. Not quite as intense as Madison’s, but not all that far off from it, either. He wondered briefly if someone had pulled all the girls out of class at some point during their childhoods and taught them to stare like that. “Well, it had *better* not be. Because in case you hadn’t heard yet, the

1950s were a long time ago. This isn't an episode of *Father Knows Best*."

Blankenship took a step back and held up his hands with his palms facing her. "Whoa, take it easy there, sister. Don't go having a conniption on me. And don't go pulling that ageism crap on me, either. Like I said, I just need some fresh air." Blankenship checked his watch again. "We've been sitting here



for *hours* now, for Christ's sake. I need the break. So quit being such a pain in my ass about it."

Wexler gave him one last meaningful look before finally dropping her sparkling emerald stare and heading for the front door to the coffee shop. "Well, OK, then," she said, brushing past his right shoulder. "You can come with me if you really want to. Just know that I'm perfectly capable of going by

myself.”

Blankenship caught the light scent of her shampoo as she passed. Something flowery. In front of him, Wexler pulled back her coat sleeve and glanced down at her left wrist to check her own watch. “We’ll be back here in half an hour, anyway, so your next coffee’s on me.”

Blankenship followed the

intoxicating scent of Wexler's shampoo out of the coffee shop and onto the street. On their way over to the field office on Lakeshore Avenue, he filled in the time by asking her about her MMA experiences. Pretty odd pastime for a woman, to say the least, and it had piqued his curiosity. "Ever fight a guy before?" he asked.

Wexler glanced over at him.

"You mean, like, *officially*?"

“Yeah.”

Wexler shook her head. ‘No, of course not. Don’t be stupid. I don’t even think they allow that kind of thing.’

Five minutes later, they’d finally reached the field office on Lakeshore Avenue, eschewing any further conversation along the way. Flashing their IDs at the security guard who was working the front desk downstairs, they

made their way across the pristine lobby and stepped into the elevator on the northeast side of the lobby before riding the car up to the fourth floor, the frigid air from outside still dancing merrily on their frozen cheeks.

When the doors to the elevator slid open with a high-pitched *ding!* several moments later, Blankenship stepped out first, momentarily forgetting what his mama had taught him about

always letting the so-called “weaker sex” go first. The next thing he knew, his world turned completely upside-down, his black dress shoes sliding out from beneath him in some sort of slippery substance that was coating the marble-tiled floor.

A split-second later he landed hard on his back, jarring the breath clean out his lungs. Wheezing painfully, he

turned his head to the left and found himself staring directly into Bill Krugman's unblinking brown eyes.

*“Jesus fucking Christ!”*

Blankenship screamed, trying to scramble to his feet but slipping in the blood. *“Jesus fucking Christ!”* His pulse crashed wildly in his wrists. Acrid stomach bile flooded into his mouth and sizzled on his taste buds. He grimaced against the foul taste. Behind

him, Wexler was already on the phone to the security desk downstairs.

“Dead body on fourth floor,” she said, breathing hard. The Glock at her side had already been drawn from its leather holster. “Call 911 and then get up here just as soon as you can to provide us with some backup.”

Wexler snapped shut her phone and shoved it deep into the front pocket



of her jeans. She gave Blankenship a concerned look and helped him to his feet with her free hand. “Are you OK?”

Blankenship wiped his shaking palms against the thighs of his dress pants, staining them with Krugman’s blood. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m fine. Just a little bit shaken up.”

Wexler nodded. “Good, then come on. I’ll lead the way.”

Still too stunned to protest,

Blankenship drew his own gun from its holster and followed her closely down the hall to the first door on their left: his office. Reaching it, Wexler took one quick step back and lunged forward again before kicking it open hard. “Freeze, motherfucker!” she shouted, shoving in her Glock first to lead the way.

No movement came from inside

the space. Just then, though, the loud rumble of a motorcycle roaring to life sounded from the parking lot four stories below. Both Blankenship and Wexler ran over to the window and looked down. A figure dressed entirely in black revved the motorcycle's engine once, then lifted both his middle fingers in their direction.

Blankenship gritted his teeth angrily. *Jack Yuntz.* In one fluid

motion, he jerked up his right arm and shot through the window, raining down hundreds of shards of broken glass onto the parking lot below, scattering them across the pavement like a bag of spilled diamonds falling from a fleeing thief's shaking hand. A thick chunk of concrete kicked up directly in front of the motorcycle's front tire, causing the motorcyclist to flinch hard.

