



THREE TIMES A LADY
&
SKIN: THE WHITE POWER MURDERS

Jon Osborne

**THREE TIMES A
LADY
A DANA
WHITESTONE THRILLER
BY JON OSBORNE**

COPYRIGHT 2013

Other titles by Jon Osborne:

[KILL ME ONCE](#)

[A GAME OF CHANCE](#)

For Jacob

PART I

CLEANING UP AFTER THE STORM

“If this is normal, we have a serious problem in this country. The federal government ought to be embarrassed about what is happening. If local government tried to run things this way, we’d be run out of town.” – Benny Rouselle, president of Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, commenting on the

cleanup efforts following Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Chapter 1

Chicago - 1981

I'm standing in my bedroom,
peeing my pants.

I'm eight years old and fully
aware of what I'm doing, but I can't
seem to stop myself. Warm, dull-yellow
moisture seeps deep into the crotch of
my tighty-whities. A hot rush of blood
floods into my cheeks.

“Disgusting, foul little

creature...” my mother begins but I already know the rest before the words are all the way out of her pretty mouth. They’re the same words she speaks every time, delivered in the condescending tone she favors. There’s nothing new about this in the least. It might’ve been a different day, sure, but it’s still the same old crap – with the same crazy woman who’d lost her mind

years ago. The same crazy woman the state has recently decided is a fit parent after all, even after the horrible thing she'd done to my little brother.

My mother drops her gaze and studies my underwear some more, wrinkling her slender nose in revulsion. Somehow, this ugly action only makes her look even *more* beautiful. “You’re almost nine years old already, for Christ’s sake,” she goes on, shaking her

head in annoyance and returning her stare to mine. “You *do* know what this means, don’t you?”

My heart flips over inside my chest. Of *course* I know what it means.

Doesn’t mean I have to like it, though.

I close my eyes tight and breathe in deeply through my nostrils, wishing with all my heart and soul that I were

somewhere other than my bedroom right now.

Anywhere other than my
bedroom.

In my mind's eye, I float away to my safe place. A large clearing deep in the verdant woods where I sit Indian-style on the ground beside a babbling brook and let the calming sounds of nature wash over me and soothe my soul.

More than anything else, this imaginary world of mine is a *nice* place. A *safe* place.

But my mother doesn't like nice or safe places. Never has and never will. To prove this point for the millionth time in her life, she steps forward and jerks me physically out of my reverie, grabbing me roughly by the scruff of my scrawny neck and squeezing

hard.

“I asked you a question, you filthy little bastard,” she hisses through clenched teeth. Her licorice-scented breath rushes into my nostrils. More urine spreads across my crotch. “*Answer* me. You *do* know what this means, don’t you?”

I look up at her with pleading eyes that are filled with tears as her sharp red fingernails dig even deeper

into my tender skin and leave half moon-shaped marks that won't disappear for at least an hour. I'm trying my best to connect with her on some sort of soul-to-soul level but I don't have especially high hopes that it will work. Still, who knew? Maybe this time I could warm her heart and avoid the consequences. Maybe this time we could make a new start and try to love each other again.

Stop being lunatics for a little while and start living normal lives again for a change. That wouldn't be so bad, would it?

The cold, hard look of detachment in her freezing green eyes disabuses me of this silly notion at once. Silly notions – among certain other things in our house – are luxuries she never allows.

“It means a trip to the butcher’s

shop,” she continues sharply when I can’t quite operate my swollen tongue properly enough to produce words. “Now get dressed.”

I rub at my throbbing neck when she finally releases me from her viselike grip and do as I’ve been instructed while five feet away she taps a high-heeled foot impatiently against the wooden floorboards in my bedroom – the same

bedroom I *used* to share with Timmy, though each and every last trace of my little brother has been erased now. No more of Timmy's clothes or toys or bedding lying around. No toothbrush of his positioned next to mine on the cracked bathroom sink. Not so much as a *hint* that the little boy who'd starred in no fewer than three-dozen national television commercials when he'd been alive had ever been there at all.

Because the same day Timmy died – the same day my mother had brutally *murdered* him – was the same day she'd sanitized our bedroom completely, along with the rest of our house, save for a single lonely picture she'd slipped into a gilded silver frame that now sat on a living-room end-table with a long-ago-wilted black rose stationed in front of it on a piece of her very best china. Where

the videotapes of Timmy in his television commercials had gone was a complete mystery to me. Probably always would be. Who knew? Maybe she'd destroyed them. Just like she'd destroyed Timmy. I certainly wouldn't put it past her.

Just like she'd undoubtedly destroy *me* too someday.

Like, maybe even today.

Chapter 2

Walking over to the corner of my bedroom on rubbery legs, I slide open the top drawer of my scarred oaken bureau before reaching in and selecting a fresh pair of Hanes, at the same time drifting back mentally to the day of the “accident”. That was what we called it around here, if the subject was ever spoken of at all, which, truth be told, didn’t happen very often these days.

The *accident*.

A funny way to describe repeatedly bashing your youngest child's skull into the sharp edge of a porcelain bathroom sink and cracking it open like a ripe watermelon in sickening explosions of red.

I shake my own head to banish the unsettling memory to the special place inside my brain that I reserve for

such things. It simply wouldn't do to think about that horrible day right now. Not with my mother standing so close. She'd *sense* it, like a rabid dog that has glimpsed a flash of bright red blood at a child's pale white throat before succumbing to overwhelming, inbred instinct to attack.

Still, had I been older at the time, I might have laughed at the absurdity of it all. Because decades before the empty

political slogan would first be posited, *I* was the child who'd been left behind, both literally and figuratively. And I'd been left behind with a living, breathing monster. A monster with an almost-too-perfect body, a breathtaking face that could stop traffic clean in the middle of a New York City rush-hour and crystal-clear green eyes that could see right through my soul and recognize that *I* was

a monster too.

I have one leg out of my soiled underwear when my mother corrects me for the first time that day.

“No, keep those ones on,” she says, clucking her small pink tongue against her perfect white teeth in exasperation. “It’ll remind you of the filthy little boy you’ve been here today and of the terrible sin you’ve committed in the eyes of God. I’ll be waiting for

you out in the car. Don't make me wait long.”

With that, she pivots on her well-turned ankles smartly enough to put an SS soldier to shame and marches out of my room. The gunshot sounds of her clacking footsteps fading away down the long hall are followed a moment later by the slamming of the front door in the distance, giving my heart a terrible start.

Ten seconds later, the car engine roars to life out in the driveway.

When I'm absolutely *certain* she's exited the house, I lift my left wrist and quickly check my Mickey Mouse watch, a gift from my mother on my eighth birthday that she insists I wear at all times. A little something to prove to the people from the state how much she truly *cares* about me. How she'd never

intentionally hurt me.

How she'd rather *die* than lose another child.

I fight back bitter tears at the utter *absurdity* of her lies. Because if the tens of thousands of dollars from companies such as Kraft and Kellogg's and Pine-Sol hadn't been enough to keep Timmy alive despite all the money that had been rolling in, what were *my* chances? Not good, to say the least.

Like my mother always told me, *I* wasn't worth one thin dime.

Mickey's arms are pointing out the hour and minute and I know that I only have about thirty seconds to get out to the car before my mother *really* blows her top. Patience might have been a virtue in the bible – which my mother reads and quotes constantly – but it sure as hell doesn't play any part in her

personal psychological inventory. Then again, where was the big surprise in t h a t ? *All* religious people were hypocrites, weren't they? Do-as-I-say-and-not-as-I-do types?

Sure as heck seemed like that to me.

Pulling my wet underpants back up around my waist with a loud elastic snapping sound, I slip my legs into a pair of dark blue shorts so that prying eyes

can't see my shame. Much like upsetting my mother, it's never a good idea to embarrass her, either. There are consequences to that, too. *Harsh* consequences. Always have been and always will be.

Shame properly camouflaged, I hustle down the long hallway past all the pictures hanging on the walls and lock our heavy wooden door behind me

before double-timing it down the cracked walkway to our car.

Climbing up into the back seat as quietly as I possibly can, I pull shut the door softly, clicking it *ever* so slightly and being very careful to avoid making any sort of unnecessary noise. Annabeth Preston isn't the kind of woman who wastes her words. When she says that children exist to be seen and not heard she really *means* it. It isn't just a silly

cliché to her. Hell, she'd *proved* that much the day she'd split Timmy's skull clean in two for the unforgivable sin of succeeding so wildly in an area in which she'd failed so miserably.

And I know beyond a shadow of a doubt – know with every last fiber of my eight-year-old being – that she isn't in the least bit afraid to prove it again.

This time on me.

Chapter 3

In the backseat of our car – a 1978 Lincoln Continental that I'm charged with maintaining in the same sparkling condition as the day it rolled off the showroom floor – I wince at the excruciating memory of my little brother's horrific death.

Immediately after Timmy's head had slammed down into the sink, his big brown eyes had filled up with blood,

making him look a lot more like a deranged werewolf in a low-budget horror flick than a five-year-old actor who'd always seemed just as home in front of the television cameras as he'd been while playing with me in our beloved sandbox out in the backyard.

I shift uncomfortably from the icky feeling of my soiled underwear as my mother puts our car in gear and backs

out of the driveway, cursing her hateful jealousy beneath my breath. Because – despite her many years of rigorous theatrical training at the prestigious Actors Academy in New York City – Annabeth Preston’s stage career had ended quite differently than poor little Timmy’s. Had ended with a pathetic whimper rather than with the ear-shattering bang to which she’d subjected my unfortunate little brother.

In the end, there had been no shouts of *encore!* for my mother; no throwing of red roses at her feet; no breathless reviews in all of the city's biggest newspapers extolling her unparalleled thespian talents. Instead, the last time *she'd* been on stage had been when she'd portrayed "Maid Marian" in an off-off-Broadway production of *Robin Hood* that hadn't

even completed its scheduled three-week run due to the laughably poor attendance.

Ten years later – when I’d find myself sitting alone in a darkened movie theater and watching Faye Dunaway chill people’s blood with her deliciously evil turn as Joan Crawford in a big-screen showing of *Mommie Dearest* – I’d catch myself thinking that the famously bitchy subject of the iconic

film hadn't been all *that* bad of a mother. Not really. Not anything with which Timmy and I wouldn't have been able to put up, at least. Because wire hangers were *nothing* to people like my mother. Child's play, really. To me and Timmy, they probably would've felt like feather pillows swung good-naturedly at each other's heads, just a little lighthearted playtime before bed for two

highly spirited boys who had their entire lives stretched out in front of them in a shimmering path that was paved with gold and led directly to superstardom.

Dreams, however – much like little brothers – had to die sometimes

Chapter 4

The oppressive heat inside our car makes it almost impossible for me to even *breathe* properly as my mother weaves her way deftly through the busy city streets with all the windows rolled up, pausing occasionally only to honk her horn angrily at another driver whenever they have the temerity to get in her way. I shake my head in exasperation at their utter *foolishness*.

Idiots, every last one of them.

Don't they know that getting in my mother's way is *always* a bad idea?

Twenty minutes later, she finally pulls our boat-like car into the small parking lot on the west side of the butcher's shop on Bishop Elder Avenue. Not counting me (which my mother seldom does), the butcher's shop is the only thing my father has left behind

following Timmy's horrific death. And – as my mother is so terribly fond of reminding me – just one of the two commodities possesses any real-world value.

Still not speaking to me, she slams the Lincoln into park and exits the vehicle before walking briskly around the side of the car and flinging open the back door in a cacophony of groaning metal. She grabs me roughly by the

underside of my bony arm and extracts me forcefully from the car before marching me directly up to the entrance of the butcher's shop, digging in her sharp red fingernails once more and nearly tearing my right shoulder out of its socket in the process.

My shoulder sings an exquisite, high-pitched song of pain as she produces a small silver key from the

left-hand side of her lacy black bra and unlocks the front door before dragging me inside.

An intense scowl darkens her gorgeous face as pulls me into the back to where the walk-in freezer is located, each one of her steps punctuated by the staccato report of her high-heeled shoes striking the freshly polished tiled floor. She'd had the tiled floors installed a few years prior for a variety of reasons, not

the least of which was to simplify the task of cleaning up any spilled blood. And why not? There was always *a lot* of spilled blood inside this butcher's shop, wasn't there?

Of course there was.

And not just from the cows and pigs, either.

Especially when the two of us were alone together inside.

Chapter 5

Finally letting go of my arm, my mother opens the freezer door and places her hands on her shapely hips before stepping to one side.

I rub gently at the half-moon indentations in my skin and strain with all my might but am completely powerless to stop my gaze from drifting to the plunging neckline of her red Armani dress. A silver Tiffany heart

necklace is cushioned between her ample breasts. The lacy black bra from which she'd produced the key to the butcher's shop a few moments earlier supports perfect white globes. A small brown mole winks out at me from the left side of her chest.

I blink rapidly in an effort to stop myself from staring but it doesn't work. Not even a little bit. Even at eight years

old, even *I* can see that my mother is a truly stunning woman. *A real hot piece of ass*, as I've heard the grease monkeys whisper to one another over at the gas station on the corner of Michigan and Elm whenever they fill up her tank for her. *A real fine piece of machinery they wouldn't mind checking under the hood.*

I sigh at the utter *unfairness* of the world. To be completely honest,

though, my mother's inviting cleavage could have caused even the most pious of the priests over at St Christopher's to forget their vows of chastity for a moment and steal a quick peek, which they do more often than is comfortable for me each and every Sunday morning while my mother and I sit in our preferred pew up front.

“Eyes up here,” my mother says.

I manage to tear my gaze away from her exquisite breasts long enough to lift my stare to hers.

She gestures inside the cold space with a delicate hand, rattling the matching silver Tiffany charm bracelet that adorns her right wrist. Inside the freezer, huge chunks of bloody red meat are hanging from sharp steel hooks stationed all around the room.

“Now, get in,” she instructs.

I do as I’m told without question. Nobody *ever* questions Annabeth Preston. Not if they want to keep breathing, at least.

Heart in my throat, I take my position in the “correction” spot in the center of the room that I’ve grown so familiar with over the years. The shiny metal floor beneath my feet has been

worn dull from the sheer number of times I've stood there in the past. Three feet away, a matching black circular patch on the floor marks the spot where Timmy *used* to stand beside me. Unfortunately for us, we'd always been the kind of boys who'd required *a lot* of correction.

“Now strip,” my mother orders.

My cheeks flush even hotter than they did back in my bedroom. Still, I

know far better than to protest, so I obediently remove my shoes and socks, then my shorts and shirt. The frigid metal floor beneath my bare feet freezes me in place as I hesitate and look up at my mother.

“The underwear, too,” she prompts.

Again, I do as I’m told. What choice do I have in the matter? What

choice have I *ever* had? Embarrassment courses hot through my veins as I slip out of my Fruit of the Looms – which are still wet and warm from my earlier accident – balancing on one foot and then the other in order to accomplish the tricky task.

Icy blasts of air give immediately birth to goose bumps that rocket up and down my spindly arms and legs. The soles of my feet go numb,

painfully at first, and then as though they'd never been attached to my body at all.

Holding my underwear in one tiny hand, I look up at my mother again.

“Now place them over your head,” she orders. “Wear them like a mask. Put the crotch over your mouth and nose. Breathe in your own waste. Taste your own sin.”

Again, I do as I'm told. The sharp smell of my own urine fills my nostrils. The acidic taste of my own piss burns my tongue.

And then something very strange happens – something I won't understand for many years to come.

For the first time in my life, I feel my tiny member begin to grow slowly between my legs. Only a little at first,

and then a bit more insistently, until it has become completely erect.

I can almost *hear* the smile in my mother's voice as she steps inside the freezer after me. "Well done, son," she says approvingly. "Very well done, indeed."

Her throaty voice drips like warm honey all over my naked body, making it feel progressively stickier with each one of her seductive words.

“That’s *exactly* what I wanted to see from you, Nicholas,” she breathes. “You’ve been a very good boy here today, and now you deserve your reward for it.”

She pauses and my heartbeat notches up in my chest.

“Tell me, son,” she asks teasingly. “Are you ready for me? Are you ready to receive your mother’s

love?”

Anticipation rips like a bullet wound through my gut, taking away my breath and setting every last one of my senses on *fire* with excitement. *This is it.* Now the fun and games can *really* begin. I only wish that Timmy could have been around to see this. He'd always loved these moments almost as much as I do.

“Yes, Mother,” I whisper in a

trembling voice. “I’ve *always* been ready for you.”

The pressure between my legs is almost unbearable now, and it’s only growing stronger with each passing second. So much blood pumping down there I’m afraid the skin might split along the seam.

The sounds of my mother’s high heels echo against the freezer floor;

joined a moment later by the harsh scratch of a wooden match striking to life against the rough strip on the side of the box. Even with the soiled underwear covering my eyes, I can see *exactly* what she's doing right now. What she *always* does when the two of us are alone together inside the butcher's shop.

When the smoke from the match reaches its intended destination three seconds later, the fire sprinklers

overhead turn on in an icy shower that drenches my entire body from head to toe.

Moaning softly, I lift up my face to the ceiling and stretch out my arms like Jesus Christ hanging on the cross, luxuriating in the exquisite pain.

Then my mother simply exits the freezer, closing the heavy steel door behind her and sliding the metal locking

pin into place.

From outside the freezer door, she calls out to me. “What do you say, son?” she asks.

Shivering uncontrollably, I feel my testicles shrivel up and crawl deep inside my stomach for warmth – the kind of warmth I can never seem to find on the *outside* of my body, no matter how hard I look.

“Thank you, Mother,” I say.

And the really sick part about the whole thing – the part that not even *I* will ever be able to fully understand – is that I actually *mean* it.

CHAPTER 6

Los Angeles International Airport – Present day

The muscles lining Special Agent Dana Whitestone's ribcage stretched nearly to the point of snapping as she extended her body a full four inches past her natural height of five-foot-three in a clumsy effort to stow her carry-on bag in the overhead compartment located above her seat on Continental Flight 942, nonstop LA to

Cleveland.

Balancing on her tiptoes, she nearly had the bag tucked away when she suddenly felt a sharp elbow smack directly into the back of her skull.

“Ouch!” Dana hissed, losing her balance and almost collapsing beneath the weight of the bag. The muscles in her overworked arms trembled like high-tension wires strung between

skyscrapers, letting her know they'd given it their best shot but also that they were done working for the day.

She whirled around and narrowed her pale blue eyes at the forty-something businessman wearing a rumpled gray suit who was stowing his own bag across the aisle, paisley-patterned tie hanging loosely around his unbuttoned collar. He looked down and sideways at her over his right shoulder

and mumbled an insincere, “Sorry ‘bout that.”

Dana glared at him. For one long, satisfying moment, she fantasized about sliding the Glock out of the shoulder holster inside her blazer and giving him a brisk pistol-whipping right then and there on the plane. Teach him some good old-fashioned manners he obviously hadn't learned through proper

home training. Maybe if he knew that she was legally entitled to carry a firearm on this flight – not to mention every other domestic flight in the United States – he'd try a little harder to sound a bit more sincere with his apologies the next time.

Then again, probably not.

“Here, let me get that for you,” the man said, wrestling the bag out of her arms before she had a chance to protest

or stop him. Leaning over the top of her head, he stowed her bag in the overhead bin with ease and snapped shut the compartment before cleaning his hands of imaginary dust. “There,” he said. “That ought to do it, wouldn’t you say?”

Dana smiled up at him through clenched teeth, caught in a strange no-man’s land somewhere between rage and relief. Rage that the presumptuous

bastard would dare touch her bag without her permission and relief that she wouldn't need to stow the stupid thing herself. In any event, the task was accomplished now – which meant there was one fewer thing she needed to worry about. And the simple truth of the matter was that she could use all the help she could get these days, even from a skull-elbowing oaf like this.

Life was *that* bad for her right

now.

“Thanks,” she said, still putting her veneers in mortal danger of chipping. “Preciate it.”

The businessman paused and gave her the once-over, lingering at her breasts, of course. Smooth operator all the way, she'd give him that much. “No problem, sweetheart. Let me know if I can buy you a screwdriver when the

drinks cart comes around, ‘K? I plan on throwing a few back myself on this flight. Five hours is a bitch of a trip.’”

Dana kept fake-smiling at the man until her cheeks began to ache, at the same time resisting the urge to rub the back of her head, where she could already feel a golf ball-sized knot welling up. She didn’t want to give him the satisfaction.

Unbelievably, she also resisted

the urge to roll her eyes at the casually dropped “sweetheart.” Instead, she simply responded in kind. When in doubt, go passive-aggressive. Irritated Woman 101. Worked every time.

“Will do, cowboy,” she said, putting enough sugar in her voice to ensure herself a mouthful of cavities that would no doubt keep her pricey dentist busy for at least a year and enable each

of his six children's eventual attendance at private universities of their choosing.

That particularly witty comeback tucked safely away under her belt, she then turned and scooched past the matronly woman in seat 32a who was knitting a scarf apparently meant for a giraffe.

Settling down into her own seat next to a scuffed-up window near the wing, she closed her eyes and imagined

downing an entire *cartful* of drinks – not that she had any intention of letting the clumsy fool across the aisle buy any of them for her. Still, she *deserved* that much, didn't she?

Damn right, she did. A little something to take the edge off. A little something to dull the pain. And not just the pain of the fresh knot that was throbbing at the back of her skull, either.

Dana pulled on her seatbelt and turned to stare out the scratched-up window, letting out a soft sigh as she did so. Sadly, drinking was entirely out of the question for her. Had been for quite some time now.

Still, that didn't mean the *temptation* had gone away. Far from it, actually.

She closed her eyes again and

fought back the sudden urge to cry. Luckily, it worked. Because not only did she not want anyone on the plane to see her crying, she highly doubted she had enough moisture left in her overworked tear ducts to support another extended crying jag, anyway. She'd already had enough extended crying jags in the past few hours alone to last her a lifetime. *Several* lifetimes, even.

So instead of letting the waterworks flow once again, she simply opened her eyes again and watched through the small window as the ear-muffled ground crew loaded bags onto the plane. Not surprisingly, however, this excruciatingly mind-numbing activity grew hopelessly boring after about three seconds or so and she finally stopped fighting the urge to let her gaze

drift down to the soiled knees of her jeans.

Like it or not, it was time to confront the evidence of her failures.

Matching dirt stains stared right back at her. *Mocked* her, actually. And why the hell not? The dirt stains were courtesy of her dead partner's gravesite, at which she'd been kneeling just a few hours earlier. But that was par for the course for her lately, wasn't it? Sure

was. Because Jeremy Brown's blood wasn't the *only* blood she had on her hands these days, it was just the freshest. And now it was mixed in with the blood of her parents, James and Sara Whitestone, the blood of her mentor, Crawford Bell, and the blood of her best friend, Eric Carlton. Not to mention the blood of the countless other innocent people she'd let die over the course of

her supposedly “sterling” fourteen-year career with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Dana rubbed at the dirt stain on her right knee and cursed her wretched life for what seemed to be the billionth time already that day. Between Nathan Stiedowe – the sadistic serial killer who’d turned out to be her very own half-brother – and a pair of mentally unhinged billionaires who’d transformed

the streets of LA into a gigantic, bloody chessboard just for shits and giggles, over the past year and a half she'd lost just about everybody in her life who'd ever mattered to her. So no matter how hard she scrubbed or what new soap she tried, she knew her hands would never come clean. Not really. Not in any meaningful sense, anyway. Not in a million fucking years. And the real

kicker about the whole thing was that her work was something for which the FBI routinely presented her awards.

Life was funny like that sometimes, though, wasn't it?

Sure was.

Damned shame there was no humor in it most of the time.

Chapter 7

“Are you crying?”

Dana gave a sudden start and looked up at the sound of the small voice two feet in front of her. A tiny face peeked over the seatback, framed by brown hair rife with cowlicks. Big blue eyes glistened with doe-like innocence. Thin lips produce *Rs* that sounded like *Ws* – turning the little boy’s unexpected question into *Aw you cwying?*

That was when she became painfully aware of the fact that a single tear had somehow escaped her left eye and was now slipping down her cheek.

She straightened in her seat and wiped quickly at her face with the back of her right hand, feeling stupider than she had in years.

“No, no,” she said. “I’ve just got allergies, that’s all.”

Nothing quite like lying to a four-year-old to cap off yet another red-letter day, eh, Whitestone?

Another face peeked over the seatback next to the little boy's a moment later. Heavily made-up features couldn't hide the lines of exhaustion carved deep around eyes that appeared practically identical to the bright blue eyes into which Dana had just been

looking.

“Bradley Thomas Taylor,” the woman scolded, “leave this poor lady alone. If I’ve told you once I’ve told you a million times before, you don’t have to talk to *everybody* you see.”

The woman Dana assumed to be Bradley’s mother cut her gaze over to her and rolled her tired eyes. “Sorry about that. This kid, I swear. He’s got no off-switch. Not one I can find, at

least.”

Dana smiled at the woman and hoped against hope that the allergy lie had actually worked. Because getting caught crying by a child was one thing, but getting caught by a fellow adult was a completely different matter altogether. “Oh, it’s no bother at all,” she said, cringing mentally at what her mascara must look like right now. No doubt both

Rocky Raccoon and Tammy Faye Baker would've been proud – and justifiably so. “He’s just being friendly, that’s all. I don’t mind one little bit. Honest.”

The woman chortled. “Oh, is that what you call it? Being *friendly*? Because last week he asked some heavyset woman in the Wal-Mart parking lot why the heck she’d left her house wearing her butt on the *front* of her body.”

Dana burst out laughing before she could stop herself – the first genuine laugh she'd enjoyed in weeks. Thankfully, some of the mental tension frying her brain escaped right along with it.

The relief felt *exquisite*.

“Well, you know what they say: Kids say the darndest things.”

The other woman pursed her full

lips, crinkling up the pale skin around her lip-sticked mouth. “Well, I suppose so. But his enunciation isn’t the best, either. After we got *into* the Wal-Mart he was playing with his Buzz Lightyear doll in the front of the shopping cart and hollering, ‘White Power! White Power!’ for all the world to hear.”

Dana wrinkled her nose in distaste. To say the least, casual racism wasn’t exactly her first choice of

conversation topic with a stranger on a plane. Or with anybody else, for that matter.

The other woman read the unspoken disapproval in her eyes at once and shook her head, waving her left hand breezily in the air to showcase the four-karat boulder weighing down her ring finger.

“Instead of ‘Light Power!’, I

mean. His *L*s sound like *W*s. Anyway, I just about died of embarrassment.”

Dana lifted the corners of her mouth into a tentative smile, happy to find that the woman wasn't stowing a KKK hood somewhere in her carry-on luggage but still not feeling entirely comfortable with the exchange. Then again, no big surprise there. She might have been a world-class investigator whenever she managed to bring her “A”

game to the ball field – according to the media, at least – but she still didn't seem to have the foggiest idea of how to read between the lines during innocent conversations.

Thankfully, the other woman took off some of the pressure then by looking around uncertainly. When it became apparent there was no flight attendant nearby, she nodded down to her son.

“Anyway, I’m really sorry to put you on the spot like this, but is there any way you could keep an eye on him for a quick minute while I go to the bathroom? I need to pee like you wouldn’t believe and there’s never enough room in those bathrooms for the both of us. I swear to God I’ll be right back.”

Dana waved her own hand in the

air, infinitely thankful to be taken off the hook and painfully aware of just how bare her *own* ring finger looked in comparison. Not so much as a faded tan line there testifying to a failed engagement. “Absolutely,” she said, trying not to think about the fact that Jeremy Brown had been carrying around an engagement ring with him in his pocket when he’d died, just waiting for the perfect moment to get down on one

knee in front of her and pop the question.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Dana said, closing her eyes briefly against the painful memory. “Go. It’s no problem at all. Besides, Bradley and I are good friends now, anyway. We’ll be just fine.”

The other woman let out a quick breath and reached across the seatback

to touch her shoulder. “Thank you so, so much. You’re a real lifesaver, you know that? And I mean that from the very bottom of my cold and blackened heart.”

Dana winced a little at that, but she was pretty sure she was able to stop the emotion before it reached her face. Still, *lifesaver* wasn’t a very accurate description of her lately.

Quite the opposite,
unfortunately.

Just ask poor Jeremy about that much.

“We’ll be fine,” Dana repeated.

“Go. It’s no problem at all.”

The woman leaned down and kissed her son on the top of his head before cupping his chin in her palm and lifting his tiny face to hers, holding his gaze.

“You be a good boy for this nice

lady while I'm gone, you hear me, Bradley? Mama will be right back and you know what happens if you misbehave."

Bradley grinned mischievously. "You'll throw me out the window over the Grand Canyon, right?"

The woman nodded. "That's absolutely right, buddy boy. And that's a heck of a long drop, so be good."

Chapter 8

Bradley giggled happily as his mother scooted out of their row and into the aisle before heading for the restrooms at the rear of the plane.

When she was out of sight, he reestablished eye contact with Dana.

His high-pitched voice – which was *much* louder than necessary – drew curious glances from the other passengers in the vicinity. “You’re

really pretty, you know that?” he bellowed. “Almost as pretty as my mama. I like your yellow hair a lot. You sort of look like Goldilocks, only your hair is way shorter. And you’ve got eyes just like mine.”

Dana suppressed a small smile at the same time that she fought back an unexpected pang of regret. From the look of things, though, she hadn’t done a

very good job of locking away her desire to have children of her *own* one day. But at nearly forty-two years old now, that particular window seemed pretty much nailed shut for good.

And without Jeremy around anymore – thanks almost entirely to her professional incompetence – she couldn't for the life of her think of a single other man on the face of the earth who she'd want as the father of her

baby.

“And you’re a very handsome little guy,” Dana answered, clenching her stomach muscles tightly together against the overwhelming grief spinning in her belly. “Come to think of it, you’re just about the handsomest little guy I’ve ever seen in my whole life. A regular *GQ* model if I’ve ever seen one.”

Bradley chewed playfully on his

lower lip and cranked up the cuteness factor at that. Apparently, he wasn't interested in playing fair here. "That's what my mama always tells me."

"Well, your mama's absolutely right. You're the handsomest little guy I've ever seen in my life."

Bradley widened his smile ear-to-ear, showing off world-class dimples in both of his cheeks. If he could be any more adorable, Dana couldn't possibly

imagine how.

“Well, we can get married someday if you want,” he said. “When I get bigger than I am right now.”

Dana lifted her eyebrows on her forehead. If she were to be perfectly honest about the whole thing, she'd have to admit that it was the first reasonable marriage proposal she'd ever received. Jeremy hadn't quite gotten the

opportunity to pop the question before he'd died...

She chased away the gut-punch thought with a quick shake of her head, cursing her brain's remarkable ability to always undermine her mental stability at the worst possible time. Everything that had happened with Jeremy was just still too fresh for her to handle, much too painful, much too hard to sort out right now. Probably would be for a very long

time to come – if not forever.

“Hmmm,” Dana said, clamping her stomach muscles together again against the heartache she doubted would *ever* go away. “We can get married someday, huh?”

Bradley nodded. “Yep. And after we *get* married we can live in a castle on the beach and ride horses and pick flowers all day long and go

swimming whenever we want to.”

Though she’d never been one for uninvited physical contact with her fellow human beings – especially not with one she’d just *met* – Dana shocked herself by reaching out a hand and touching the boy’s smooth cheek. Thankfully, he didn’t pull away.

“OK, handsome. You’re on. Consider it a date.”

From there, the conversation

drifted amiably from Bradley telling her the difference between fledglings and *real* vampires (fledglings hadn't yet tasted human blood) to the main reason he didn't especially care for broccoli.

“Cuz it tastes gross,” was his concise explanation. “Sometimes I feed it to our dog underneath the table when my mama’s not looking, though. Don’t tell her, OK?”

Dana shook her head.

“Absolutely not. Your secret is safe with me.”

Bradley held her gaze. From the look in his eye, she could tell he was deadly serious about this. “Cross your heart and hope to die?”

Dana nodded. “And stick a needle in my eye.”

The little boy nodded back,

apparently satisfied by her eye-sticking promise. After all, only a complete lunatic would ever agree to such a horrible thing if they weren't one hundred percent reliable. "Good," he said. "And since we've got a secret now that makes us best friends forever, right?"

Dana reached out and touched the boy's smooth cheek again. This time the physical contact didn't seem so

difficult for her to initiate.

Didn't seem so difficult, at all.

“You bet it does, handsome.”

Chapter 9

From there, the five minutes alone with Bradley seemed to pass in the blink of an eye for Dana. As the little boy continued talking about everything under the sun (including his slow-but-steady progress on learning how to tie his own shoes), she idly wondered how long an entire lifetime with him would take. Probably two eye-blinks; max. If that.

He was in the middle of describing to her what he wanted for his next birthday (a DVD of *Aladdin*, an oversized beanbag and a new puppy dog would do for starters – just so long as the new dog also enjoyed the taste of broccoli) when his mother finally returned from her hasty trip to the bathroom.

“Thank you, thank you, *thank*

you,” the woman breathed, wiping away an imaginary layer of sweat from her brow as she slid back into her row. “A million times *thank you*. I can’t tell you how much I needed that. He talk your ear off while I was gone?”

Dana smiled – a *real* smile this time. She was happy to find that she still retained the ability. She’d begun having her doubts lately.

“Yeah,” she said, “but in a *good*

way. That's quite the little conversationalist you've got there."

The other woman shook her head in bemusement and reached down to tousle her son's hair again. Obviously, hair-tousling marked one of her favorite ways of showing affection to her son, and despite Dana's very best efforts to cut off the ugly emotion at the pass, she couldn't help feeling a stab of jealousy.

She wondered briefly if her pale blue eyes had turned green in their sockets yet. If they had, she wouldn't have been the least bit surprised.

“And such a hopeless flirt, too,” the other woman said, still smiling down at her boy as only a mother could smile down at her son. “Always has been and always will be.”

The woman paused and let out a slow breath, sending the minty smell of

Certs floating into Dana's nostrils. "Oh well, at least he always picks the pretty ones. Say whatever else you want about him, but the boy's got great taste in women."

Dana widened her smile as Bradley and his mother settled back down into their seats then and fell into a lengthy discussion about what the Tooth Fairy did with all the teeth she took and

why the heck she needed so many of them in the first place. Ten minutes passed before the flight attendants took their positions at various sections of the plane and ran everyone through the standard preflight instructions. Exaggerated arm movements pantomimed the placing of oxygen masks over faces while a prerecorded message droned on in the background, imploring everyone onboard to secure their own

masks before attempting to assist their fellow passengers.

Ten minutes after *that*, the plane finally streaked down the runway and lifted off, shooting sharp little thrills of excitement through Dana's stomach and eliciting a delighted whoop of glee from little Bradley in the seat in front of her.

Dana sighed heavily and looked out her window again, watching Los

Angeles disappear behind them in a swirling fog of gray-and-white jet exhaust. Like it or not – and she still wasn't sure which one it was for her yet – it was time to get back home to Cleveland, back to her old life in Ohio after six solid months of traipsing around the country chasing deranged serial killers.

She sighed again, even deeper this time, slumping her shoulders in

resignation. At least, what was still *left* of her old life. Because not counting Oreo – her beloved black-and-white cat who she'd left under the care of her kindly old landlords at a price and security level she never would've been able to find at a kennel – there wasn't much left of her old life back in Cleveland to speak of.

Wasn't much left to speak of, at

all.

CHAPTER 10

Dana awoke with a start four hours later to the sound of the pilot's deep voice coming over the intercom.

She stretched her arms high over her head and let out a loud yawn, being careful to not elbow the elderly scarf-knitter to her right directly in the mouth. Not the sort of favor you wanted to pay forward.

Dana yawned again. Blissfully,

she'd managed to fall asleep somewhere over Nevada, which had made the long plane ride back home a bit more bearable – not that dreaming about the night your parents had been brutally murdered in cold blood right in front of your shocked and disbelieving four-year-old eyes could ever be considered *restful*.

Shaking the remaining cobwebs

from the attic of her brain, she concentrated on the pilot's words as they crackled over the intercom. Even though the man was speaking in the same coma-inducing monotone all pilots used, the *words* he was saying didn't sound normal to her at all.

“... and since we're experiencing a minor technical problem with the landing gear at the moment we'll be bypassing Hopkins

International and touching down at Burke Lakefront Airport instead. As the holding pattern over Hopkins is already full anyway, this will give us just a little more time to iron out the kinks. Nothing to worry about, folks, I assure you, but I wanted to keep you in the loop. More in a bit.”

Dana sat up straighter in her seat and looked around the cabin at her

fellow passengers. Like most Americans, anything out of the norm on a plane immediately slammed her mind back to the horrifying events of September 11, 2001, when Islamic extremists had slaughtered more than three thousand of her fellow citizens by plowing hijacked commercial airliners into well-known landmarks stretching along the eastern seaboard of the United States from New York City all the way

down to Washington, DC.

She tightened her grip on the armrests at her sides and glanced across the aisle. The rumpled businessman who'd elbowed her in the back of her head a few hours earlier was tilting back his head to finish off the last of his latest drink, a glossy sheen sparkling in his badly bloodshot eyes. From the seat in front of her, little Bradley asked his

mother, “Are we almost home yet, mama?”

The woman’s voice sounded every bit as frightened as Dana felt inside. Still, to her great credit, she tried to play it off at first. “We sure are, honey. Shouldn’t be too much longer now at all.”

The little boy nodded. “But I can’t see my daddy when we get there because he got dead, right?”

Through the crack in the seats, Dana watched a sad look flash across the woman's face, and she empathized with her at once. And why not? She'd seen the *exact* same look in her own bathroom mirror each and every morning for the past thirty-five years now, ever since the horrible night that she'd watched her parents viciously murdered by a deranged madman who still haunted

her dreams to this day.

“That’s right, baby doll,”

Bradley’s mother answered softly.

“Your daddy died, but he’s always looking down on you from heaven, so always need to remember to be a good boy, even when you don’t think anyone’s watching you.”

Bradley sighed audibly, further bruising Dana’s hopelessly bruised heart.

“What does my daddy do in heaven, anyway?” the little boy asked. “Is he still a baseball player like when he was with us?”

The woman nodded and tousled her son's hair. “Yep, he sure is, slugger. And he's one of the best baseball players in all of heaven. Even better than Babe Ruth, some say. Your daddy and Babe Ruth play on the same

team now.”

The little boy frowned. “What team do Babe Ruth and my daddy play for? Does my daddy still play for the Cleveland Indians?”

The woman smiled gently. “Nope. Not anymore, buddy. Your daddy was traded to the Angels, so that’s the team he’ll play on for the rest of forever now.”

Heartbreaking as the

conversation was for her to listen to, Dana felt infinitely thankful for the mental break it provided, however brief. Looking out her window, she saw perhaps a dozen airliners circling the bright-blue skies above Hopkins ten miles to the east, each taking its position in the mile-high queue and waiting its turn to land.

She glanced down at her watch.

Burke Lakefront was fifteen miles west of Hopkins. The DC-10 in which they were flying had a maximum speed of six hundred and ten miles an hour, though she guessed they were only doing about five hundred miles an hour right now. That should give them approximately one minute until they made it to Burke Lakefront, a small commuter airport usually reserved for personal aircraft and corporate jets.

The pilot's voice came crackling over the intercom again just as what Dana assumed to be a military jet came roaring up along their left side, spinning her heart in her chest like a gyroscope.

High-pitched shrieks immediately sounded from all around the cabin. Pure *pandemonium* followed after that.

From the signage on the sleek

gray fuselage, Dana identified the military aircraft as an F-16 fighter. Probably scrambled from Wright-Patterson Air Force Base out in Dayton. *Nothing to worry about*, her ass. There w a *splenty* to worry about here, obviously. And then some. And that would have been putting things *extremely* mildly.

A rounded bulletproof canopy couldn't obscure the helmeted pilot

inside the F-16, dark sunglasses and all.

The DC-10 pilot's voice didn't sound quite so calm this time. "Flight attendants, please ensure that everyone onboard is buckled up, then take your own seats and prepare for an emergency landing. Passengers onboard Flight 942, this is not a drill. Please do everything your flight attendants instruct you to do.