Close, but not close enough.

Blankenship adjusted his arm an inch to the left and pulled back on the Glock's trigger again. But this time his weapon jammed. “*Goddamn* it,” he snarled.

He turned to Wexler, wondering what in the hell she was *doing*. He twisted up his face in annoyance. The deer-in-the-headlights look on her pretty

face made it clear to him that she didn't have the faintest clue of what she should do. "Well, Wexler," he snapped, "don't just *stand* there, for Christ's sake. *Shoot* the motherfucker already. My fucking gun jammed."

Directly to his right, Wexler finally fired off her own Glock. The sharp report from her weapon rang loudly in Blankenship's ears, rattling his brain. Unlike *his* recent near-miss,

however, the misdirected bullet from her gun shattered a car window fifty feet to the left of its intended target, setting off the vehicle's alarm system.

Instinctually, Blankenship grabbed Wexler's Glock from her hands and pointed it out the window as the offended Mercedes-Benz that she'd just hit continued to honk obnoxiously. But by then it was already too late. The

figure dressed in black kicked the motorcycle into gear and pulled back on the gas with his right fist before roaring out of the parking lot in an ear-bending screech of tires.

Hitting Lakeshore Avenue in a matter of seconds, the motorcycle wobbled crazily for a moment – nearly spilling over onto the icy pavement – before its driver finally regained control and righted the ship.



Blankenship winced and lowered Wexler's gun to his side as the m o c k i n g *wah-wah-wah* of the motorcycle's powerful engine echoed in his ears like the sound of maniacal laughter.

And then, with one last shocking burst of speed and the fluttering of a black trench coat, the figure was simply *gone*.



## CHAPTER 49

The cold wind roared in Jack's face as he zipped out of the FBI field office parking lot on the recently purchased motorcycle, freezing his cheeks solid. His heartbeat hammered painfully against his ribcage for several terrifying moments when he nearly dumped the motorcycle on Lakeshore Avenue, but then he somehow managed to right the ship again. “*Fuck, fuck,*

*fuck,*” he muttered to himself, not sure he’d *ever* felt this way before. He’d just been *shot at*, for Christ’s sake. Quite a change of pace from what he’d grown accustomed to, with *him* doing all the shooting.

Speeding down Lakeshore Avenue as the loud wail of sirens began to echo loudly in the distance, Jack pointed the motorcycle toward I-90,

knowing good and goddamn well that he needed a straight stretch of road to really pick up speed and throw off any possible pursuers.

He nearly threw up his own heart as he went from the overload of adrenalin coursing through his veins. His extremities tingled. His mouth filled up with an acrid taste. Grimacing, he swallowed it back. Still, he felt *proud* of himself for what he'd just done. And

why the hell not? He'd had a *great* plan for killing Bill Krugman – sliding the sleeping pill-laced syringe through the plastic bottle of vodka and covering up the small hole with a piece of Scotch tape before somehow convincing the Director to have a drink while Jack ostensibly used the bathroom prior to their face-to-face meeting, but great playwrights knew when to edit their

scripts. And less was more sometimes.

When he'd gotten into Cleveland half an hour earlier, instead of heading directly for his hotel and setting things up for the final showdown with the venerable Director, Jack hadn't been able to resist the urge to swing by the field office to conduct a little reconnaissance work. And that was when his plan had suddenly changed. Risky, of course, but he hadn't minded.

He *liked* the risk, after all. Always had.  
Not to mention the fact that smoking was  
an absolutely *filthy* habit.

And – as his mother had so often  
and so wisely told him and his little  
sister while they'd been growing up on  
the mean streets of New York City –  
cigarettes would *kill* you.

Finally reaching the on-ramp to  
I-90 several minutes later, Jack pulled



back on the throttle some more and lost himself in the steady stream of traffic that was flowing down the busy travel corridor. Then he smiled. The execution of Crawford Bell had gone *perfectly*, much better than even *he* ever would have dare dreamed. *One down, one to go*. Now he just needed to take care of Dana Whitestone and he could finally wrap up this decidedly deadly little game of modified chess once and

for all.

*His way, this time.*

Jack widened his smile until his cheeks began to ache.