We're unable to operate the landing gear properly and an in-flight refueling can't be performed at this late juncture. Therefore, we'll be touching down in a water-landing on Lake Erie. When we hit the water, use your seat cushions as flotation devices. Slide the straps over your shoulders and activate the light beacon located on the left-hand side. Please secure your own flotation devices before attempting to help out

children or fellow passengers. Exits are clearly marked and located at the front, middle and back of the plane. Please try to stay as calm as you possibly can. The Coast Guard is standing by.”

The man’s deep voice cracked with his final words.

“May God have mercy on our souls.”

Chapter 11

The intercom clicked off and Dana's breath hitched in her throat.

She looked out her window again and felt her heartbeat notch up another fifty levels in her chest. In the distance, two Coast Guard cutters were steaming full-speed ahead toward an undetermined rendezvous point out on the menacing, great gray-blue expanse of Lake Erie, the choppy waters throwing

around the massive cutters like tiny toy boats bobbing up and down in the bathtub wake of a giggling, squirming child.

A massive adrenaline dump flooded through her veins, electrifying her arms and legs as a panic-stricken flight attendant in her mid-twenties charged down the aisle checking seatbelts; glancing first to her right and

then to her left with a look of absolute *terror* etched onto her pretty face.

Thirty seconds later, the plane angled sharply downward and began its stomach-turning descent.

Dana's heart rolled across her ribcage as they went down and an oxygen mask dropped down from a hidden compartment in the ceiling above her, dangling before her eyes.

She reached out with shaking

hands and fastened the plastic cup over her mouth and nose as her mind flashed back to the story of Captain Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger – the former Air Force fighter pilot who’d been hailed as a hero for crash-landing his plane in the Hudson River in 2009 without incurring any fatalities or major injuries to the one hundred fifty-five souls aboard US Airways Flight 1549, Charlotte to New

York City. Dana only prayed that the passengers onboard Continental Flight 942, nonstop LA to Cleveland, would prove every bit as fortunate.

They didn't.

When the plane slammed down into the water fifty seconds later, it did so with enough force to rearrange her insides as they'd been crammed them into a gigantic blender turned up full speed. A sickening rollercoaster feeling

stabbed her deep in the gut while unearthly sounds filled her ears: the screams of her fellow passengers; the rumble of an unimaginably powerful earthquake; the unbearable screech of twisting metal as the interior walls of the plane bowed and moaned and sagged.

Dana gripped her armrests with all her might, digging her fingernails into the plastic hard enough to draw blood.

A sliding, disorienting sense of movement wracked her body as the plane plowed even deeper into the murky water.

The last thing she remembered hearing was little Bradley's terrified yelp of fear in front of her.

And that was when everything around her went dead silent and as pitch-black as the inside of a coffee can. There were no more screams in her

ears. No more rumbling in her belly.
No more screeching of metal as the
plane came apart at the seams.

Just an unfamiliar sense of
weightlessness in her limbs and head
and torso as she floated away softly on a
black cloud into a dark place she'd
never before visited – and damn sure
never wanted to visit again.

PART II

LADIES FIRST

“Naming hurricanes is a tradition that dates back hundreds of years. Natives of the West Indies named storms after the particular saint’s day on which they occurred. In 1953, the National Weather Service began using female first names for hurricanes, but it wasn’t until 1978

that men's names were included too.” –

Laura Wiener, *Hurricane History:*

Fascinating Facts

CHAPTER 12

My mother performed her rudimentary version of a castration on me the day I turned thirteen – the same day she started giving me testosterone shots to ensure my continued physical development. After all, she wouldn't want to arouse anybody's suspicions about what she was up to, now would she? Wouldn't want anyone to suspect that the devil's soul lurked just beneath

the *façade* of that gorgeous angel's face of hers.

And apparently she'd grown weary of arousing other things, as well – especially on me.

Unholy things.

Even though we weren't Jewish – we were Catholic – I received a horrifying *bris* when other boys my age who actually *were* Jewish were busy

celebrating their *bar mitzvahs* with family and friends. Not that we Catholics had anything to puff out our chests and crow about when it came to the ghastly practice, of course.

In medieval times in Europe – back in the days when women weren't permitted to perform in choirs during religious services due to their lowly social standing – the Roman Catholic Church often castrated boys to prevent

their voices from breaking at puberty, allowing the lads to develop especially high vocal ranges. Italian church records dating all the way back to the 1550s mentioned *castrati*, and it wasn't until the late-1880s that the church finally condemned the practice officially.

A hundred years later when Catholic priests would fill in their time

by molesting untold numbers of altar boys behind locked vestibule doors, the church would turn the same blind eye to the sickening abuse, led by none other than cover-up master Pope Benedict the Sixteenth himself.

Early-onset puberty had allowed my mother to dismiss any concerns of *my* voice not developing properly. *My* adult voice was already there. Even at thirteen years old, I possessed a deep

baritone that people often mistook for an adult's whenever I spoke with them on the phone, often leading them to think that my cadence and pitch belonged to my deceased father.

“You sound exactly like him,” they'd say with amazement in their own voices. “It's *uncanny*.”

So, Jewish or not, my mother had absolutely no qualms whatsoever about

going forward with the extremely dangerous procedure. And why *would* she have any qualms about it? What did she have to lose at this point? Another child?

Probably not one of her biggest concerns, considering *her* history.

Only my special *bris* – which translated to “covenant of circumcision” from the Hebrew – would go quite a bit further than the simple removal of my

foreskin.

Quite a bit further, indeed.

In some early cultures, castration was performed on soldiers who'd lost in battle. The winners did it to symbolize their complete victory over their defeated foes and to take away their very manhood and they could never retrieve it again.

For her part, my mother

symbolized *her* victory over *me* with a sharp scalpel, no anesthesia and with a delighted smile planted firmly on her pretty lips.

After tying me down by my wrists and ankles with thick leather restraints to the huge wooden table in the middle of our kitchen, she stood over me with the sharp surgical instrument balanced unsteadily in her delicate right hand.

“Try not to move, son,” she said theatrically, hovering the glinting blade just a few inches above my private parts. “If you move, I might mess it up. And if you scream, I’ll make sure I mess it up on purpose.”

I tried my very best to keep silent – tried with every last ounce of energy I possessed – but when the sharp steel sliced deep into the tender skin at the top

of my genitalia I had no choice *but* to scream. I screamed loud and long and hard, screamed until I felt like I had razor blades crammed down my throat, screamed until I had no voice left with which to scream.

But my mother only watched me silently the entire time, not even the slightest *trace* of emotion crossing her beautiful face. Not even the slightest *indication* that my animalistic howls

affected her eardrums in the least little bit.

When I'd finally stopped my screaming – much too exhausted to make another sound and feeling a pain in my penis like none I'd ever experienced before – my mother tutted.

“Now, now, son,” she said soothingly. “I warned you, didn't I? I was just going to take your foreskin and

testicles, but now I suppose I'll have to take the whole sinful thing. I wish you hadn't made me do this. But you did."

With that, she discarded the scalpel in favor of a wickedly sharp meat cleaver that was hanging over our kitchen table along with a variety of other knives. As the longtime wife of a butcher, she knew *exactly* what to do.

She undid the leather restraints on my ankles and turned my limp body

over onto one side before pulling the shaft of my penis taut against the wooden surface of the table.

Then she lifted up her right arm in one swift movement and brought down her gloved hand again in a blindingly fast chopping motion. It took less than a second for the meat cleaver to slice effortlessly through flesh and veins and arteries and make resounding

contact with the wood.

I don't remember screaming again at that point. Everything had gone pitch-black and dead silent. I suppose the trauma of the entire ordeal must have signaled my brain to flood with endorphins, nature's very own painkillers: a way for my body to deny the horrific trauma to which it had just been subjected.

Total removal of the male

genitalia didn't come without its inherent risks, however. Quite the opposite, as a matter of fact. For one, the danger of death due to bleeding or infection was *much* greater than with simple removal of the testicles. But like everything else in her extremely well planned-out life, my mother had prepared for *that* possibility too.

Blood spurting forth like an

exploding geyser from between my quivering thighs and every last cell in my body screaming out in pure *agony* as my mother moved to the stove and held the flat side of the meat cleaver against a burner glowing bright red, the world around me blurred, swimming in and out of focus until everything appeared to me as though I were viewing it through a thick sheet of rain-spattered glass.

My mother returned to the table

and pressed the hot metal against my wound to cauterize it. The sound of sizzling flesh filled my ears. The smell of cooking meat wafted up into my nostrils, mixing in with the scent of her expensive perfume and making me gag.

Chanel No. 5, of course.
Nothing but the very best for her.

“What do you say, son?” she asked.

Somehow — despite the unspeakable horror to which I'd just been subjected — I managed to mumble my reply right before I passed out for good.

“Thank you, Mother,” I said.

And once again — strange as it might have sounded to any of the so-called *normal* people out there in the world — the really sick thing about the

whole thing was that I actually *meant* it.

Chapter 13

The overwhelming blackness of Dana's nightmare morphed first into a hazy gray, then pure white, and finally a blinding flash of vibrant colors that hurt her brain so badly it threatened to bring on a seizure.

She squinted hard against the disorienting visual onslaught, feeling more confused than she'd ever felt before 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.

She sucked in a sharp breath that sent an agonizing 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 filthy jeans. His walk was confident, completely sure of itself,

practically a *swagger*.

Dana blinked rapidly and tried desperately to make sense of the mind-bending scene in front of her. No use.

Suddenly, though, her brain nearly 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.

Her breath quickened in her throat. Her temples pounded on the

sides of her skull. For one terrifying moment, her heart actually stopped beating dead in her chest.

A cold shiver skittered down the length of Dana's spine as she shook her head in bewilderment and again tried to process the baffling imagery before her. No good. But then a second, more powerful wave of shivers wracked her body when the next chilling realization

finally 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 heading for her bedroom.

She 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 loomed

over the child's bed with a huge butcher's knife dangling from his powerful right hand. Glittering 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.

Bradley, the little boy from the plane who'd promised to marry her one

day.

Stunned stupid, she watched in horror as her half-brother lifted the gleaming knife high 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 hanging above the bureau of her

childhood bedroom, she abruptly caught sight of her own face. Her mouth had been sewn shut. Tight stitches fastened her lips together, rendering 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 now do was look on helplessly as

the monster 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 burst and he bled out all over the matching Superman sheets.

But the knife never came down. Instead, Nathan Stiedowe simply lowered the glimmering steel to his side and reached down to stroke the boy's

silky blonde hair.

“I’ll be back for you in just a bit, little boy,” he whispered. “That much you can count on.”

Bradley only mumbled dreamily in response.

Turning away from the child, the monster then exited the room, passing through Dana’s body again as he went. 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 Dana's mother had been just sixteen years old. As James Whitestone 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 goopy 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 the monster enter the bathroom, the scene of her father's horribly grisly murder in 1976. 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 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 cheeks and blurred her vision. Through the watery veil obscuring her eyes, she watched numbly as her mother emerged quickly from the master bedroom, alerted by the commotion in the hallway.

Dana's heart shattered into a million tiny pieces at her first glimpse of the beautiful face she hadn't seen for

more than thirty-five years now. 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 etched deep into her smooth forehead. “James, honey?” she asked tentatively. “Are you OK in there? 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 was completely fooled by the mimicry, just as she’d been on the devastating night of July 4th, 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 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 was completely powerless to wake up from this awful nightmare.

“Jesus Christ,” Sara Whitestone breathed. “You scared the living 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?”

Turning on her heel, she then walked back to the master bedroom with her satin night robe flowing behind her like the train of an elaborate wedding dress. Fifteen seconds later, the monster followed her 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, she was standing directly *behind* the monster, close enough to reach out and touch him had she been able to control her arms.

Dana gagged. 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, her mother was lying on her side in the king-sized bed, dressed only in a flimsy off-white negligee now, the night robe she'd been wearing a moment earlier dripping from the doorknob of the closet like strands of

shimmering silver garland dripping from the branches of a beautifully decorated Christmas tree.

Sara had her pretty head propped up coquettishly on one small hand. Smiling at the monster through the darkness, she said, “You gonna stay out there all night, lover boy, or are you gonna come keep me company in this big old bed already?”

When the monster crossed the

threshold of the master bedroom, Dana's mother bolted upright as she suddenly realized he was not 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 that expanded her birdlike chest nearly to the point of bursting, she 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 squirmed in the monster’s

strong grasp, an impotent field mouse struggling to escape the eagle's powerful talons. Nathan Stiedowe leaned down into her face and smiled, his perfectly even teeth sparkling brightly in the darkness and emitting an eerie, almost *phosphorescent* light. "Tell me something," he snarled. "Do you even know who I *am*?"

A brief look of confusion

colored in Sara's beautiful face, followed almost 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 her mother's teeth rattle in her mouth even from across the room.

“That's not my name anymore,

slut,” the monster spat. “You made damn 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 flying fuck about who you hurt, do you? Only worried about yourselves and your precious goddamn families.”

He paused and narrowed his glittering eyes. “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 14

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 Sara'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. “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 first I think I’ll give you an idea 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.”

He slapped her 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.”

Flipping Sara back over, the monster 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, however, her mother'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 wearing his blue-and-white footy-pajamas, Bradley was holding a teddy bear in one tiny hand and shifting 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, freezing little Bradley like an ice sculpture in his paralyzing stare.

He never took his eyes off the boy as he whipped the sharp blade across Sara's 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 was making as she choked to death on her own blood.

The monster sprang off the bed in

a preternatural flash of movement, leaping toward the doorway and passing directly through Dana's body again. The little boy's enormous blue eyes rounded in terror as Nathan Stiedowe yanked the sharp knife high overhead and bright red droplets of Sara Whitestone's freshly drawn blood slid down the glinting blade before spattering onto his tiny upturned face.

That was when the front door

slammed open with a violent bang.

“James? Sara? What the hell’s going on in here? It’s Ralph Wilson from next door. Elizabeth and I heard screaming and called the police. Is everything all right?”

Nathan Stiedowe froze in his tracks for the briefest of moments. And then he suddenly reacted in another blindingly fast flash of black movement.

Undisguised hatred flashed across his handsome face as he bolted past the now-catatonic little boy and dashed into Dana's childhood bedroom before pulling himself up through the open window and dashing across the yard, disappearing into the darkness.

From the corner of her right eye, Dana watched a dark circle of urine spread across the front of Bradley's

pajama bottoms, just like the urine that had spread across *her* pajama bottoms thirty-five years earlier.

The accusing glare in the little boy's traumatized eyes was impossible to misinterpret.

How could you let this happen to me again? his look asked her. *You were supposed to protect me.*

Now because of you I have to die in that plane crash.

CHAPTER 15

It had taken about a hundred days for the wound from my unorthodox *bris* to heal fully. More than three months of walking bowlegged around the house and feeling like an overworked cowboy who'd spent a long day of busting broncos on his isolated ranch out in Wyoming with no one else around to lend a helping hand. More than three months of not daring to step so much as a

high-heeled foot outside the confines of our oh-so-peculiar domestic living arrangements. More than three months of having my mother clean my private parts with a solution of rubbing alcohol mixed with water while I sat on the toilet in front of her with my legs splayed wide.

The burning sensation I'd felt when the rough cotton cloth made first

contact with my horribly blistered skin was intense – no debating that simple fact – but it was absolutely *nothing* compared to the searing gratitude I felt inside for the kindly woman kneeling before me.

A concerned look of concentration colored in my mother's gorgeous face as she lovingly tended to my injury. *God, how I adored her.* She was my own personal angel of mercy;

had showed me unimaginable generosity by giving me life for a second time. Because, cheesy as it might sound – and even *I* knew it sounded hopelessly cheesy – I'd truly been born again, only this time as a woman.

And thank God in the heavens above for that! *Lord almighty, thank the heavens above!* Because finally my outside matched the way I'd always felt

on the *inside*, down in that special place between my legs where I'd never felt especially comfortable before.

Things weren't *all* good as a woman, however. Quite the opposite, actually. Through a great deal of trial and error on my part, mostly *error*, I found out the hard way that women didn't bitch just to hear themselves bitch, after all.

As with all newborns, I'd

needed to learn how to do everything again for the very first time. Silly little things like learning how to pee while sitting down and getting used to the uneven trickle that sprinkled forth from between my legs now as opposed to the steady flow of urine that had come from my penis. Silly little things like needing to learn how to mop up the excess moisture with toilet paper as opposed to

the way I'd done it before with a few quick shakes of my sinful, dangling appendage.

Silly little things that – added altogether – had transformed me into a living, breathing *lady*.

Home schooling was the answer to hiding my physical transformation from the education authorities. Over countless cups of tea, my mother and I passed long afternoons learning the same

information they taught the other children – the so-called *normal* children – in the public schools.

She tutored me extensively in English and math; chemistry and engineering; history and philosophy. In addition to that, we also learned about such famous *castrati* as Farinelli, the stage name of Carlo Maria Broschi, an Italian man who'd become one of the

most popular singers of the 18th century despite – or rather *because of* – his unusual deformity.

Not that my mother and I had any plans for *me* to become a singer in order to achieve *my* fame, however. *That* method of achieving fame was much too pedestrian for people of our refined tastes, much too ordinary. Instead, according to my mother's carefully crafted plans, my future lay in *stripping*

people of their undeserved fame.

People like Timmy, people who didn't possess one single iota of talent inside their worthless bodies yet got by in life simply because some cosmic force out there had randomly decided that they were somehow *better* than the rest of world. More *deserving*.

But that shit was about to change. In a big way.

And I considered myself just the girl to change it.

Just as soon as I finished growing up, of course.

Chapter 16

Dana bolted upright out of her coma and ripped blindly at the thick plastic tube shoved down her throat.

She gagged hard while the cylinder seemed to take forever to slide up her esophagus, lubricated with stomach acid and some kind of sticky white paste they'd been feeding her. A high-pitched alarm filled the room with frantic beeping, followed almost at once

by a stampede of medical personnel storming into the room.

“Jesus Christ!” a woman yelled.

“Get a sedative!”

A man with a deep baritone voice overruled the order at once. His harsh tone left no doubt as to *exactly* who was in charge here. “Are you out of your mind, Jean? She just came out of a coma, for Christ’s sake. The last thing

in the world we want to do right now is put her back to sleep.”

Dana coughed painfully. The lining of her throat felt raped. Like she'd just swallowed ten gallons of high-grade gasoline.

Gradually, she became aware of a catheter between her legs, of more plastic tubes in her arms. She ripped at those, too, but the large man who'd just barked out his stern command that she

should not be injected with any sleep-inducing drugs pushed her gently back down into the bed.

“Easy, Agent Whitestone,” the man said, resting his huge hands lightly on her shoulders. “Easy, now. Everything’s OK. *You’re* OK.”

Dana’s vision sharpened like powerful binoculars abruptly coming into focus, hurting her eyeballs and

sending a searing jumble of confusing images racing through her brain.

She glanced to her left and saw snow falling lightly outside the window, collecting briefly on the glass before melting away. More confusion clouded her mind. She tried to speak but a hoarse croak came out instead.

The man in charge – Dr. Aloysius Spinks, according to his nametag, a large African-American with

a shiny bald head – poured her a glass of water from the plastic pitcher on the bedside table and held it up to her lips. Dana drank deeply before coughing again.

“The little boy,” she finally managed, forcing out the words even though it hurt like hell to talk. “Did the little boy make it?”

Spinks frowned and motioned to

a nurse. The woman left the room in a scuffling of feet before Spinks looked back at her. “What little boy, Agent Whitestone?”

“From the plane,” Dana said. Tears of frustration pooled in her eyes. Her skull throbbed like it had never throbbed before. A powerful storm of nausea boiled in her gut, threatening to explode from her gullet in a disgusting rainbow of projectile-vomit. “He was

sitting directly in front of me. I was in seat 32b. The little boy was right in front of me with his mother. Did he survive the crash?”

Spinks lifted his right arm and adjusted the wire-framed glasses on his face. As he did so, ripples of sinew danced just beneath the surface of his skin like minnows darting through a shallow pond, letting Dana know that the

good doctor had most likely played football in college. Probably linebacker.

“I don’t know, Agent Whitestone,” he admitted, shaking his head slightly with the words. “Most of the passengers made it, but a few perished in the crash. Six, I believe, didn’t make it. One child died. What was the little boy’s name? I’ll have someone look into it right away.”

The accusing look that had flashed across the little boy's blood-sprinkled face in Dana's horrific nightmare bolted back into her mind.

Now because of you I have to die in that plane crash.

She wretched hard, nearly throwing up again. Her temples ached as though powerful drills were boring through the bone on either side of her

head.

Spinks held up the glass to her lips again and she finished off the remaining water with a few hard swallows. It helped.

“Bradley Taylor Thomas,” she whispered, swallowing back the acrid taste in her mouth and remembering how the little boy’s mother had used his full name while admonishing him to not talk to strangers. “His name is Bradley

Thomas Taylor. About four years old.
Blonde hair. Blue eyes.”

Spinks waved to an orderly standing near the doorway. “Get on it right away. Check back with me just as soon as you find out anything.”

“Yes, sir.”

When the orderly had left the room, Dana’s scrambled brain finally started working again. Her heart flipped

over inside her chest as the stunning realization hit her with all the subtlety of an aluminum baseball bat slamming into a plate-glass window, sending sharp shards of glass cascading across her mind.

She'd boarded the plane out in Los Angeles on May 12th. It had been sunny outside then, bright, warm. The snow falling outside her window now indicated that a substantial chunk of time

had passed since that day and this one. Not even Cleveland's weather was *that* bad.

More nausea boiled in her stomach. "How long have I been out of it?" she asked weakly. "What's today's date?"

Spinks lifted a medical chart from her bedside table and flipped it open. A sympathetic look flooded into

his warm brown eyes. “The date is November 16th,” he said. “You were in a coma for twenty-four weeks. You sustained massive head trauma in the plane crash that fractured your skull. You were life-flighted to Fairview General Hospital ten minutes after they fished you out of the water and we immediately performed a series of life-saving surgical procedures on you, including a craniectomy, a craniotomy

and a cranioplasty. Basically, that means we relieved the pressure inside your skull caused by the bleeding and inserted temporary metal plates while the bone healed. The good news is that you'll make a full recovery, Agent Whitestone. As a matter of fact, you're almost there already. It's quite remarkable, really."

Somehow, Dana wasn't

surprised by the news. What was there for her to be *surprised* about here? All things considered, serious thought should have been given to changing the term “Murphy’s Law” to “Whitestone’s Law”, considering the way *her* life had unfolded. After all, whatever the worst possible outcome in any given scenario could be, *that* was the one she could usually count on.

“So, now what?” she asked as a

wave of utter exhaustion washed over her body and suddenly made her want nothing more right now than to go back to sleep again – maybe even forever this time.

Spinks laid down the medical chart on her bedside table and lifted her left wrist to check her pulse. “Well,” he said, “now we’ll monitor you closely for the next several days to make sure that

no additional swelling occurs in your brain. After that, you'll spend a couple weeks here in the hospital rehabbing. Still, you're one of the lucky ones, Agent Whitestone. You're something of a medical miracle; you really are. Your recovery speed has been absolutely *astounding*. Before you know it, you'll be up and about and as good as new."

Dana closed her eyes. If Spinks knew just how far off the mark he'd been

with *that* statement, he'd probably blush about nine shade of purple. Wasn't his fault that he didn't know her horrible history, though.

Still, “good as new” wasn't all that terribly *good* when it came to her, now was it?

Sure wasn't. Not even close.

She opened her eyes again when Spinks dropped her wrist. “I'll alert

Bill Krugman that you've emerged from your coma," he said. "His name is listed at the top of the emergency contacts in your cellphone. Or is there someone else you'd prefer for me to call?"

Dana shook her head. The head of the FBI – known to everyone in the Bureau simply by his title of "The Director" – was the *only* living person left on her emergency-contacts list. All the others were dead now.

Another thing Spinks had no way of knowing.

“No,” she said, sinking her head back down into the pillow and feeling her eyelids droop. “That’ll be fine.”

Spinks’s voice filled her brain again as the murky world of dreamland dragged her off into its warm embrace. Dana only prayed that her destination this time would be a much more pleasant

place than the horrific nightmare world from which she'd just emerged. Only time would tell.

“Fine,” Spinks said. “I’ll leave you alone to rest up now then, Agent Whitestone. Even though your recovery has been amazing, I don’t want you overdoing it.”

Dana’s eyelids flew open again when she felt his hand reach behind her head.

Spinks pursed his lips and handed her a call button attached to a length of plastic-covered wire. “*Relax*, Agent Whitestone. Just press this button if you need anything.”

Dana’s cheeks flushed hot with blood. “Of course, Doctor. Sorry about that. I guess I’m just still feeling a little shaken up.”

Spinks waved away her

apology. “Don’t be silly. It’s perfectly understandable considering the circumstances. Anyway, just press the button if you need anything. I’ll be back to check up on you in just a little bit. And Agent Whitestone?”

Dana looked up at the kindly medical professional. “Yes?”

Spinks held her gaze. “You’re a very lucky woman, ma’am. Don’t ever forget that.”

When Spinks exited the room, Dana let out a deep breath that deflated her chest and closed her eyes again, this time for good. Despite the doctor's encouraging words, however, the plain truth of the matter was that she didn't *feel* so lucky right now. Quite the opposite, as a matter of fact.

Then again, life was funny like that sometimes, wasn't it?

Sure as hell was.

Damned shame there was no
humor in it most of time.

CHAPTER 17

Bill Krugman hurried into Dana's hospital room the following morning, holding his trademark briefcase in his left hand and a colorful bouquet of flowers in his right.

“Dana,” he said, rushing over and laying down the flowers on her bedside table. “Thank God you're finally conscious.”

The Director put a warm hand on

the side of her face and leaned over the metal bedrail to kiss her softly on the top of her head, a grandfatherly look of concern deepening the already impressive menagerie of creases lining his weathered forehead.

“Thank God,” he said again, shifting his dark brown eyes back and forth between her pale blue ones.

“That’s all I can say. Thank *God*.”

Dana smiled thinly at her boss.

She was happy to see him, of course, *thrilled*, actually, but she had an eerie feeling that “thinly” was the only way she’d be able to smile at anyone for a very long time to come.

Wasn’t all that much for her to smile about lately, after all.

She pushed herself up straighter in bed and felt a nagging ache in her

underused muscles. “Thank you so much for coming, sir,” she said, not wanting to sound rude here but also wanting to get the pleasantries out of the way as quickly as possible. Dr. Spinks had told her that six people had *died* in the plane crash, and Dana still didn’t know if Bradley had been among them. Wasn’t sure she *wanted* to know. “It really means the world to me to see you here. I hope it wasn’t too much of a hassle for

you getting here.”

Krugman shook his head and pulled a plastic chair over to her bedside, setting down his leather briefcase on the tiled floor next to his feet and taking a seat. He waved his left hand in the air, showcasing the silver wedding band sparkling on his ring finger. “Of course not,” he said. “Don’t be ridiculous. I only wish that I could

have made it here sooner.”

He paused and stretched his neck. “Anyway, I’ve got some good news for you, Agent Whitestone – mixed in with a little bit of bad news – if you think you’re feeling up to hearing it.”

A nervous tickle fluttered Dana’s chest. “What’s that, sir?”

Krugman beamed. “The little boy from the plane crash,” he said. “He’s alive and well. Not a scratch on

him.”

Tears of joy flooded into Dana’s eyes. Overwhelming relief coursed through her veins. For several long moments, she couldn’t even *breathe*. “Thank God,” she finally whispered, echoing Krugman’s earlier sentiments. “Just, thank *God*. Where is he now?”

Krugman rolled his muscular neck on his sturdy shoulders. Even in

his late-sixties, the guy was in great shape, and Dana only hoped that she looked *half* as good at his age.

“Well, that’s the bad news,” Krugman said uncertainly, rubbing the left side of his throat with the palm of his right hand. “At the moment, the little boy’s living in a foster home in Parma. Unfortunately, his mother died in the plane crash and he had no other relatives to look after him. The mother died of

head trauma very similar to yours, Dana. Her skull slammed against the window and she didn't survive the impact. FAA investigators say the little boy's body bounced off hers and that's what saved his life."

Dana closed her eyes and felt her heart shatter into a million tiny pieces inside her badly constricted chest like a fumbled dinner plate. *The poor baby.*

Not only had he lost his mother now, she remembered all too well how he'd recently lost his father too, though she didn't know any of the details surrounding *that* death yet.

He was completely alone in the world.

More tears flooded into her eyes. Every last cell in her body ached for the little boy. And why not? Seemed to her that she was intimately familiar

with someone else who'd lost both of her parents at the tender age of just four years old.

The words tumbled out of her mouth before she had a chance to stop them from coming. "I want him," she blurted out.

Krugman cocked his head to one side. "*What?*"

Dana took in a deep breath that

ballooned her lungs to capacity. It might have been a hasty decision, she knew, but the truth of the matter was that she really didn't care right now. With every last fiber of her being, she wanted the boy. *Needed* him. Wanted and needed him more than anything else she'd ever wanted or needed in her entire life. "I want him," she repeated, a little more forcefully this time. "I want to adopt the little boy. I want to take him home with

me.”

Krugman looked stunned.

“Dana, don’t you think that maybe you should...”

She cut him off with a look before he could finish. “I’m completely serious, sir. If it’s not too much trouble, could you please arrange for somebody at the Bureau to start the paperwork for me? I’ll take over from there once the

ball is rolling.”

Krugman held her gaze and studied her eyes some more. After a long moment, he finally blew out a slow breath that sagged his chest. “These things take time, Agent Whitestone. As a matter of fact, they take *a lot* of time. I’ll have someone in admin start making some calls on your behalf if you’re absolutely *certain* this is what you want, but you need to remember that there’s no

shame in changing your mind about it later on. This is a *really* big decision you're making here. A *huge* one, actually. One you probably shouldn't be making right now."

Dana rolled her neck on her slender shoulders and felt the unbelievable stiffness there. If nothing else, she knew she needed to get the hell out of this hospital bed, *pronto*. And

Krugman was right. It *was* a big decision she was making here. A *huge* one, actually. Crazy as the idea might sound at the moment, though – even to her – she knew there was no way in hell she'd ever back out of it.

Not now, not later and not *ever*.

Why *would* she? She already *loved* the little boy. Had fallen madly in love with him the very first time she'd laid eyes on him on the plane.

“I’m absolutely sure this is what I want, sir,” she said, meaning it with all her heart and soul. “As a matter of fact, I’ve never been more certain about anything in my entire life.”

Krugman finally dropped his stare and shook his head. “Fine, Agent Whitestone. If you’re absolutely sure this is what you want, then I’ll get the ball rolling for you. I’ll have someone

in admin contact you just as soon as the process is started.”

Despite everything she'd just been through – despite everything she'd gone through since she'd been *four years old* – Dana's body practically *floated* out of her hospital bed. “Thank you so much, sir,” she said excitedly. “You don't know how much this means to me.”

Just then, Krugman's cellphone

rang in his pocket. He held up a finger to her and motioned for her to wait while he dug it out, flipping it open and placing it to his ear. “Hey, honey, what’s going on?”

A nervous thrill swirled in Dana’s stomach as the Director talked with his wife. It wasn’t that she was already having second thoughts about adopting the little boy, of course – far

from it, actually – but *holy crap*, what had she just gotten herself into here? What did *she* know about being a mother? About taking care of someone else? Hell, she could hardly seem to take care of *herself* these days.

Still, if everything went well for her, she might just have the chance to become a mother, after all.

And she'd become mother to the handsomest little guy she'd ever seen in

her entire life. A regular *GQ* model if ever there'd been one.

Then again, when had been the last time anything in her life had actually gone *well* for her?

Dana shook away the disconcerting thought when Krugman flipped shut his cellphone.

“Sorry about that,” the Director said, slipping the phone back into his

pants pocket and shifting in his seat.

“Marie was just calling to remind me to take my blood pressure medicine.”

He paused and shook his head in bemusement. “That woman, I swear. Always thinking about someone else and never about herself.”

Dana smiled. From the adoring look her boss’s eye, she could tell that he loved his wife more than he loved anything else in the entire world. And

she knew *exactly* how he felt, too. Because – despite the overwhelming *newness* of it all – she already felt the exact same way about Bradley.

Krugman broke into her thoughts by rising to his feet and snapping open the latches on his leather briefcase. “Anyway,” he said, “I’ve got to get out of here for a little while, Dana. Much as I don’t want to, I’m having lunch with

the head of the Northeast Ohio regional office in about twenty minutes. I've been putting it off forever now, but now that I'm up here it seems that I've run out of excuses.”

He extracted a pile of magazines and newspaper clippings from his briefcase and handed it over to her. “Here’s a little light reading for you while I’m gone. I’ll be back later on tonight to say goodbye before I head

back to DC, OK?”

Dana nodded and looked down at the pile in her hands, feeling her breath catch in her throat and her brain buzz with an intense electric charge. On top of the pile and highlighted by her standard FBI ID picture, *Newsweek's* cover teased readers to the main story inside:

*AMERICA'S TOP COP IN
COMA AFTER PLANE CRASH*

She looked up at the Director, stunned. “What’s this?” she breathed.

Krugman leaned over the bed railing and patted her shoulder. “This,” he said, “is just *some* of the press you garnered while you were taking your extended nap, Agent Whitestone. Seems

that you became an even *bigger* national celebrity while you were sleeping it off in dreamland. Enjoy the quotes from me in there, OK? I said some really nice things about you.”

He paused. “But, Dana?”

Dana looked up at her boss.

“Yes, sir?”

Krugman smiled. “Don’t let it go to your head, OK, kiddo? I don’t need any *prima donnas* making my job any

more difficult than it already is.”

CHAPTER 18

Dana spent the next several weeks reading and re-reading the articles detailing her life and career. That is, whenever she wasn't being subjected to the daily, grueling physical rehab sessions with a twenty-two-year-old intern named Zachary who seemed to have muscles even in his *hair* and who made Torquemada look suspiciously more like Mother Theresa by

comparison with all the ridiculous twists and turns contortions he loved to put her through.

Dana shook her head in disbelief as she reviewed the large pile of press clippings for the umpteenth time since Krugman had given them to her, absolutely *astounded* by the information the press had dredged up. From the murder of her parents way back in 1976

to the Cleveland Slasher case involving her half-brother two years prior to the Chessboard Killer slayings out in LA earlier in the year, they hadn't missed a single trick.

Dana sighed heavily, having always cherished what little privacy her job allowed. Though they didn't know *all* the details yet – and hopefully never would – anyone with an Internet connection, basic cable-television

package or subscription to the local newspaper was now privy to an *extremely* well-researched synopsis of her colossally screwed-up life, including just how close her relationship to the Cleveland Slasher had actually been. Then again, she supposed that was the price you paid for being the supposed hero in two of the most sensational serial-killer cases to come

down the pike in the past twenty-five years.

For being the supposed hero who'd – indirectly, anyway – cost so many innocent people their lives.

Worse, the press was still out there digging for more information. Literally, *right out there*. From a helpful orderly, Dana knew that a small cadre of reporters had set up camp out in the hospital's parking lot, just waiting

for her to emerge. And the relentless media showed no signs of going home anytime soon, either.

Dana let out a disgusted breath that fluttered her lips against her teeth. Hopefully, they'd brought along plenty of coffee with them, because she had absolutely *zero* intention of speaking with any of them when she came out. Or with anyone else, for that matter. Let

somebody *else's* name fill up the newspapers for a little while. *Her* name needed a break

She sighed again, even more heavily this time, feeling the entire weight of the world resting squarely on her unsteady shoulders. Above all else, she knew that she needed some alone time right now. Some “me time”. Maybe even a vacation somewhere warm. With Cleveland stuck in the grips

of yet another brutally cold winter, Florida might be a nice change of pace for a while, give her a chance to clear her head. Maybe even Hawaii.

One thing seemed obvious: she needed some time to unwind, to decompress, to process all of the horrible events of her life.

And to run away from all of the ghosts still chasing her.

A knock at the door mercifully pulled her out of the macabre inventory of deaths she'd been connected with over the years. A moment later, Dr. Aloysius Spinks entered the room, holding her medical chart in his right hand and smiling brightly.

“Good afternoon, Agent Whitestone,” he said in his rich baritone. “How are you feeling today?”

He didn't wait for her to answer before making his way over to her bedside and laying down her chart on the table. Leaning over the bed railing, he ran his long fingers deftly through the recently re-grown blonde hair on her scalp and examined the long row of stitches laced into her skull as expertly as a blind man reading Braille.

After a moment or two of rifling

through her hair, he looked down at her and smiled again. “What’s your secret, Agent Whitestone? If I could bottle this stuff I’d be a millionaire.”

Dana looked up at him and shrugged. “Not sure, Doc. Just lucky, I guess.”

Spinks chuckled and straightened to his full height, which looked to be somewhere around six-four. Retrieving her clipboard from the table, he marked

something down before flipping it shut again. “Any questions for me?” he asked.

Dana pushed herself up straighter in bed and nodded. “As a matter of fact, yes, Dr. Spinks,” she said. “Any idea of when I can get the hell out of this place? I’ve got a serious case of cabin fever going on over here and I’ve got someone at home who *really* needs me.”

It was the truth – even if that particular someone was a black-and-white cat named Oreo.

Spinks frowned. “Well, to tell you the truth, Agent Whitestone, I’m a little concerned about your psychological state right now. Your physical wounds have healed up beautifully, but how are you feeling *mentally*? You’ve been through quite a

rough patch with everything that's gone on lately, and I've got to imagine it's been pretty tough on you."

Dana pursed her lips. From the look of things, flimsy paper gowns like the one she was wearing right now were the *only* kind of privacy she could expect here in the hospital.

Then again, why the heck should Fairview General be any different from the rest of the world?

“It’s been hard – no doubt about it – but I feel fine psychologically,” Dana lied. *No way in hell she was telling the truth on this one.* “So if my skull is ready to leave the hospital, then so am I. I’d really like to go home today, if that’s OK with you.”

Spinks deepened his frown, and Dana frowned back at him this time. Judging by the disapproving look in the

good doctor's eye, though, he wasn't going to let her get away *that* easily.

“We have psychologists on staff here at the hospital,” Spinks said. “I think you should probably talk to one of them about what you’ve been through before we discharge you. Maybe even more than one, if you feel the need. Who knows? It might make you feel better about everything. And I know it would make *me* feel a lot better about the

thought of letting you out of here so quickly.”

Dana’s stomach lurched. If she didn’t get out of this hospital bed – and *today* – she knew she’d go crazy.

If she weren’t there already, which no doubt remained a subject of hotly contested debate in some quarters.

Still, she’d considered Spinks’s possible reluctance to discharge her for

weeks now, so she was prepared with her answer.

“The FBI requires mandatory psychological counseling whenever an agent undergoes a traumatic event such as the plane crash I was involved in,” she said, regurgitating the spiel that she’d rehearsed mentally ever since first emerging from her coma. “Since the nature of my job involves quite a bit of sensitive information, I really think I’d

feel more comfortable speaking with a mental-health professional who's been approved by the Bureau. Thank you very much for your concern, Doctor – I really appreciate it – but I'm afraid I'll have to pass.”

Spinks shrugged, but the deep lines etched into his broad forehead let Dana know he wasn't especially pleased with her answer. Still, he knew that

unless he invoked the Baker Act and kept her on a forty-eight-hour psychiatric hold that he didn't have any real authority in the matter. Dana knew it too.

Clearly, though, Spinks was frustrated with her decision. And then some. Because as her primary attending physician he most likely would have been kept in the loop on some of the juicier details of her story – sort of his

“Barney the Orderly” to her Hannibal Lecter. And that represented *exactly* the kind of information everyone seemed to be dying to know lately. Only there was no *quid pro quo* involved this time. People wanted things from Dana, sure – they wanted *lots* of things from her – but nobody seemed to be offering her anything in return.

Spinks finally stretched his tree-

trunk neck three inches to the right and let out a deep breath that deflated his muscular chest. Despite his obvious misgivings about the matter, however – whether self-centered or not – to his credit, he recovered quickly.

“Completely understandable, Agent Whitestone,” he said now, and actually did a passable job of sounding like he actually meant it. “Makes sense to me.”