*Hell*, he thought as the freezing wind whipped hard through his short brown hair and turned the exposed skin on his face into an unfeeling sheet of frozen flesh, *I guess that I might as well take out Jeremy Brown again, too,*

*while I'm at it.*



# PART X

“The beginnings and endings of all human undertakings are untidy.” – John Galsworthy, English playwright and novelist who died in 1933.



## CHAPTER 50

Bruce Blankenship felt tired.

And cranky as hell.

He blinked hard against the bright rays of sunshine that were streaming in through the windshield of his 4-Runner and stabbing the center of his brain like sharp yellow knives, at the same time resisting the overpowering urge to yawn. He and Wexler had been up all night after the shit-show that had

begun with Jack Yuntz slicing Bill Krugman's throat right there in their own goddamn *field office*. Still, sleep wasn't an option for him right now. Wouldn't be for the foreseeable future, as a matter of fact. And until he could track down the murdering little punk who'd killed his boss in cold blood – catching the old man unawares from *behind*, of course – Blankenship didn't think he'd willingly



go to sleep again. If sleep wanted him so goddamn badly, it would just have to take him by force.

“He sliced the janitor’s throat and stole his clothes while the man was outside having a smoke, and in the process stole the janitor’s ID,” Claire Wexler said from the passenger seat beside him, lifting her right hand and studying her short fingernails casually. “Pretty shitty security setup, if you ask

me. Anyway, I'm fucking *starving* and I'm fucking exhausted, too. I need some breakfast and then I need about twelve hours of uninterrupted shut-eye. You hear me, Blankenship? Are you taking me to my car? Because it's just on the other side of the building, you know. I could have walked there, even by myself. Is this one of your knight-in-shining-armor things again?"

Blankenship resisted the urge to shout at his *de facto* partner, missing Dana Whitestone more than ever. Wexler was obviously cranky herself, but that was just too fucking bad for her. “No, Claire,” he said evenly. “I’m not taking you to your car.”

“Well, then, where *are* you taking me?”

Blankenship didn’t bother to

look at her. “Somewhere that I should have taken you a long time ago.”

“Where’s that?”

“Just wait. You’ll see.”

Ten minutes later, Blankenship angled his 4-Runner into the Cleveland Police Department’s headquarters on Ontario Street. Wexler lifted her eyebrows on her forehead as he pulled his vehicle into an empty space and killed the engine. “What are we doing

here?” she asked.

Blankenship undid his seatbelt and opened his door. “Just follow me,” he said. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

To his great surprise, Wexler did as she’d been instructed without asking any more annoying questions. Exiting the passenger side of the vehicle, she followed closely at Blankenship’s heels while he led her across the icy pavement

and toward a large building fifty yards away from the main structure. Pulling open a heavy outer door a moment later, Blankenship flashed his ID at a man seated behind the front desk there and received a nod in return. The loud sound of gunshots rang out all around them.

“What the hell are we doing at a *shooting range*?” Wexler asked, still bringing up the rear. “Seriously,

Blankenship, is this really necessary?”

Blankenship finally turned around to face her. He lifted his own eyebrows high on his forehead but didn't say a word. He didn't think he needed to.

Wexler shook her head in irritation at the unspoken insinuation.

“Fine, Quick-Draw McGraw. Whatever you want. You're the boss, I guess.”

Forty-five seconds later,

Blankenship and Wexler were in a two-person booth with headphones cupped over their ears and yellow-tinted Wiley X shooting glasses on their faces to protect their eyes. Seventy yards away, a paper target in the shape of a male torso hung from a metal clip on a motorized pulley system. Blankenship swept an arm in front of his waist.



“Ladies first,” he said, speaking loudly enough for her to hear him through her hearing protection. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Wexler gave him a stormy look and lifted her Glock, thankfully not at *him*. Setting her lips into a tight line, she pulled back on the trigger. The first shot didn’t even hit the target.

Blankenship pushed her arms down gently. “Here,” he said. “Wait a

minute. Let me show you.”

Lifting his own weapon, he put three quick shots within an inch or two of the target’s heart before lowering his weapon to his side again and turning back to her. “You’ve got to think of your weapon as an extension of your own arm,” he said. “You’re jerking back on the trigger. *Squeeze* it instead, firmly but gently.”

Wexler nodded and lifted her Glock again, pulling back on the trigger once more. This bullet nipped the very bottom of the left-hand side of the target this time. Closer, but not anywhere *near* close enough for what they needed.

Blankenship stopped her again and shook his head in disbelief, pulling off the right side of his headphones to facilitate the exchange. “How the hell

did you ever pass your shooting quals at the Academy?” he asked. “No offense, Wexler, but you shoot like shit.”

His new partner glared daggers at him and pulled off the left half of her own hearing protection. “Fuck you, Blankenship,” she said. “Just fuck you very much. For your information, I’m good at *other* things.”

“Like what?”

“Like choking the shit out of you

if you keep running your smart mouth to me,” she spat. Fire shot through her sparkling green eyes with the harsh words.

Blankenship glared back at her. His patience with the young agent had run its course now. So – woman or not – if she wanted to talk to him like a man, he’d *treat* her like a man. No time for chivalry when people were still *dying*

out there. “Well, unless you plan on stopping Jack Yuntz by choking him out with one of your fancy MMA moves, I suggest that you come here every day until you learn how to shoot, Wexler. This isn’t an MMA match, you know. That fucking prick killed our boss right in our own goddamn backyard.”

Wexler softened her glare, and Blankenship felt glad to see it. Angry as he felt right now, he also felt much too

tired to fight with her. And however hard it might be for them to accomplish at the moment, they needed to save whatever vitriol they could muster for Jack Yuntz. “Yeah, I know that he killed our boss in our own backyard,” Wexler said, taking the sharp edge out of her tone. “I was there, you know. But are we absolutely *sure* it was him. Are we absolutely sure it was Jack Yuntz?”

Blankenship creased his face at the question, puzzled. “What the fuck do you mean by that? Who in the hell *else* would it be?”

Wexler shrugged. “I don’t know. Just thinking out loud, I guess. Forget I said it.” She paused. “Anyway, as much as I’m enjoying this lovely shooting lesson and your unending patience with me, Blankenship, could I



please use your cellphone real quick? I need to make a call and have my neighbor check on my dogs. Poor little things have been alone for more than twelve hours now. They're probably going crazy."

"Where's *your* cellphone?"

"Forgot it back at the office."

Blankenship patted at the front pocket of his pants, which were blissfully blood-free thanks to Madison.

Despite the ridiculous hour, his lovely wife had delivered a fresh set of clothes to him to replace the bloodstained ones he'd been wearing earlier. With no babysitter available at the time, Madison had needed to bring the twins along for the ride, so it looked to him as though he'd be buying her some more jewelry soon. The good stuff, too. He didn't mind, though. Hell, it was the *least* she

deserved.

Blankenship dug out the cellphone. Only, when he looked down at it, it wasn't *his* cellphone. It was *Bill Krugman's*.

Blankenship shook his head and recovered quickly from the momentary shock. He'd almost forgotten that he'd removed the Director's phone from the old man's inside jacket pocket the previous night. Switching it on, he

studied the screen and frowned. “Hold on a sec,” he said, holding up a finger to Wexler. “I forgot I had this thing on me.”

Wexler screwed up her pretty face. “What the hell are you frowning at, Blankenship? You look like a goddamn Gloomy Gus right now. Did your wife just dump you via text message or something? Trouble in

paradise?”

Blankenship held up the phone so that Wexler could see the screen. “This is Krugman’s cellphone,” he said. “I hacked into it last night. Wanted to see if he might have left us anything interesting to follow up on. Something we might use to catch Jack Yuntz.”

Wexler looked interested by that. “So, *did* you find anything interesting?”

Blankenship shook his head.

“Nope. Not really. I found out that Krugman belonged to an online site that matches up chatters by similar interests, but that’s about it. Sort of like that Chat Roulette thing, only without all the masturbation.”

“What the hell is Chat Roulette?”

Blankenship shook his head.

“It’s a friendship site.”

“So, what’s the big deal then?”

Blankenship hit the login to FriendFinder. Thankfully, Krugman’s username and password had been saved into the system, which made this particular hacking job a piece of cake.

“No big deal at all,” he said to Wexler.

“Just thought that it was a little bit weird.”

Wexler shivered. “Well, it *is*

weird. And not just a little bit, either. Downright creepy, if you ask me. Don't all the drooling pedophiles hang out on those kind of sites?"