He blew out another slow breath while he finished coming to terms with the fact that his prized patient was holding most of the cards right now since there didn't seem to be anything wrong with her – physically, at least. “So let's get those stitches out of you and get you home,” he finished up. “After we figure out a way to get you out of here unseen, of course.”

Relief flooded through Dana's body. A thousand-pound weight lifted off her shoulders. She didn't even care that Spinks was getting an obvious kick out of the chance to participate in what he most likely perceived as a high-stakes game of cloak-and-dagger with the press. Let him have his fun. All she cared about was getting the hell out of this hospital bed.

Besides, she knew for a fact that she'd need Spinks's help to leave the hospital undetected. So what did she care if he went home and told his wife all about his interesting day?

She didn't.

Still, she knew that the good doctor should probably be a little more careful about what he wished for. Because he just might get it.

Just like she had when she'd
joined the Federal Bureau of
Investigation.

CHAPTER 19

Many, *many* years passed before my mother and I finally compiled a list for me to work from.

With one notable addition she knew nothing about, of course.

Following my life-alerting *bris* when I was thirteen years old, I'd chucked caution entirely to the wind when I'd turned twenty-one and just went the whole nice yards without ever

looking back from there.

A complete sex change – complete with perfect silicone breasts featuring my own God-given nipples and the fashioning of a vagina from the skin left over from my brutal castration – completed my stunning transformation. Thanks to Timmy and all the money he'd made with his stupid television commercials – commercials that to this

day still brought in residual checks every six months or so – the cost of the operation up in Canada had been surprisingly affordable.

Estrogen treatments had eventually replaced the testosterone shots, making my voice higher and more feminine-sounding in addition to the added bonus of softening my skin, a feature I maintained by applying copious amounts of moisturizing lotion all over

my body each night, slathering myself in the stuff until my pores could take no more. For more years than I cared to remember, I'd needed to continue shaving my face and legs every day – *twice* a day – but the monthly visits to the clinic in downtown Chicago for electrolysis treatments had slowly removed *that* aggravating inconvenience from my life as well.

And here I was now all these years later: finally a girl on the *outside*, too – not just on the *inside*, anymore.

And life was certainly good when you were a girl, wasn't it?

It sure as heck was. As a matter of fact, life was *very* good when you were a girl. Especially when you were a girl like me: a self-sufficient, take-no-prisoners sort of gal who could slip

effortlessly back and forth between the genders without anyone becoming any the wiser.

Stylish male wigs in a breathtaking variety of colors and Ace bandages wrapped tightly around my newfound bosom allowed me to continue appearing as a man whenever I so chose – not that it was a route I chose to travel very often, mind you. Because being a man was an inconvenience, a pain in the

ass, something only to be done when it was absolutely necessary to further my mother's wonderfully thought-out plans.

My heart singing with joy in my chest, I stare down at the tattered sheet of paper in my hands and read through the names again. The first name on my list has already been checked off. A warm-up act, really. By following the script my mother had provided, I'd

brought down the curtains on the
insufferable woman and her glittering
lifestyle of thoroughly undeserved fame
once and for all.

Now with her out of the way,
four more names await my undivided
attention:

1. ~~Dinah Leach~~

2. Penelope

Hargrave

3. Amber Knightly

4. Annabeth

Preston

5. Dana

Whitestone

I shudder a full-body shudder
as I read through the names on my list
once more, a cold quiver snaking down
the entire length of my spine at the

delicious memory of my first kill. A woman out in Atlanta – one of those “real” housewives” who wouldn’t have known the definition of *reality* had it jumped up and bitten her directly in her big fat ass.

After forcing my way into her opulent Buckhead home while the powerful hurricane had raged on outside, I’d struck down the undeserving whore in a manner *exactly*

befitting the worthless pig she'd been. And with Dinah Leach's name safely crossed off my list, I could now turn my full attention to the spoiled heiress out in New York City, a petulant little brat who'd never worked a single day in her life yet somehow still possessed a net worth larger than several third-world countries combined.

Hell, the world would *cheer*

me for that one.

After the heiress, Number Three would come in the form of the requisite pop singer – Amber Knightly, who'd gotten her big break on The Disney Channel when she'd been just eight years old.

I pause and narrow my eyes as I come to the fourth name on my list, a name that – for obvious reasons – I've secretly added without my mother's

knowledge or consent:

Annabeth Preston.

I shift uncomfortably in my wooden chair at the kitchen table and fiddle with the delicate silver Tiffany necklace hanging around my throat.

Can I really do it? I wonder.

Really take the life of the woman who'd given me my own – *twice?*

I straighten in my seat and pull

back my slender shoulders. *Of course*
I can do it. I *need* to do it, as a matter
of fact. There's no other option. No
room for mercy here. After all, it's
only fair after what she'd done to poor
Timmy.

What's more, I'll actually *enjoy*
it.

At least that's what I tell myself
now.

Shaking my head, I return my

attention to the list and force myself to slow down. No point in getting ahead of myself here. No need to rush things. And at least there's no ambiguity concerning the fifth and final name on my list.

Still, Dana Whitestone will mark a worthy foil, so I'll need to be *extremely* careful with her. The woman's unofficial label as

“America’s top cop” would no doubt prove the stiffest test of my *own* greatness. Because killing vapid reality stars and other undeserving fame whores of their ilk was one thing, but besting a woman like the FBI agent at her own dangerous game was quite another. If I can pull it off, though, I know that my name will go down in history as one of the greatest serial killers of all time.

John Wayne Gacy.

Andrei Chikatilo.

Ted Bundy.

Gary Ridgway.

Richard Ramirez.

Nicholas Preston.

Pushing my chair away from the
kitchen table with the loud scrape of
wood against tile, I smooth my red
Armani dress around my long legs

before making my way into the guest bathroom of our house at 969 Turning Oaks Drive while my mother sleeps peacefully in the master bedroom a hundred feet away, completely oblivious to the fact that her *own* name has been added to my special list.

Closing the bathroom door behind me, I peer into the vanity mirror above the sink and nod approvingly at the pleasant image that stares back at

me, shiver again at the tantalizing prospect of one day butchering my mother like a kosher hog. Flipping over my long brown hair to one side, I smile at myself.

Right on cue, my reflection smiles back.

I widen my smile even farther while I study my high cheekbones, glittering green eyes and perfectly

straight white teeth. No two ways about it – I'm absolutely *gorgeous*. Stunning beyond my wildest dreams. Just like my mother had assured me I'd be all those years ago. And where was the great surprise in that?

After all, apples – even the rotten ones – never fell too far from the tree, now did they?

Leaning in even closer to the mirror, I blot my lipstick with the tip of

my right pinkie and sigh contentedly as I slowly drift back in time to my first kill. No matter how much time passed, you never forgot your first go-around, did you?

Of course you didn't.

Because the first time was always the sweetest.

PART III

BACK IN THE SADDLE

“Climate is what we expect, weather is what we get.” – Mark Twain

CHAPTER 20

Two hours after her hasty negotiations with Dr. Spinks concerning her discharge from the hospital, Dana almost laughed out loud at the ridiculousness of it all. She just couldn't help herself. Still, she had to admit that it was kind of fun, too. Because playing cat-and-mouse really could be a thrilling game when you were the one trying to *avoid* detection, rather

than the sick feeling you got deep inside the pit of your stomach while you were in the process of hunting down a deranged serial killer and knowing that any one of your many mistakes could cost innocent people their lives.

Would *probably* cost innocent people their lives.

That being said, Dana felt an awful lot like Chevy Chase in *Fletch*

right about now, dressed up as a doctor in a white lab coat and holding a medical chart in front of her nose while a group of orderlies crowded around her and escorted her past the press that was camped out in the hospital's parking lot.

The reporters barely glanced up at them as they strolled by. Not a single Dan Rather in the entire group, and thank God for that. Not a single Nathan Stiedowe in the entire group, either —

and thank God *twice* for that.

Dana shuddered at the terrifying memory of her half-brother. Because Nathan Stiedowe had been a reporter once upon a time, too; had even had the audacity to write about the murders of her parents under the same name he'd been given by their mother at birth: Jeremiah Quigley. Murders *he* himself had committed. And he hadn't been the

kind of reporter who would've been fooled *this* easily. Not even close. He would have sensed Dana's fear from a mile away, would've *smelled* it.

What's more, it would have *excited* him.

Short as Dana was – five-three even on her best day – each of the orderlies who'd applied for the job of acting as her human shields had been selected on the basis of their own, more

impressive heights. No doubt it marked the easiest employment interview process any of them had ever been through in their entire lives:

Are you taller than any one of The Lollipop Kids from the Wizard of Oz?

Yep.

Great, you're hired.

Dana heaved a grateful sigh of

relief when they finally reached a white hospital van fifty yards away from the media and seven of the orderlies immediately peeled off, heading back toward Fairview General's main entrance and giggling to themselves like naughty schoolchildren as they passed by the reporters again. Take *that*, Tom Brokaw. Stick *that* in your newsreel and smoke it, buddy.

The job of actually driving Dana

home fell to a young man of about twenty-eight or so. Justin McNamara was the oldest son of a surgeon on staff at Fairview General, so Dr. Spinks had decided he'd probably be Dana's best bet to not kiss and tell – aka go running off to the press with his story. With anything about Dana and her personal life seeming to be a hot commodity these days, if any new information leaked out

to the press after the ridiculous *Fletch* routine the source wouldn't be hard to trace.

They'd made it halfway home to Dana's apartment complex in Lakewood on the western outskirts of Cleveland when her stomach suddenly lurched.

Gritting her teeth, she berated herself for her unforgivable *stupidity*. Because it hadn't been very long ago that her *brother* had posed as an orderly in

order to gain access to her hospital room, less than a week after she'd passed out from the sheer stress of investigating the Cleveland Slasher case.

Well, the sheer stress of it washed down by more than just a small measure Kettle One vodka.

Dana's heartbeat pounded wildly against her ribcage as she studied the

orderly from out of the corner of her left eye, not wanting to alert him to her suspicions. He didn't *look* like a killer to her, but then again neither had her brother. Hell, Nathan Stiedowe had been so devilishly handsome that he'd made Ted Bundy look downright homely by comparison; completely obscuring the horrendously ugly person he'd been inside.

Dana balled up her fists in her

lap and breathed slowly through her nostrils; unable to believe that she hadn't even *considered* the possible threat until it was too late. Once again – as had been the case so many other times in her career – it seemed that she was a day late and a dollar short, the same mistake she'd consistently made during the Cleveland Slasher and Chessboard Killer investigations.

Dana shook her head in exasperation. *What the hell was wrong with her? Why the hell couldn't she seem to think straight anymore? And if something was up, had Dr. Spinks been in on it, too?*

Before she knew what was happening, her worst fears were confirmed when McNamara suddenly jammed down his foot hard on the brake

pedal and brought the van to a screeching halt, slamming Dana's body violently forward against her seat belt.

Pain like a knife wound ripped through her right shoulder while two feet away a casual smile played across McNamara's full lips as he turned in his seat to face her.

Dana jerked back in horror – seeing Nathan Stiedowe's face dancing in front of her eyes – raising her arms to

protect her face.

A confused look flooded across the young orderly's handsome features. "Whoa," he said, holding up his hands in front of him in a placating manner. "Take it easy, ma'am. We're here, that's all. You're home. Look."

He gestured past Dana's aching right shoulder and out her window. She turned in her seat and blinked hard in

confusion. Fifty feet away, her apartment complex loomed up nine stories high into the late-afternoon winter sunshine.

An exquisite wave of relief washed through her veins and cleared her mind like the morning sun breaking through a dark bank of clouds. Without realizing it, she'd gotten completely lost in her thoughts again; had completely lost track of time. Worse, she'd also

briefly lost track of her *physical body*, had absolutely no idea where she'd been there for a moment.

Dana closed her eyes and let out a soft sigh. If nothing else, she knew that the FBI shrink would have a *field day* with her once they'd finally coaxed her onto the comfortable leather couches scattered around their plush offices down in Quantico.

She felt ridiculous as she lowered her arms and tried to smile at McNamara. Wasn't easy. "So we are," she said, trying her best to sound casual about the whole thing but falling miserably short. "Sorry about that. Didn't mean to go all schizo on you there."

The concerned look in McNamara's eyes let her know that even

he could see that she'd lost her marbles – and he was just a lowly orderly. Told her that he thought they might as well start fitting her for her white coat right now – and not the kind she was currently wearing as part of the elaborate *Fletch* ruse, either. The kind of white coat that restricted the free movement of your arms, both for your own safety and for the safety of those around you.

The kind of white coats that they

passed out right along with the psychotropic meds over in the mental-health wing at the Cleveland Clinic.

McNamara forced the semblance of a smile onto his full lips. “No problem, ma’am,” he said. “Welcome home.”

Chapter 21

Dana exited the van and stood on the curb until McNamara had driven away, watching the young orderly adjust his rearview mirror to keep her in his line of sight before swinging the van out of the parking lot and disappearing into the heavy traffic streaming down Clifton Avenue. No doubt he wanted to make sure that Dana didn't slit her wrists right then and there on the snow-covered

sidewalk. Truth be told, though, she didn't blame him the least little bit for his vigilance. Why would she? She probably would have reacted the *exact* same way had she been in his shoes.

She shook her head mournfully and started toward her apartment building, knowing that the poor kid had no idea just how close he'd come with his silent diagnosis of insanity. Because

the truth of the matter was that she *did* feel like she was starting to go a little bit crazy lately, just a smidge *Looney Toons*; a textbook case of PTSD if she'd ever seen one.

Then again, when the hell had crazy people ever been trusted to make their own diagnoses?

A biting cold delivered by howling wind sliced hard through her paper-thin lab coat and swirled her

recently re-grown short blonde hair wildly around her scalp as she made her way up to the main doors of the apartment complex and fished her magnetic key card out of her purse before sliding the plastic rectangle through the electronic reader and stepping inside, shivering violently as she did so.

Dana shivered some more.

Cleveland in the wintertime had never been an especially pleasant place to live under even the best of weather conditions, but today's lake-effect winds were making things that much worse, that much more unbearable. It was the kind of cold that hurt you all the way down to the bone. The kind of cold that made you want nothing more than to curl up into a tight little ball right there in the middle of it all and simply *cry* yourself

to death.

Stepping deeper inside the building, Dana paused a moment to shake off the bitter cold, luxuriating in the warmth of the lobby that immediately went to work defrosting her frozen cheeks. Taking a deep breath, she then headed directly for her landlady's apartment on the first floor, deliberately ignoring her mailbox located in a

honeycomb arrangement in the middle of the lobby, not even wanting to *think* about what might be in there after all this time away. No doubt the damn thing was crammed full of credit card bills and Publisher's Clearinghouse letters breathlessly informing her that *she* could be the next lucky winner of the million-dollar prize.

Dana pulled open another door at the northeast end of the lobby and made

her way down the hall before knocking lightly on her landlady's door.

A moment later, Maggie Carter fiddled with the chain inside and opened up. “Dana!” the old woman said happily in her thick Polish accent. “Welcome home, honey! We’ve been so worried about you! How are you feeling, my love?”

Dana smiled – a *real* smile this

time. It was hard not to when you looked at Maggie Carter. Eighty years old if she was a day, she'd escaped her home country and its Nazi persecution during World War II and had subsequently changed her name from Magdalena Abrahamowicz to the more American-sounding Maggie Carter in an effort to fit in better with her new surroundings. The name change had been made to honor her adopted country

of the United States, but the simple truth of the matter was that Maggie Carter would have fit in *anywhere* she went.

The woman possessed a smile that lit up the room like a sunburst every time she showed off her false teeth and, even at her advanced age, still moved around town like an eighteen-year-old girl brimming over with enthusiasm and good cheer.

Dana widened her own smile, knowing that she could probably learn a thing or two from the old gal. Life wasn't *all* just gloom and doom and serial killers. There were *good* things about it, too – however hard that good stuff might be to find sometimes.

“I’m fine, Mrs. Carter,” she said, catching a whiff of freshly baked bread that was emanating from the kitchen and

making her stomach growl. “I’m feeling *much* better, as a matter of fact. And how are you and Mr. Carter doing? How’s his colitis these days?”

Maggie Carter rolled her watery blue eyes halfway around her wrinkled face and waved a frail arm in front of her painfully thin body, jiggling the loose skin hanging off her right biceps like a rooster’s comb. “I’m wonderful, sweetie,” she said. “Thanks so much for

asking. As for Mr. Carter, well, Bob's sleeping again, but what's new, right? His health is fine, though. He might not look like much, but that man's as healthy as a horse. Eats like one too."

The old lady cackled at her own joke, and Dana joined in. She just couldn't help herself. Maggie Carter's laugh was *infectious*.

The old woman stepped to the

side and motioned for her to come inside. “Anyway, get the heck out of that cold hallway and get your pretty little butt in here already, missy. You’ll catch your death of pneumonia if you’re not careful. Kind of reminds me of Warsaw in the wintertime.”

The old woman paused and shook her head, no doubt to chase away what must’ve been *extremely* unpleasant memories of Warsaw in the wintertime.

“C’mon, sweetheart,” she said. “I’ve got some hot tea waiting for us on the stove and I know there’s somebody here who’s just *dying* to see you.”

Dana gave Maggie Carter a faux confused look. “And who might that somebody be?”

The old woman eyed her sardonically. “Why, Oreo, of course, you silly bird! He’s been doing nothing

but crying for his mama all day and night ever since you left – not that I’m complaining, mind you. To tell you the truth, the company’s been kind of nice, what with Bob usually sleeping all the time.”

Maggie Carter shook her head again. “I swear to sweet Jesus above, that man could sleep through a *hurricane*.”

Dana laughed and stepped inside

the old woman's apartment as she'd been instructed, even though what she *really* felt like doing right now was retrieving her cat and getting back up to her *own* apartment before taking a long, hot shower. A chance to scrub the antiseptic smell of the hospital out of her hair and skin and fingernails.

A chance for her to be *alone* for a little while.

She stopped herself mid-thought and gave herself a swift mental kick in the butt for her unforgivable selfishness. Here she was already looking forward to ending her visit with Maggie Carter, and she'd also had the unbelievably poor taste to show up on the woman's doorstep empty-handed.

Dana suppressed a sigh, wishing she'd thought to bring along a gift for

Maggie Carter as thanks for watching Oreo for so long, but also knowing that it was too late to worry about that now. She'd need to do it later. She knew the old lady was fond of chocolate and cheese, so she made a mental note to stop by Godiva and the deli tomorrow morning. Even with Godiva's exorbitant prices, it was a small price to pay for the old woman's kindness. Because as far as Dana knew, most kennels didn't

offer unlimited pet-sitting services for comatose pet owners who were stuck in the hospital following horrific plane crashes.

Maggie Carter smoothed her flower-patterned housedress around her bony knees as Dana stepped deeper into the apartment and looked around.

The Carters' apartment looked *exactly* like one might suspect an

octogenarian couple's living quarters to look like. Plastic-covered couches in the living room to go along with matching recliners positioned in front of an old, cabinet-style television on the south side of the room. A teetering stack of *National Enquirer* tabloids that was piled three feet high on top of a scarred dining-room table.

Maggie Carter lifted the magazines off the table and placed them

on an old wooden chair three feet away.

“Here, have a seat, dear,” she said. “I’ll be back with our tea in just a minute, and then I’ll go get Oreo for you. He has his own room, you know.”

The old woman beamed with this revelation, and Dana had no doubt that her cat couldn’t have been left in more capable – or loving – hands.

Twenty minutes later – their tea

finally drunk, pleasantries exchanged and a thorough update on Mr. Carter's colitis condition delivered in graphic detail – Maggie Carter retrieved Oreo from his bedroom and placed him down on the floor in the dining room.

Dana's cat glanced up briefly at her to let her know that he didn't especially care for being abandoned this long before finally sauntering over to her and rubbing his portly body against her

ankles. After a moment or two, he began to purr. Dana smiled softly, happy to be reunited with her best buddy. Unlike dogs, however, she'd learned that cat's made you *earn* their affection. Not that it took all that much, of course. Keep them fat and safe and warm and you had yourself a friend for life.

“I missed you too, big guy,” she said, leaning down to scratch Oreo

behind his pointy ears for a few seconds
before scooping him up into her arms.

“Now let’s get you home already.

“Let’s get *both* of us home
already.”