Blankenship ignored her and studied the menu as the main page of the site loaded. Seemed to take forever with the weak Internet signal from Verizon. "Probably pretty hard to find people to talk to when you're the top dog," he said. "Anyway, it's probably



nothing. Krugman probably just...”

Blankenship stopped suddenly when a high-pitched chime sounded from Krugman’s phone and an electronic grid popped up on the small screen, accompanied by a flashing notification:

FRIEND NEARBY

Blankenship frowned. “What the

fuck is this?” he said, staring down at the moving icon blipping across the screen:

*bullets4justice*

He deepened his frown. According the GPS-tracked coordinates, Krugman’s online friend was directly outside the shooting range *right now*.

Blankenship’s ears rang. His heart thudded in his chest. Then the

pieces of the puzzle snapped into place inside his mind.

‘What is it?’ Wexler asked, taking in the stunned look on his face. “What’s going on?”

Blankenship was already moving toward the entrance to the shooting range with his Glock at the ready. Wexler followed close behind. “What is it?” she asked again, more forcefully this

time.

“Hey, put that goddamn gun down!” A deep male voice thundered out from Blankenship’s left side. He cut his stare over to it. The Cleveland uniform at the front desk had risen to his feet, looking pissed. “You can’t have your loaded weapon out unless you’re in a booth!” the man yelled.

Blankenship glared at the guy. “Official business,” he snapped. “Don’t

get in my way unless you want to be brought up on federal charges.”

The uniform sat back down sheepishly.

Blankenship turned to Wexler. “C’mon,” he said. “Jack Yuntz is outside.”

Wexler wrinkled up her face in confusion. This time it was *her* turn to be stunned. “How the fuck do you know

that?”

Blankenship banged out of the shooting range as a dizzying rush of adrenalin pumped hot through his veins. No time to explain things to Wexler now. He could bring her up to speed on his masterful investigative techniques later on. Twenty yards away to his right, Jack Yuntz was just turning the corner of the building, slipping a sharp butcher's knife into the inside pocket of his trench

coat as he went. “Let’s go!”

Blankenship shouted, feeling his heart rev up in his chest even more. “We’re not letting the little bastard get away this time.”

Blissfully, Wexler seemed to be all out of questions now. Racing sixty feet down to the corner of the building, Blankenship turned it and saw that Yuntz was in a dead sprint now, headed for his

motorcycle twenty yards away with the tails of his long black trench coat flapping wildly behind him in the stiff breeze. Taking one last deep breath through his flared nostrils, he lifted his gun and skidded to a halt.

Momentarily, at least.

The force of his forward motion – combined with the unseen patch of black ice underneath his feet – kept his body going long after his brain had told



it to stop. Much the same way they'd slid out from beneath him in Bill Krugman's freshly spilled blood the previous night, his dress shoes slid out from beneath him now, turning his world completely upside-down before he landed hard on his back on the pavement with a loud grunt, jarring the breath clean out of his lungs and the Glock out of his hand, clattering the weapon down

onto the sidewalk beside him in a rattling of metal.

Blankenship looked up in horror and tried to draw breath into his lungs. Wasn't easy. Felt like he was trying to breathe in *fire* right now. But Jack Yuntz had nearly reached his motorcycle now. Easy breathing could wait for a more convenient time. He looked up at Wexler and choked out the words. "*Shoot him!*" he wheezed.

Everything seemed to unfold in slow motion after that. Setting her own feet firmly on a patch of dry sidewalk, Wexler lifted her gun and steadied her right wrist with her left hand. Then she squeezed the trigger, just like Blankenship had advised her to do inside the shooting range just a few minutes earlier.

A split-second later, Jack Yuntz

collapsed in a heap beside his motorcycle fifty yards away, shot once directly in the back of his skull. Blankenship widened his brown eyes in complete and utter shock, unable to believe what he'd just seen.

It had been an absolutely fucking *perfect* shot.



# CHAPTER 51

Blankenship rose slowly to his feet, still shocked beyond words. Finally, he managed speech, however unworthy of being written down for study by future generations his words might be. “What the hell was *that*?” he asked, trying in vain to control the incessant hammering of his heart inside his badly constricted chest.

Wexler holstered her weapon,

not even *breathing* hard. She shrugged.