Chapter 22

Thanking Maggie Carter again, Dana exited the old woman's apartment and headed for the elevator down the hall. Stepping inside a moment later, she punched the button for the fourth floor and held Oreo close as they made their ascent, knowing that she'd need him as a security blanket to get through this next part.

When the elevator reached the

fourth floor with a high-pitched *ding!* a moment later, she exited the car and made her way down the hall to apartment D12 on badly shaking legs, purposely shifting her gaze away from the apartment located directly across the hall.

D13 had been Eric Carlton's apartment – the best human friend Dana had ever had in her life and another

unfortunate victim of the Cleveland Slasher when Nathan Stiedowe had caved in his head with a claw hammer. Tears flooded into Dana's eyes at the horrific memory. She still had Eric's spare key stashed underneath the welcome mat in front of her own door to remind her of that heartbreaking fact. So even if *moving on* wasn't very high on her list of priorities right now, *moving* definitely was. Because she knew that

there was no way in hell she'd be able to continue living here with reminders of Eric constantly staring her in the face just five short feet across the hall. Not after the unspeakable thing her half-brother had done to him.

Still, much like the forgotten gift for Maggie Carter as thanks for watching Oreo, that was something she'd need to worry about later. *Right now*, she

desperately needed a long, hot shower.
Everything else in the world could wait.

She slipped her key into the lock
and pushed open the front door to her
apartment before stepping inside,
pausing in the doorway and looking into
her home.

Complete silence greeted her.
Stale, unmoving air filled her nostrils.
No big surprise there, however. After
all, the place had been locked up tight

for *months* now.

Dana made her way farther into the vaguely familiar apartment and placed Oreo down on the floor at her feet before taking a moment or two to re-acclimate herself with her surroundings.

In the living room, a pair of plaid armchairs flanked a matching plaid couch – a bit more up-to-date than those belonging to the Carters since the

furnishings had been purchased at Pier One five or six years ago as opposed to JC Penney's sometime back in the late-1960s. A coffee table with a thick, cut-glass top served as the centerpiece of the room, and an old-fashioned coat rack stood watch over in the corner next to the front door like a painfully thin scarecrow, an old raincoat and a floppy beach hat hanging from a couple of the hooks. Above the flat-screen television

mounted to the north wall of the living room, an old Sears portrait showcased a four-year-old Dana book-ended by her parents, James and Sara. A beautiful moment suspended forever in time.

Dana sighed heavily. Even though her mom and dad had been gone for more than three decades now, she still missed them every single day. More now than ever now that everyone

she'd ever loved since the day they'd died had moved on to the next world without her, too.

She was two-thirds of the way home to feeling sorry for herself when the harsh jangle of the phone on her kitchen wall suddenly interrupted her pity-party. Fighting back a hot jolt of panic in her chest from the abrupt noise, she walked quickly into the kitchen and picked up the phone, placing the

receiver to her ear.

She half-expected God to be calling to tell her to quit her crying already and just get on with her life, but she was surprised instead to hear Sergeant Gary Templeton's voice fill her ear.

Dana grimaced. The last time she'd spoken with the Cleveland cop, she'd been screaming up into his face

about how the Cleveland Slasher never left a shred of evidence behind at any of his many crime scenes. Still, the truth of the matter was that it should have been Templeton screaming at *her* — considering the fact that she'd just thrown up her lunch all over a freshly discovered murder scene.

“Dana,” Templeton said, and for a moment she thought she detected a note of apprehension in his voice. And why

not? He was probably still mad at her, and if he were, she wouldn't blame him. The way she'd behaved the last time she'd spoken with him had been bush league, at best. At worst, she'd made *Amateur Hour at the Apollo* look like Barbra Streisand performing at the Grammys.

“I'm so glad I reached you,” Templeton went on after a brief

exchange of how-are-yous. “I heard that you came out of your coma a few weeks ago but I didn’t want to bother you while you were recovering. Anyway, how long have you been home?”

Dana glanced down at her watch, a silver Rolex that had once belonged to her mother – a first-anniversary gift from her father, who’d worn a matching gold one, saying that he and Sara matched so perfectly as husband and wife that the

least their jewelry could do was the same. Dana *always* wore the watch, regardless of her outfit, even though every time the battery ran out only reminded her of the horrific bloodbath in which both of her parents had died. “Well, let’s see here,” she said. “About two minutes now. Give or take.”

“Ouch,” Templeton said. “I’m really sorry to hear that, but I’m also

happy as hell to hear that you're finally out of the hospital. We've all been really worried about you, you know."

Dana smiled. It was a nice thing for him to say. "Thanks, Gary. Anyway, before you say anything else, I want to apologize for the way I spoke to you the last time we were together. It was completely uncalled for and you didn't deserve it. You were just doing your job and protecting the crime scene. It

was my fault, no two ways about it. I was way out of line and I won't ever let it happen again."

Templeton paused. After a moment, he cleared his throat. "Don't worry about it, Dana. The stress of the case was getting to all of us back then, including me. It's perfectly understandable. Anyway, I'm sorry to catch you right when you got home. You

must need your rest. I'll give you a call later on tonight or tomorrow morning."

Dana shook her head. "No, it's fine, Gary. What's up? What's going on?"

Templeton cleared his throat again. "Ah, nothing. I'll handle it myself."

Dana stretched her neck to the left and fought back a sudden swell of irritation inside her chest. She just

couldn't help herself. She knew that Templeton was just trying to be polite, not wanting to bother her right after she'd gotten home. But polite or not, his reluctance to tell her what he'd called her about was a little bit aggravating, too. "If I ask you *pretty* please will you tell me?" she asked.

Templeton laughed, and Dana smiled again, this time with relief.

Obviously, bygones really were bygones when it came to him, and thank God for that much. Because when the Cleveland cop buried a grudge, it clearly *stayed* buried, bless his heart.

Dana lifted her eyebrows. Much as she'd done with Maggie Carter, she found herself thinking that she could probably learn a thing or two from the veteran police officer. Steal a page from his playbook and cut people a little

bit of slack from time to time. After all, to err was human but to forgive was divine, right?

Just so long as you weren't asking forgiveness for murder.

“OK, Dana,” Templeton finally relented. “I’ll tell you what I’ve got to say if you absolutely *insist* on hearing it, but I’m warning you right now that you’re probably not going to like it.”

Dana kicked her feet out of her shoes and shrugged her shoulders out of the lab coat. “I’m a big girl, Gary,” she said. “Try me.”

“Fine – I need your help again,” Templeton said without further preamble, referencing the fact that it had been him who’d called Dana in on the Cleveland Slasher case two years earlier. “Christian Manhoff was found

lying dead in the middle of Prospect Avenue while you were recovering in the hospital.”

Dana searched her memory until she remembered the name. Even though another murder case was the last thing in the world she felt like dealing with right now, her investigative mind nonetheless sprang into action processing the information, the mental equivalent of a whiplash reflex. Unbelievably, it also

actually felt *good*. Much like cockroaches and the seemingly never-ending trend of tourists sporting fanny packs to go along with their white sneakers and black dress socks, it seemed, old habits died hard.

Finally, she seized upon it.

Christian Manhoff was something of a local celebrity around Cleveland — a “super-fan” of the

Cleveland Browns, the erstwhile, blue-collar city's professional football team. That is, if you wanted to count a bumbling squad that seemed to drop the ball every bit as often as they caught it and which hadn't made the playoffs in anyone's recent memory as "professional".

The cartoonish image of Christian Manhoff filled Dana's mind. An obese, three-hundred-and-fifty-pound

man, Manhoff had gained a certain measure of national celebrity by dressing up in an orange-and-white plastic hardhat and a “dawg” mask while going shirtless and sporting nipple rings in the frigid winter air at the Browns games every Sunday afternoon during football season.

With his seat situated near one end zone in Cleveland Browns Stadium

– a section of the stadium known affectionately around the city as “The Dawg Pound” – Manhoff often got an abundance of face-time, or at least *mask*-time, on ESPN during its post-game wrap-up shows. But with a visage like that representing the city, Dana wasn’t surprised that the rest of the country still viewed Cleveland as a joke. Situated on the shores of Lake Erie, the city’s “Mistake By The Lake”

tag still hadn't worn off yet – and at this rate she highly doubted it ever would. And guys like Christian Manhoff did absolutely *nothing* to burnish the long-suffering town's hopelessly tarnished image.

Dana caught herself mid-snark and mentally berated herself for her pissy attitude. When the hell had she become so damned *heartless*? So cold

and uncaring? She'd never liked to speak ill of the dead before – or even *think* ill of them, for that matter. In most cases, anyway. Especially not the *recently* dead.

Shame heated up her cheeks as she wrapped the telephone cord around her finger until it cut off her circulation and Templeton filled her in on the rest of the story.

As he spoke, she gathered that

Christian Manhoff had been found naked and lying dead in the middle of a downtown street with a large rawhide dog bone shoved halfway down his throat – a favorite prop of the Browns’ “super-fans”. According to Templeton, the ME had concluded that Manhoff had choked to death on the bone, though Dana didn’t think that eight years of advanced schooling were necessarily

required to come up with *that* unsurprising diagnosis.

“There’s something else,”
Templeton said when he’d finally
finished bringing her up to speed.

“What’s that, Gary?”

The Cleveland cop hesitated.
Then he blew out a slow breath and
went on. “There was also a picture of
your brother attached to one of
Manhoff’s nipple rings.”

Dana's stomach flipped inside-out. Her world swam out of focus before suddenly clearing up again in a dizzying flash of color. "*What?*" she asked hoarsely, feeling her knees buckle hard beneath her.

"Yeah, I know," Templeton said. "It's fucking weird. The photograph wasn't there at the initial crime scene, but the ME said he

discovered it when he went to do the autopsy.”

Dana held onto the edge of the kitchen counter to support her weight and glanced over at the digital clock on her stove.

“Where are you now?” she asked.

“Down at the stationhouse.”

“Where’s Christian Manhoff’s body?”

“At the coroner’s office.”

“I’ll be there in half an hour to pick you up.”

Templeton let out a relieved breath. “Thanks, Dana. I really appreciate it. And I’m really sorry for dropping this shitstorm into your lap right after you got out of the hospital, but I really didn’t know who else to turn to. I owe you one.”

“Don’t mention it, Gary. I’ll see you in half an hour.”

A familiar thrill boiled away deep in the pit of Dana’s stomach as she hung up the phone, completely chasing away the vertigo she’d been feeling despite the overwhelming shock of being thrust smack-dab into the middle of yet *another* homicide investigation featuring a very personal connection to her.

The thrill of the chase.

She took several deep breaths through her nostrils and steeled herself for what would come next. Hell, maybe she wasn't crazy, after all. Maybe she'd just been *born* for this kind of work. Had been born to chase killers. God knew she loved it – all of the horrible collateral damage usually involved notwithstanding. And much like the rest

of the country, anything concerning Nathan Stiedowe – even peripherally – fascinated the *hell* out of her.

Besides, Gary, she thought as her gaze drifted upward and landed on a fresh bottle of Jim Beam that was sitting on top of her refrigerator next to a roll of paper towels. It's me who owes everybody else. Jeremy, Eric, Crawford, my parents... all the others...

And now it was time for her to

pay up.

CHAPTER 23

After finally discarding the silly white lab coat in favor of her worn brown leather bomber jacket, a fuzzy green scarf and a pair of faded blue jeans – tucking her Glock 17 into her shoulder holster to complete the hastily thrown-together outfit – Dana exited the elevator on the ground floor of her apartment complex and rushed out the front door of the lobby to go meet up

with Templeton at the stationhouse downtown.

Dana took a deep breath and steeled herself for what would come next. Her heartbeat hadn't slowed down one little bit since she'd first hung up with the Cleveland cop, and judging from the incessant thumping still banging away against her ribcage she highly doubted it would anytime soon.

Entirely preoccupied with thoughts of her brother and how he might tie into Christian Manhoff's brutal murder, she didn't notice the television news crew that had been lying in wait for her just outside the main doors of the apartment complex until it was already too late.

Dana gritted her teeth and skidded to a stop. Clever as the sleight

of hand might have been with the doctor's outfit back at the hospital, the press hadn't been fooled for long. Still, she was happy that the misdirection had worked for this long. After all, she certainly hadn't expected them to stay in the dark *forever* on the subject of her whereabouts. They were just too good at what they did; too hungry; too goddamn *relentless*.

As was usual with television

journalists, everything happened very quickly from there. Before Dana knew what was going on, lights from three different cameras blinded her and a microphone was shoved into her face. A second boom mike was lowered just above her head while a young man with perfect hair stepped forward in the middle of the pack and smiled perfect teeth at her, each one of his dental

veneers as bright and dazzling as the lights that were blazing forth from the cameras.

The powerful lights sliced through the foggy winter air with all the efficiency of a vicious paper cut and stabbed Dana's thoroughly shocked brain via her woefully unprepared eyeballs, causing a smattering of tiny black dots to dance crazily in front of her face for several long seconds.

She blinked rapidly against the intensity of the lights and counted the number of figures huddled in a rough semi-circle around Colgate's poster boy. *Four*. The lead reporter had come with a full crew in tow, and why not? This story could be his ticket out of Cleveland and onto bigger and better things. Los Angeles, perhaps. Maybe even New York City itself – the holy

grail of TV news.

“Agent Whitestone,” the man said with a melodramatic flair that he’d no doubt been practicing in front of his bathroom mirror each and every night for the past five years now, refining it and redefining it until it sounded as smooth as processed honey, both to his own ears and to the ears of his viewers.

“Brent Price, Channel Four News. You walked right past us at the hospital,

didn't you?"

The reporter narrowed his bright blue eyes beneath his carefully coiffed brown hair to let her know that she'd been caught red-handed and there was nowhere left for her to hide. "*Didn't* you?" he repeated accusingly.

Dana forced back the abrupt swell of anger she felt rising up in her chest. Wasn't easy. "I have no idea

what you're talking about, Mr. Price," she said, putting down her head and beginning to hustle past the journalists, making a beeline for her car parked forty-five feet away. She *really* didn't have time for this crap right now. Having never been anything less than a total gentleman a day in his entire life, Gary Templeton would no doubt be waiting for her on the curb downtown, and she didn't want to keep the

Cleveland cop standing out there in this cold any longer than she absolutely needed to.

Not that she was going to get off the hook *that* easily, of course.

The newsman laughed and shuffled his feet to block her path, slipping momentarily on a patch of black ice hidden beneath his brown dress shoes and temporarily losing his

balance.

Price flung out his arms wildly to his sides and regained his equilibrium quickly, but otherwise looked like an adult who was attempting to ride a skateboard for the very first time in his life. Still, once he'd regained his balance, he acted as though nothing had happened at all. Not even a single *flicker* of acknowledgement on his handsome face that he'd come perilously

close to smashing out all his pretty veneers against the hard ground.

Dana watched all this unfold in amazement. Not a single hair on Price's head had moved out of place despite his near-fall and the fact that the healthy wind swirling around the parking lot at the moment called to mind a certain famous fictional tornado that had once dropped an entire *house* on a wicked

witch sporting ruby-red slippers.

She shook her head in bewilderment, wondering where the heck TV folks got all their confidence. She highly doubted it came from a can of industrial-strength hairspray or ten pounds of pancake make-up, though. No, it was something else. Maybe a complete lack of self-awareness, an utter inability to step outside their own bodies and view themselves through the eyes of

others. The same lack of crushing self-consciousness that Dana seemed to have been *born* with.

Whatever it was, however, she knew that she could probably use some more of it herself. *A lot* more of it, actually. She *hated* knowing that she didn't even trust herself anymore. How could she expect anyone *else* to trust her?

And in her job, trust was *everything*.

That being said – much like a cat's love – trust was something that needed to be earned. Or, in her case, earned *back*. Starting with Gary Templeton and Christian Manhoff's grieving family. No matter how hard it might be for her to accomplish right now, Dana knew that she needed to

regroup mentally, to stay strong, to show everybody that she hadn't cracked and that she was still capable of doing her job properly.

And maybe, just *maybe*, even *excelling* at it every once in a while.

“Sure you don't know what I'm talking about, Agent Whitestone,” Price persisted, turning down the corners of his mouth into a frown to indicate he wasn't buying her story. “Nice try,

though. I guess you *really* didn't want to talk to us, huh? Anyway, it's a good thing for me that my source on the inside finally coughed up the information. The rest of those idiots are still waiting for you outside Fairview General."

He cast his gaze up at the menacing winter sky above and clucked his tongue with false concern. "The poor bastards. It's going to get dark out

pretty soon and our weather guy says that it's supposed to get viciously cold out here tonight. Can you believe that? Helluva way to describe the weather, huh? But that's what he said. *Viciously* cold. I've never heard the weather described that way before, have you?"

Dana ignored Price's question and forced herself not to glare, even though the sneaky newsman had taken all of about three seconds to get all the way

underneath her skin. Still, she knew that she looked like a stark raving lunatic whenever she glared at somebody on television and that was the *last* impression on earth she wanted to create right now. Or *reinforce*. Hell, everybody out there probably thought she was crazy already.

Accurate as the impression might be, she didn't want to reinforce it by

appearing the part.

She concentrated on keeping her voice completely even and entirely devoid of emotion, a little trick that she'd learned during a media-relations course taught by her former mentor and partner, Crawford Bell – another victim of the Cleveland Slasher when he'd been strung up by his neck with a length of electrical cord in a perfect replica of her childhood wardrobe. “Good to see you,

Brett,” she said, purposely getting the newsman’s first name wrong. “How are your wife and kids doing?”

She studied the newsman’s reaction as he processed her words. Personal questions like the one she’d just asked him put the media on the defensive and made it more likely that the footage they’d just shot wouldn’t wind up on the ten o’clock news. It was

a simple trick, but an effective one nonetheless. Because not even the fanciest editing job could cover up when a picture jumped wildly to and fro with no natural segue. And in the news business – much like in the FBI – trust was *everything*. Even the slightest *hint* that you were trying to pull the wool over the public's eyes and attempting to fool them into believing anything less than the absolute truth meant that you

were dead in the water.

Sure enough, Price looked confused for a moment, casting a sideways glance at one of his cameramen before returning his gaze to Dana. “What are you talking about, Agent Whitestone? My name’s *Brent* and I don’t have a wife and kids. I’m single.”

Dana crinkled up her face and

affected an embarrassed look, as though she'd just been caught in a mortifying social *faux pas* and could just *die* right there on the spot. "Ah, right," she said, sucking in a lungful of cold air over her bottom teeth to show him just how *stupid* she felt. "Sorry about that, Brent. I guess I must have been thinking about Brett Grodin over at Channel Two."

Price's face reddened, but in his

case the mortification was completely genuine. Brett Grodin and the rest of the cast over at Channel Two had been kicking the crap out of Channel Four every ratings period for the past five years now, and Brent Price – much like *all* newsmen – *hated* to be outdone by his contemporaries. Despised knowing that somebody out there was doing a better job than he was and would

probably get out of Cleveland a hell of a lot sooner than he did.

Dana allowed herself a small smile at Price's obvious discomfort. She just couldn't help herself. It served the inconsiderate jerk right, though. Maybe now he'd know how *she* felt. How it felt to be ambushed at home like this. The shoe was on the other foot now, and the best part of it all was that Price hadn't even realized the transition

was taking place. She'd turned the situation around on her questioner with two simple sentences, just like Crawford Bell had taught her to do.

God, she missed that man.

“No problem,” Price said after another long moment of awkward silence. Still, he looked pissed off that they'd probably have to trash the entire opening sequence, waving four fingers

across his throat to let his cameramen know they could stop taping.

Despite his pushiness, Dana almost felt sorry for him as she watched him try to recover his composure in front of his colleagues. Because much like her, looking like a complete jackass on television didn't do a damn thing to further *his* career, either.

Price cleared his throat and gathered himself before nodding to his

cameramen to start taping again.

“Anyway, do you have a minute to give us a quick interview, Agent Whitestone?” he asked, slipping back into his smooth newsman’s persona now that the all-seeing electronic eyes were capturing his slick performance once more. “Maybe we could go inside where it’s warm and have a little sit-down, if that’s agreeable with you.

We'll make it nice. No pressure.

Everyone's dying to know what went on in your recent cases and you're a *very* hard target to catch up with."

Dana shook her head but continued smiling at Price. At twenty-five or twenty-six, he couldn't have been more than three or four years removed from J-school, and local Cleveland news obviously hadn't been his first choice. Then again, whose first choice

had Cleveland been? Sure, *Dana* had chosen to return to her native city after graduating from Cleveland State University in 1994 with a degree in criminal psychology and beginning her career in Washington, DC three years later, but she marked the exception to the rule, not the rule itself. For most people, Cleveland had always been the place where promising careers went to *die*.

Probably always would be.

Still, in this economy, you took jobs wherever you could find them.

“Sorry, Brett,” she said, getting the erstwhile reporter’s name right this time and trying her best to look disappointed about the refusal. No use rubbing salt in his open wounds. He looked plenty enough wounded already as it was. “I can’t do it right now because I’ve got a very important

appointment I need to keep. But I'll tell you what: how about I give you an exclusive in a couple of days or so? I could call you at the station to set it up, if that's all right with you."

Price brightened at the suggestion. At least the trip out to Lakewood hadn't been a *complete* waste of his time. "Hell, yeah," he said, perking up at the notion that *he* might be

the one to finally nail down the elusive first interview with Dana Whitestone following a pair of the most bizarre serial-killer stories the country had ever seen — an interview that not even Barbara Walters and the rest of the clucking hens over on *The View* had managed to get up to this point. “How about next Monday or Tuesday? We’ll be in winter sweeps then and it would really help me out. Make me look like a

big shot to the boys upstairs if I could get the scoop on all the rest of the vultures.”

Dana pulled back the left sleeve on her bomber jacket and checked her watch to remind Price of the fact that he was making her late. “No problem,” she said. “I’ll call you at the news station in a day or two. What’s your extension?”

“Four-five-four-three.”

“Fine. I’ll give you a call at that number then.”

“Awesome,” Price said.

“Thanks a million.”

He jerked his head toward the far end of the parking lot to let his camera and soundmen know they could follow him toward their news van.

“Well, I guess we’ll just wrap things up here for now then, Agent Whitestone.

Talk to you soon.”

Dana watched the news crew walk away, then called out to Price before he could climb up into the passenger compartment of the van.

“Hey, Brett?”

He turned around to face her.

“Yeah?”

“I’ll give you that exclusive on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

Dana held his stare. “I’ll give you the exclusive if you promise to never pull this crap again. Don’t ever ambush me at home like this again, OK? I don’t like it and it isn’t fair. Do we have a deal?”

Price lowered his head. Even *he* knew that the press could and often did overstep its boundaries. God knew *he* wouldn’t have wanted anyone harassing

him at home like this. If they did, he'd probably wind up chasing them off his property with a twelve-gauge shotgun in his hands, locked, cocked and loaded for bear.

“Yeah, it’s a deal, Agent Whitestone,” he said, finally dropping his affected tone and sounding like a real human being for the first time all night. “Sorry about that.”

Dana waved away his apology.

“It’s all right. Just make sure it never happens again, OK? I’d really hate to have to give that exclusive to Brett Grodin. I’ve never liked that prick.”

A brief smile flashed across Price’s full lips, followed almost at once by a full-blown grin that showed off his pearly whites to their best advantage. “I’d hate it more, Agent Whitestone,” he said, climbing up into

the van's passenger compartment. "And believe me, I hate that prick a hell of a lot worse than you do."

And with that, Brett Price slammed the door shut behind him and he and the rest of the Channel Four news team drove off into the cold night.

CHAPTER 24

When Brent Price and the rest of the Channel Two news team had safely driven off in their news van, Dana climbed behind the steering wheel of her silver Mazda Protégé and cranked the engine to life.

“Jessie’s Girl” by Rick Springfield immediately came on over the car stereo and she found the volume control on the steering wheel with her

thumb before turning it all the way up. She'd always *loved* this song. It had always reminded her of her high school days, back in the days before her life had become so damned complicated all the time.

Dana dialed up the power on the defroster to clear off the frost from the windshield and hit Interstate 90 for ten minutes before taking the West 25th

Street exit and heading directly into the heart of the city, sighing as the last strains of the nostalgia-inducing song wound down and the radio kicked over to “I Wonder” by Kellie Pickler, the former *American Idol* contestant who’d recorded a Top Ten smash-hit with a song detailing an irretrievably broken relationship between a mother and her daughter.

Dana sighed heavily. The song

had always made her miss her *own* mother that much more. And why not? Sara Whitestone had been her entire *world* during the brief time they'd shared together on this earth, and it would have been *really* nice to call her mom right now and ask for some advice. Because the sad truth of the matter was that Dana didn't know *what* to do anymore. About *anything*. Her life. Her career. The

thrilling-yet-absolutely-*soul-freezing*
possibility of adopting little Bradley.

About a million other little things
that mothers and daughters around the
globe routinely discussed on a daily
basis.

Dana sighed again. One thing
she *did* know, however, was that as
much as she didn't want to, she'd make
good on her promise to Brent Price
about sitting down with him for that

exclusive interview. Still, the thought filled her stomach with dread. No doubt the national networks would tap into the live feed and broadcast the interview countrywide, and the last thing in the world she wanted right now was any more attention.

Thankfully, though, Price still looked a little wet behind his ears to her, and that was *exactly* the kind of reporter

she wanted to deal with on this matter. Using the tricks that Crawford Bell had taught her, hopefully she could steer the interview with Price in whatever direction she chose, and she was pretty sure he'd be happy enough to have scored the initial Q&A with her that he wouldn't recognize – or at least wouldn't *call her out on* – what she already knew would be completely evasive answers designed to put the

public's insatiable curiosity about her to rest once and for all. Hell, most people didn't care *what* Dana said, they just wanted to hear her saying it – preferably in prime time, if at all possible. Somehow, despite the infinite number of more important issues out there worth obsessing over, her story had become *hot*. One of the hottest in the past decade, if not even longer than that – at

least in the world of law enforcement. And like it or not, she knew it would remain that way until she could take away at least *some* of the mystery for the curious masses.

Twenty minutes later, having successfully navigated the treacherous road conditions on I-90 as yet *another* heavy snow began to fall from the heavens, Dana swung the Protégé in front of the main stationhouse of the

Cleveland Police Department and came to a gentle stop.

She glanced out her window and frowned. From all appearances, it looked like Brent Price's weatherman colleague had been spot-on with his gloomy forecast for the night. It *did* look like it was going to be a cold one out there tonight.

A viciously cold one.

Just as she'd suspected he'd be, Gary Templeton was waiting for her on the curb, dressed in a long black trench coat over a perfectly creased navy-blue police uniform, with his hands shoved deep into his pockets against the inclement weather.

He approached the passenger-side door with a wide smile on his face, letting in an icy blast of freezing air

behind him before finally settling down into the passenger seat and pulling shut the door again.

“Hey, there, Dana,” he said, lifting his large hands to his face and blowing into them for warmth. “Long time, no see, huh?”

Dana leaned forward and turned up the heater inside the car. “You should have waited for me inside the stationhouse, Gary,” she scolded.

“You’re lucky you didn’t catch your death of pneumonia out there. This weather is *insane*.”

Templeton chuckled. “Tell me about it. Welcome to Ohio in December, right? Ain’t exactly Honolulu, is it?”

Dana peered into the side-view mirror to make sure the coast was clear before swinging the Protégé back out

into the traffic that was crawling down the ice-covered street. Prospect Avenue – the same busy road on which Christian Manhoff’s naked body had been discovered just a few days earlier.

She turned down the radio and looked sideways at the Templeton. “So, what picture of my brother was attached to Christian Manhoff’s nipple ring, anyway?” she asked. “And do you have any idea of who might have put it there?”

Templeton brushed a light dusting of snow from the sleeve of his trench coat. Tiny white crystals immediately melted in the hot blasts of air blowing from the vents. “Well, it was the same picture that he used with his byline when he worked for the *Plain Dealer*,” he said, referencing her half-brother’s former job as a newspaper reporter in the city. “The same picture

he used back when he was still going by the name of Jeremiah Quigley. We're running it for prints and fibers now. Same thing with the dog bone. Hopefully we'll know something more in a day or two. Nothing yet, though. Crime scene was pretty clean. Sound familiar to you?"

Dana grimaced at the mention of her brother's penchant for never leaving behind any evidence at his many crime

scenes – not to mention the unsettling mention of his birth name. “Quigley” had been her mother’s maiden name, and in the hundreds of times Dana had read the horrible account of her parents’ deaths in the newspaper – an account written by none other than her half-brother himself – never once had she bothered to look at the reporter’s name or mug shot. If she *had*, maybe she

could have saved Crawford and Eric and all of the others from dying their horrible deaths.

But she hadn't, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it now.

Templeton broke into her thoughts. "And, no, I have no idea who might have put the picture there. Do you?"

Dana shook her head. "Not a clue."

Templeton grunted. “So, I guess we’re starting from ground zero then, huh?”

Dana looked over at the Cleveland cop and lifted her eyebrows halfway up her forehead, taking his inventory. Close-cropped silver hair that sat atop a ruggedly handsome face highlighted by a pair of piercing brown eyes. A dead ringer for Richard Gere if

ever there'd been one, mixed in with more than just a small helping of Clint Eastwood for good measure.

“Hell, Gary,” she said. “Where *else* do we ever start from?”

Templeton sighed as she took a left onto East 9th Street and pointed the car in the direction of Lake Erie, which had nearly become her permanent home after the plane crash back in May.

“Good point,” he said. “Well, at least

we're not starting from a negative number, though, right? Who knows? Maybe we'll get a little luckier this time around."

Dana laughed without humor. "Sun shines down on even a dog's butt every once in a while."

Templeton cast his gaze out the window and up at the pitch-black skies overhead. "Interesting way to put it,

Agent Whitestone.”

Dana pursed her lips and straightened up in her seat, staring straight ahead through the windshield.

“Wasn’t it just, though?”

CHAPTER 25

Ten minutes later, Dana pulled the Protégé into the parking lot of the Cuyahoga County Coroner's Office on Cedar Avenue and let out a slow breath that deflated her chest.

“Ready to go do this?” she asked Templeton, feeling the thrill of the chase begin to boil away in her stomach again.

The Cleveland cop nodded in his seat next her. “Yep, but are you

absolutely *sure* you're feeling up to this, Dana? You still look a little pale to me."

Dana dismissed his concern with a quick sweep of her right hand while she slid her sleek silver vehicle into an empty space in the parking lot. Downshifting to park, she switched off the engine and adjusted the rearview mirror to check her appearance.

Not great, but not all that bad either, considering the circumstances.

“I’m fine, Gary,” she said, returning the mirror to its proper position before turning in her seat to face him. “As far as my coloring goes, I *always* look this pale. Curse of the Irish, I suppose. Hell, I get sunburned if I read for too long under anything stronger than a forty-watt bulb.”

Templeton laughed at her dumb joke, but Dana didn't bother mentioning to him the *other* curse of the Irish that sometimes ruled her life – a little too often for her to simply dismiss it as the harmless blowing off of some steam. The curse of the Irish that sent her running straight for the bottle whenever things got too difficult for her to deal with. Still, her alcohol use had clouded

her judgment when she'd been investigating the Cleveland Slasher case – had slowed her down mentally when she'd needed to be clear-headed the most – and she was determined to never make that same mistake again. Like it not, people's lives *depended* on her and she couldn't afford to let them down.

Not now and not ever again.

Exiting the Protégé, she and Templeton stepped out into the freezing

wind and headed quickly for the entrance to the coroner's office fifty feet away, the cold winter air slicing effortlessly through their jackets like the sharp scalpels that were no doubt slicing through the deceased bodies inside.

Dana shivered hard; the disconcerting thought suddenly making her wonder if she'd *ever* feel warm again.

Templeton hustled up the front steps ahead of her and held open the door for her before stepping inside himself. When they'd reached the front desk in the lobby, he asked the receptionist where they might find the chief coroner. The woman behind the desk smiled and directed them down a long hallway.

Dana and Templeton moved

down the hall toward Dr. Philip Johnson's office without speaking, both gearing up mentally for what lay ahead. As the head coroner for the entire county, Johnson hadn't been especially pleased with Dana when she'd pressed him into exhuming and re-autopsying the four victims previous to Jacinda Holloway in the Cleveland Slasher case. And unlike Gary Templeton, Johnson was the kind of guy who *did*

hold onto a grudge.

Held onto it like a dog with a bone clamped down hard between its teeth.

Dana stopped herself mid-thought. To say the least, an inconvenient way of thinking about things when Christian Manhoff had died in the exact manner he had.

In any event, she had very little

doubt that Johnson had gone *apoplectic* when he'd found out that somebody had snuck into his building and attached a picture of her half-brother to one of Christian Manhoff's nipple rings. To his mind, Dana and anything connected with her probably constituted nothing less of a nuisance than a plague of locusts.

A nuisance of *biblical* proportions.

Finally coming to a stop outside

Johnson's door, Dana made a mental note to have background checks run on everyone who'd worked at the coroner's office over the past three years – much as she'd done with everybody who'd played a part in investigating the Cleveland Slasher murder scenes two years earlier since it had seemed like whoever had been committing *those* murders had possessed some sort of

background in detective work. Nothing had come of it during that case, but who knew? Like Templeton had said to her back in the car, maybe they'd get luckier this time around.

And maybe that Publisher's Clearinghouse letter stuck in her mailbox back home had a cashable check inside with her name on it.

Dana shook her head and tried to reason things through. Wasn't easy.

Still, in all likelihood she knew that somebody had probably just been playing a prank on her by attaching a picture of Nathan Stiedowe to Christian Manhoff's nipple ring, enjoying a mean-spirited laugh at her expense. Law-enforcement types were notorious for their macabre senses of humour, weren't they?

Damn right, they were. There

was a time-honored tradition in the field of hazing your fellow cops with all the subtlety of drunken frat boys at a keg party. It was just part of the deal, she knew, the nature of the beast. Always had been and no doubt always would be.

Then again, maybe somebody had been *deadly* serious about the whole thing.

Only one way to find out.

Pity it had to be through a man who detested her as much as Johnson did.

The chief coroner opened the door to his office before Dana even had a chance to knock. Dana creased her face, figuring somebody must have called him to alert him to the fact that a Cleveland cop and an FBI agent had just strolled through the front doors of his

building.

He barely looked at her and shifted his gaze immediately to Templeton. “Come with me,” he said brusquely. “I know what you’re here for.”

Brushing past them rudely, Johnson led them down the hall to the main autopsy room thirty feet away. Ever the proper gentleman, he opened the door and entered first without

holding the door for Dana. She grabbed the closing door and stepped in after him, with Templeton bringing up the rear.

The sickly-sweet smell of formaldehyde immediately filled Dana's nostrils as she entered the room, tickling all the tiny hairs on the inside of her nose and making her want to sneeze. From the corner of her eye, she watched

Templeton wrinkle his own nose against the offending odor, and she didn't blame him one little bit.

The entire space stank of *death*.

The autopsy room itself was a cold, sterile place, filled with refrigerated drawers for storing the dead bodies. Dana had seen a lot of horrible things over the course of her fourteen-year career with the FBI, but for some reason the stark sight of Christian

Manhoff's naked and bloated body lying dead on a shiny metal slab twenty feet away suddenly made her want to cry.

Was this where life ended? she wondered. Whether you lived it the right way or the wrong way? Whether you lived it with love in your heart or hate? Was this the end waiting for all of them? Her? Johnson? Templeton?

She closed her eyes and tried not

to think about the fact that Crawford Bell and Eric Carlton had laid on tables just like these recently, in this very same room. Maybe even on the *same* table. Not to mention her poor mother and father.

Dana shuddered. Whatever most people's faults might be – and she knew everybody had their fair share – the vast majority of human beings deserved a fate far better than this. Deserved to be kept

warm and safe and loved. Deserved better than having someone like Dr. Phillip Johnson clinically poking at them and prodding them and slicing open their sternums to find out just how much their hearts and spleens and livers might weigh.

“Could you bring us up to speed on what you found out with Christian Manhoff, Dr. Johnson?” Dana asked,

wanting to break the heavy silence in the room even if the conversation had to be with a man who despised her as much as Johnson did. Needed some sign of *life* amidst all this death.

Johnson bristled, obviously irritated at the prospect of having to explain his exact science to an ignorant layperson such as her. “Not sure what exactly there is to bring you up to speed on, Agent Whitestone,” he said gruffly,

shaking his head briskly in annoyance.

“Somebody shoved a large rawhide bone down Christian Manhoff’s throat and he choked to death on it. There isn’t much more to it than that.”

Dana eyed Manhoff’s naked body. “You didn’t cut him open,” she observed, feeling a sharp stab of irritation at what must’ve been the *nine-millionth* example of Johnson’s

incompetence. “There could be some evidence *inside* of him, you know.”

She pressed her lips together while she waited for the coroner’s reply. The comment had been made to remind Johnson of the fact that he’d failed to fully autopsy the girls in the Cleveland Slasher case the first time around – a mistake that had set back the investigation by at least three months by delaying the discovery of the plastic

letters shoved inside the girls' uteruses.

To remind Johnson of the fact that his carelessness had cost innocent people their *lives*.

"I'm doing it tonight," Johnson said, clearly making up the lie right there on the spot.

Dana pulled back her head on her shoulders, impressed with the guy's moxie despite the annoyance that was

still coursing so hotly through her veins. If nothing else, though, thirty long years on the job had obviously taught Johnson very well how to deal with people like her – people who seemed to exist for no other reason than to make his life more complicated.

“I’ll call you first thing tomorrow morning and let you know if I find anything interesting, but I highly doubt I will,” the chief coroner went on.

“To me, this death looks like somebody was in a great big hurry, so I wouldn’t count on finding any clever clues hidden in this one.”

Dana nodded, but also made a mental note to call the state medical board on Johnson. Enough was enough with this jerk already. There was no way in hell he should be allowed to continue operating in the slipshod

manner he did. It just wasn't fair to the victims or their families. "Great," she said, trying to keep the sarcasm out of her voice but no doubt falling far short. "I'll look forward to hearing what you have to say."

She paused before going on. "Anyway, I really hate to bother you any further, Dr. Johnson, but is there be any way I could also get a list of all the people who've worked here in the past

three years? Including cleaning staff and maintenance workers? I'll need their names, addresses and Social Security numbers. Also, any background information you might have on file would be helpful. I want to find out if anyone who's worked here – either now or in the past – might have had a reason to attach the photograph of my brother to Christian Manhoff's body.”

Johnson waved his thin right arm in the air, showcasing the thick blue veins that were pulsing like tiny snakes on the back of his skeletal left hand. “I’ll have Nancy Lawson in human resources compile a list for you,” he said. “You can pick it up from the receptionist at the front desk tomorrow morning.”

The chief coroner hesitated and

furrowed his bushy eyebrows. “So, will there be anything else that you require of me, Agent Whitestone? As always, I’m at your complete and utter disposal.”

Dana shook her head, irritated by Johnson’s flippant tone but knowing there wasn’t anything she could do about it right now. “Nope,” she said in a clipped tone that matched his perfectly. “That should just about cover it for the time being. Thank you so much for your

help, Doctor. I really appreciate it. And I'll let you know if and when I need something else from you, so please keep that in mind. Is your cellphone number still the same?"

Johnson worked his thin lips into the semblance of a dull, gray smile, showcasing worn-down teeth set into a crooked pink gum-line that looked like concrete tombstones dotting an unkempt

graveyard. “Sure is, Agent Whitestone. As a matter of fact, I even have you programmed into my contacts list. How about that for a nice surprise? Always happy to get a call from you.”

Just then, as if on cue, Gary Templeton’s *own* cellphone rang in his pocket. The Cleveland cop dug it out and placed the receiver to his ear. After a moment or two, he turned down the corners of his mouth into a frown.

Flipping shut his phone and putting it back into his pocket, he pulled back the sleeve on his trench coat to check his watch. “I’ve got to run, Dana,” he said, shaking his head and looking back up at her. “There’s been an armed robbery over at the Fifth Third Bank on Ontario Avenue. A squad car is coming to pick me up now. Chief says it’s an all-hands-on-deck type of thing.

Will you be OK getting on with this on your own? I'll call you tomorrow morning and touch base with you to see what you've found out."