“I don’t know. Lucky shot, I guess.”

Blankenship scowled at her.

“Bullshit.”

Wexler smiled in the bright morning sunlight, her straight white teeth sparkling like a neat row of recently polished pearls and making Blankenship think of a Crest commercial. “Fine, Blankenship,” she said. “You’re right.

That *was* bullshit just now. All of it. I just wasn't sure that it was him last night. Didn't know for sure right now until I got a good look at the little fucker's face. He got what he deserved, though. That's all that matters, right? It's all over for us now. Him, too. We can finally get on with our lives. Move on to the next human trash piles they put in front of us."

Blankenship rubbed at his aching



elbow where he'd banged it against the pavement. Goddamn thing was throbbing like hell. "So what was that inside the shooting range five minutes ago?" he asked.

Wexler shrugged again.

"Creative license?"

Blankenship sighed heavily and shook his head in exasperation. "Why do I have the distinct feeling that you

*enjoy* fucking with me, Wexler?”

Wexler widened her perfect smile. He didn't think he'd ever seen her look prettier. “Because you've got a good gut instinct, Blankenship. You've got a goddamn good gut instinct. Now, c'mon, let's get the fuck out of here and go get some breakfast already. I'm fucking *starving*. They can find us over at the restaurant.”

Before he could protest, Wexler

was already making her way toward his 4-Runner in the parking lot. Blankenship paused for a long moment before following her. He knew that they shouldn't be leaving the crime scene like this, would probably receive matching formal reprimands in their files for doing so, but he was much too tired and much too stunned at the moment to fight with her.

He glanced over at Jack Yuntz's prone body, which was laid out in the snow beside the motorcycle fifty yards away and surrounded by a bright circle of red. "How do you know he's dead?" he asked, hurrying to catch up with Wexler. "Shouldn't we at least *check*? This seems like the fake ending of a bad horror movie, right before the monster comes back to life."

Wexler didn't turn around. "No need to check," she said. "He's dead, all right."

"How can you be so sure?"

Wexler finally stopped and turned around to face him. "Because I *never* miss when I'm playing for keeps, Blankenship."

Blankenship lifted his eyebrows high on his forehead. Somehow, he

knew that she was telling him the truth. The confidence in her voice gave him goose bumps. “Never?” he asked.

Wexler shook her head. “*Never*. And for your information, I got a *perfect* score on my shooting quals at the Academy, you arrogant fucking prick.”



## CHAPTER 52

Claire turned around again and continued toward Blankenship's 4-Runner out in the parking lot of the Cleveland Police Department headquarters, allowing herself another small smile as she went. *Merry Christmas, world, she thought. And Happy Hanukah, Kwanza and Festivus, too, while we're at it. Things are going to be a lot different around here from*



*now on.*

Pulling open the passenger-side door of the 4-Runner after several more moments of brisk walking – at the same time being very careful not to slip on the ice beneath her feet like her hopelessly clumsy partner had just done – Claire slid into her seat and pulled on her seatbelt before snapping the metal buckle into place. Thirty seconds later,

Bruce Blankenship did the same thing next to her on the driver's side. "Where do you want to eat?" he asked, slipping the key into the ignition and cranking the engine into life.

Claire turned to face him more directly as he pulled out of the parking lot of the police HQ and onto Ontario Street, *liking* what she saw. And why not? Even in his exhausted state right now, Blankenship was *cute*. *Damned*

cut. Pity he was already taken. A lowdown crying *shame*, as a matter of fact. “Doesn’t matter to me,” she said. “But I *do* know one thing.”

Blankenship gave her a puzzled look. “What’s that?”

Claire turned her attention back to the road in front of them. “You’re buying.”

Not surprisingly, Bruce

Blankenship didn't protest. He simply drove her to the nearest McDonald's and bought her a Number Two: a Sausage McMuffin with Egg and a hash brown, with a diet Coke in place of the coffee.

Just like she'd told him to.

Claire smiled to herself. Maybe her new partner wasn't such a hopeless case, after all. Maybe he *was* capable of learning.

She sighed, knowing that only

time would tell.

THE END

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

If you've made it this far,  
thank you for reading my  
book! I hope you enjoyed it.  
Please leave a review! I'd also  
like to take this opportunity to

invite you to join me on my  
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see you there!