Dana smiled, enjoying the feeling of knowing that someone was watching her back – the same feeling she'd had while working with Jeremy Brown before he'd been murdered in an L.A. hotel room back in May, the victim of a sixteen-year-old chess prodigy who'd

shoved a sharp pair of scissors deep into his neck as revenge for Dana having failed to immediately apprehend the killers responsible for the death of the boy's beloved mother.

“Absolutely, Gary,” she said, making yet *another* mental note, this time to call Bill Krugman down in Washington, DC to let him know what was going on. The Director would

probably be angry with her for setting off on this investigation without his knowledge or consent, but she'd need to worry about that later on. "I'll talk with you tomorrow morning, Gary," she went on. "Don't worry about me. I'll be just fine."

Templeton nodded and said his goodbyes to Johnson. Dana smiled again as she watched him walked away. Still, if she'd known then just how far

off the mark she'd been with her statement about being just fine, she never would've left the coroner's office alone in the first place.

Then again, if hopes and wishes were loaves and fishes, she'd never go hungry again, right?

CHAPTER 26

Out in the lobby of the coroner's office, Dana asked the woman seated behind the front desk where she might find Nancy Lawson, the human-resources person Johnson had said could compile a list of employees for her.

It was a long shot and it would take a ton of time and energy to run background checks on all of the workers at the coroner's office – both past and

present – but Dana hoped she could talk Templeton into getting some of his underlings at the Cleveland PD to do most of the legwork. And *fast*. Every last second counted here, and they were already hopelessly behind schedule as it was. Most investigative leads that didn't turn into cold-case files were usually developed within forty-eight hours after a crime had been committed

– a fact known to even the most casual of viewer of the late-night police drama – and the stopwatch on *that* magic number had already expired two days ago.

Dana closed her eyes briefly. Once again, just as had been the case during so many other investigations in her career, she found herself playing catch-up with her quarry. And the worst part about it was that she still didn't have the faintest goddamn clue in the

world of who her quarry even *was* at this point.

“You found her,” said the woman behind the desk, a delicately pretty lady somewhere in her mid-fifties who was wearing small gold hoop earrings and a smart-looking blue blazer that matched perfectly with the soft color of her eyes.

“I’m Nancy Lawson. How may I help you?”

Dana flipped open her badge; feeling tragically underdressed in her leather bomber jacket. “I’m Special Agent Dana Whitestone,” she said. “Dr. Johnson said that he’s going to ask you to put together a list of past and present employees for me, but I wanted to ask you about something else.”

She jerked her head up at a small camera that was mounted in a corner

near the ceiling where two walls met. The camera had been trained on the front doors to capture on videotape everyone who entered and exited the building: a silent watcher completely incapable of lying. “How many of those things do you have around here?” Dana asked.

Lawson turned and looked up at the camera. “Well, they’re all over the place,” she said, turning back in her seat to face Dana again. “To tell you the

truth, they sort of creep me out. No matter how hard I try, I can't help but feel like Big Brother is watching me all the time.”

The woman shivered. “George Orwell was right when he wrote that crazy book of his, wasn't he? Uncle Sam, Big Brother – what's the difference these days?”

“Is there a camera in the autopsy

room?” Dana asked, not wanting to sound rude here but also wanting to speed along the conversation. She couldn't afford to waste any more time right now with her and Templeton already in a losing race against the clock. As she'd noted earlier, every last second counted here, so she couldn't afford to waste even a single one of them at this point. It might well turn out to be the difference between someone's

continued life and their unthinkably painful death. “I didn’t notice a camera when I was in there earlier,” Dana went on.

Lawson nodded. “As a matter of fact, yes, there *is* a camera in there, Agent Whitestone. For that matter, they just replaced it not too long ago, if memory serves. Some sort of new and improved version, I guess.’

Dana lifted her eyebrows.

Bingo. Things were looking up already.

“They did it over the Thanksgiving holiday,” Lawson continued. “They’ve got the new camera hidden pretty well in there, though. I suppose they don’t want the families to notice it when they come in to identify the bodies of their deceased relatives. Can’t blame them, can you?”

Dana shook her head. No, she couldn't. God knew *she* wouldn't have wanted to know that her loved ones had been taped after death, either. Not to mention how *much* tape they must have used in her case, considering all of the many loved ones she'd lost in her life.

How many loved ones she'd lost *recently*.

“So are *all* the autopsy

procedures videotaped?” she asked.

Lawson moved a pile of papers on her desk to one side and nodded. “Yeah. That’s our policy now. There was a big lawsuit brought a couple of years ago by a family that contended that their grandfather’s body had been mistreated and it cost the city four million bucks to settle everything in the end, so I guess the big-wigs downtown finally got the message and wanted to

cover their butts.”

A nervous ripple fluttered through Dana’s stomach. The thrill of the chase at work again. “Does Dr. Johnson have access to the tapes?” she asked. “If so, I’d like to take a look at them. One in particular.”

Lawson rolled her eyes halfway around her pretty face. “Hell, to tell you the truth, Agent Whitestone, I’d be

surprised if that man even knows the camera is *in* there. Or even what a camera *is*, for that matter. He's completely lost when it comes to technology. From the way he looks at a computer, you'd think he was still living back in 1963."

The woman paused and lifted her perfectly plucked eyebrows. "Probably still *is* living back in 1963 – in his mind, at least."

Dana slipped her FBI shield back into the inside pocket of her leather jacket and resisted the urge to scream. Once again, it looked to her as though Dr. Phillip Johnson would be of absolutely no help at all on this case. Then again, what *else* was new? He'd *never* been any help to her.

Quite the opposite, unfortunately.

She gritted her teeth and fought back another powerful wave of irritation in her chest. She couldn't *wait* for the day that a new, more competent ME took Johnson's place. Because catching murderers was hard enough as it was without constantly being hamstrung by people like him – people who were *supposed* to be on her side. “Who else has access to the tapes?” she asked.

Lawson fiddled with one of her gold hoop earrings and slid her small pink tongue across her sparkling white teeth. Dentures, Dana guessed. Nice ones, too.

“Funny you should ask,” the receptionist said. “Believe it or not, *I*’ve actually got access to them. But they’re not actually tapes because everything’s gone digital these days.

The fact that I've got access to them creeps me out, too, but we're so shorthanded around here that I was designated as the backup A/V person, even though I barely know the difference between a USB port and a telephone wire myself."

The woman shook her head, looking annoyed now herself. "No raise to go along with it, though, of course."

"Who's permission would you

need in order to get me the footage of Christian Manhoff's autopsy?" Dana asked.

Lawson glanced around the lobby. The place was mostly empty, save for a tired-looking janitor who was mopping up the tiled floor beneath a television set in the southwest corner that was tuned into a rerun of *The Golden Girls* but turned down too low

to hear.

“Theoretically, I’m *supposed* to talk to Dr. Johnson before I release anything like that,” the receptionist said, “but he always acts so damned irritated whenever I ask him a question that I stopped doing that a long time ago. The videos are public record anyway since the taxpayers pay for them, so I’m not too worried about that. Do you know the date of the autopsy you’re looking for?”

More hope tickled Dana's chest, but it was swallowed up quickly by even *more* anger at the chief coroner. For all intents and purposes, *autopsy* probably wasn't the right word to use for it. She highly doubted that Johnson had taken more than five minutes to examine Christian Manhoff's lifeless body, much less shown the initiative to actually cut him open to see what might be inside.

As with everything else regarding the good doctor, it had no doubt been an open and shut case for him. The faster he was done with it, the better, as far he was concerned.

“I’m not sure when the autopsy took place,” Dana said. “In the past couple of days or so. Couldn’t you just type the name into the database?”

Lawson nodded. “Well, now, there’s an idea, isn’t it? I suppose I

could do just that.” She leaned forward in her chair and punched a few keys on the computer in front of her before looking back up at Dana. “What’s the name again?”

Dana spelled it out for her. “Christian Manhoff. *M-A-N-H-O-F-F*.”

Lawson pecked away at the keyboard some more. After another moment or two, she glanced up and said,

“You can come over here if you want. I don’t like watching these things very much. They make my skin crawl.”

Dana pressed her lips together and gave the woman a sympathetic look. She didn’t blame the receptionist one little bit for her squeamishness. After all, who in their right mind *would* like watching videos filled with nothing but blood and guts and despair? With the obvious exception being the killers and

other dregs of society out there who actually *got off* on watching such dreadful things, of course.

Dana came around Lawson's desk, bumping her hipbone painfully against the sharp edge of one corner in the process. "Not exactly must-see TV, huh?" she asked, wincing at the hot jolt of pain shooting through her hip.

Lawson shook her head and

stood up, offering Dana the chair.

“Whoa, careful there, honey,” she said.

“When you get to be my age, your hip will crack just like a breadstick if you’re not careful. And, no, it’s not must-see TV at all. Anyway, sit down, Agent Whitestone. I don’t know about you, but I have to sit about six inches away from the screen to see anything clearly any more. Old age is no fun, dear. If there’s any way you can possibly avoid it,

please do so. Just try to remember that you heard it here first, though, OK? I'd actually like to get some credit for my world-class brilliance one of these days."

Lawson paused and sighed deeply. "Ah, what the heck am I talking about? You're still so young and pretty still that that's something you don't need to worry about for a very long time.

Lucky girl.”

Dana sat down in the chair, and Lawson leaned over her right shoulder, positioning the cursor over the PLAY button on the screen.

“Just tap the trackpad once and you should be good to go,” Lawson said, straightening back up again. “Anyway, I think I’ll go grab a quick cup of coffee while you’re looking for what you need. Would you like one, as well?”

Dana shook her head. “No, thank you, Miss Lawson. But are you *sure* you won’t get into any trouble for this? I could always come back later on when you get the proper clearance – or when I get a search warrant. I’m not going to lie, though – this is a huge help to me. It definitely saves me some time.”

Lawson waved a hand in the air and looked around the lobby again.

“Hell, sweetie, nobody ever comes in here,” she said, almost underneath her breath. “Nobody who’d raise a stink about it, anyway. Besides, if we get caught I’ll just say that you overpowered me and threatened to arrest me if I didn’t let you see the video. Sound like a plan to you?”

Dana smiled. “Sure does. Thanks again for all your help, Miss Lawson. I really appreciate this.”

Nancy Lawson squeezed her right shoulder. “No problem, sweetheart. After all, we girls need to stick together, now don’t we? Anyway, I’ll be back in just a minute or two, OK?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Dana waited until the sound of the woman’s high heels clacking against the tiled floor had faded away down the

long hallway before tapping the trackpad on the computer. Movement sprang to life at once on the screen.

From the look of the angle of the footage, the camera Lawson had told her about had been mounted to the north wall of the autopsy room, mostly hidden by a potted plant that Dana only now realized she'd subconsciously thought looked out of place amongst all the cold gray steel when she'd been in there earlier.

In the footage, Dr. Phillip Johnson stood over Christian Manhoff's naked body, accompanied by a pathology assistant.

Dana grimaced at the image of the huge rawhide bone shoved halfway down the dead man's throat. The idea itself was bad enough to think about, but actually seeing it up close and personal and in living color like this really

hammered home the point just *how* horrific Manhoff's death must have been.

There was no audio on the video, but Dana could see that Johnson was talking by the way his assistant was scribbling down notes on a clipboard.

She leaned in closer to the computer. Unbelievably, thirty seconds later Johnson actually *left the room*.

Dana cursed sharply underneath

her breath. Obviously, five minutes had been far too generous of an estimate of how much time the head coroner had spent with Christian Manhoff's lifeless body. More like five *seconds*.

She clamped her teeth together until the muscles bulged against her jawline and leaned in even closer to the computer screen, focusing on the pathology assistant now.

The man looked to her to be somewhere in his mid-forties, with thinning gray hair that was parted sharply on the left side of his head. The paper mask covering the lower half of his face made determining any facial features difficult, but she felt certain that Nancy Lawson would know who he was. The coroner's office wasn't all that big of a place – people-wise, at

least – for the man to be an entirely unknown entity. Unfamiliar faces wouldn't go unnoticed around here, and Dana had a sneaking suspicion that Lawson was *exactly* the sort of woman who noticed *everything*.

A minute or so after Johnson had left the room, his pathology assistant followed suit, closing the door behind him.

Dana frowned as the image on

the video stood still for what seemed a lifetime, just Christian Manhoff's dead body alone in the room with a large rawhide dog bone shoved halfway down his throat. She found the fast-forward button on the computer and watched the same scene unfold for two more minutes, according to the time-stamp in the lower left-hand corner of the screen.

And then the door to the autopsy

room opened up again.

Dana widened her eyes in shock. A woman who looked to be somewhere in her late-thirties or early forties entered the room, dressed to the nines in a designer dress and high-heeled shoes.

She was holding something in her right hand.

Turning directly to the camera hidden behind the potted plant, the

woman smiled up at the viewfinder before lifting the picture of Dana's half-brother and mouthing three distinct words that you didn't need to be a professional lip-reader to figure out.

Fuck you, Dana.

Dana recoiled from the computer screen, as though the woman might somehow reach through the computer monitor and grab her hard by the throat.

Her pulse skipped three beats in a row in her neck while the woman calmly attached the picture of Nathan Stiedowe to Christian Manhoff's nipple ring. Then the woman simply turned around, flipped off the camera with both her middle fingers and left the room.

Dana rewound the video and watched it again. And then for a third and fourth time.

Fuck you, Dana.

Fuck you, Dana.

Fuck you, Dana.

Dana's ears rang. Her hands shook. Perspiration flooded into her palms.

She took in a deep, shuddering breath to steady herself. It was clear that the woman in the autopsy video had absolutely *zero* interest in concealing her identity, no fear *whatsoever* about

her face being captured on tape, and that worried Dana. *A lot*. Because only someone with nothing left to lose would ever display such carelessness.

But how in the heck had the woman known that the camera had been hidden behind the plant in the first place? Did she work there?

Dana shook her head. Didn't seem likely considering the fact that it would have taken all of about five

minutes to identify her if she *did* work there. So if that wasn't it, what *was* it? Was she a disgruntled former employee? A relative of one? And just how, exactly, had she gained access to the autopsy room in the first place? Nancy Lawson had told her that the camera had been installed just a couple weeks prior, so that meant the woman must have been privy to *that* information

too. But how could she have known that if she didn't work there?

Dana tapped the trackpad to stop the video and called up the Internet browser on Nancy Lawson's computer before saving the footage in a zip file and e-mailing it to herself.

Just then, a voice sounded directly behind her in her left ear, nearly causing her to jump right out of her skin.

“Find anything interesting, Agent

Whitestone?”

Dana snapped her neck around and leapt to her feet, almost knocking over the chair in the process. A cold trickle of sweat slid down her back. Her heartbeat thudded in her chest.

“Not a thing,” she lied, moving quickly around to the other side of the desk and instinctively putting some distance between herself and the

coroner's office employee. "I'm afraid I didn't find anything at all."

Nancy Lawson pressed her lips together in disappointment. "Hmnn. That's too bad."

Dana narrowed her eyes and stared across the desk at the human-resources worker. The well-dressed woman in the autopsy footage didn't resemble Nancy Lawson in the least little bit, but she'd been burned in the

past by such simple oversights and she didn't want to get burned again. Not this time. *Everyone* had to remain a suspect until she could rule him or her out, which she hadn't done with Nancy Lawson yet.

Dana tried to keep the adrenaline out of her voice when she spoke again. Didn't work, though. Not even a little bit. "Thanks again for all your help,

Miss Lawson. I can't tell you how much this means to me."

Nancy Lawson blew off a thick cloud of steam from her piping-hot Styrofoam cup of coffee before taking a tentative sip.

"Don't mention it, honey. That's what they pay me the big bucks for."

CHAPTER 27

Hands still shaking, Dana ducked into the gleaming public restroom down the hall in the coroner's office building and again tried to steady herself. Once again, it didn't work.

Not even a little bit.

A familiar dread washed through her stomach as she splashed some cold water onto her face in an effort calm down. No good. She was still too

shaken up from the shocking video she'd just watched to even *breathe* properly right now, much less *think* straight.

A shocking video she hadn't been expecting to see at all.

What had the woman in the surveillance footage been trying to tell her by attaching the photograph of her brother to Christian Manhoff's body, anyway? Besides "fuck you", of

course. *That* part of the message hadn't been very difficult to figure out.

Dana rolled her narrow shoulders forward and stared into her reflection in the mirror above the sink. It was clear that the woman had been calling her out by name – *literally*, just as Nathan Stiedowe had done during the Cleveland Slasher investigation – but to what end and for what purpose? And could the woman in the video be a

murderer? Just like Dana's half-brother had been? Could Dana be *sure* of that? Had the woman in the video been the same person who'd shoved a large rawhide bone down Christian Manhoff's throat until he'd choked to death on it? Or was she simply *connected* to the murder somehow? And if so, just *how* was she connected to it?

Dana took in several deep

breaths through her nostrils in order to get some oxygen pumping through her system again. Nothing made any sense to her right now. Still, what the hell *else* was new? She'd been in a daze ever since she'd first emerged from her coma three weeks earlier, and from the look of things she doubted she'd snap out of it anytime soon. That being said, she knew that she'd need to do just that – and *quick*. Because one person was dead

already and there could be more to come soon. Would *probably* be more to come soon. With suspects like this one – people who went to such great lengths to actually *draw attention to* their terrible crimes – there were *always* more to come.

But Dana didn't see how the woman in the video could have *possibly* pulled off the murder by herself. She

just didn't appear physically capable.

Christian Manhoff had been a big man. A *huge* man, even. He must have easily outweighed the woman in the video by at least a hundred and fifty pounds. Surely the woman in the video *couldn't* have overpowered him. She looked tall, sure – a little bit taller than the average female and certainly a lot taller than Dana – but she didn't look anywhere near *strong* enough to pull off

the deed by herself. So did that mean she'd had help killing Christian Manhoff? And if so, from whom? Or – for some odd reason – had the woman in the video simply been piggybacking on a murder that had already committed by someone else, one to which she had no other link?

Dana didn't know, but she sure as hell planned to find out.

Flipping open her cellphone, she accessed her e-mail account and downloaded the attached zip file that she'd sent herself a few minutes earlier before watching the autopsy video several more times, her heart pounding progressively harder against her ribcage each time she worked her way through the soul-freezing footage.

On the fourth or fifth repeat

viewing, she finally noticed the watch strapped around the woman's left wrist as she entered the autopsy room and held up the photograph of Nathan Stiedowe to the camera.

Dana paused the video and selected the portion of the image featuring the watch before zooming in. The watch had caught her eye mostly because it looked so out of place when compared to the rest of the woman's

hopelessly trendy attire. The dress that the woman in the video had been wearing looked like it had cost a pretty penny, indeed – along with her shoes, jewelry and haircut. Something of a closet clotheshorse herself, Dana knew quality when she saw it, and the bird-flipping, profanity-mouthing woman's get-up was definitely *quality*.

Dana bit down gently her lower

lip – an unfortunate habit she'd formed in grade school and still hadn't quite gotten over yet – while she continued to think things through. The mystery woman's wardrobe had obviously selected with great care, so the cheap watch stuck out to Dana like the proverbial sore thumb. It was almost like topping off a piece of perfectly prepared filet mignon with a healthy dollop of two-dollar whipped cream that

you'd picked up at the grocery store as an afterthought: a small addition but one that was nonetheless large enough to completely ruin the overall presentation.

Simply stated, the watch was a real piece of junk. Something a kid might wear.

The watch itself consisted of a worn red-leather strap and what *appeared* to be a cartoon character using

its hands to point out the hour and minute.

Dana zoomed in even closer on the video and narrowed her eyes.

Mickey Mouse.

She shook her head in confusion, not knowing *why* the watch bothered her, just that it did. In a big way. A cop's instinct, she supposed – a sixth sense about these sorts of things. Call it whatever you wanted, she thought, but

she'd followed far too many of these gut feelings directly to a murderer's doorstep to simply ignore it altogether.

Besides, flimsy lead or not, at least it was a *lead*. She'd gone on much less during the Cleveland Slasher investigation – not to mention a lot of other cases that she'd investigated in the past. So it was important that she didn't ignore any possible roads here, no

matter how unpromising those roads might initially seem. Because sometimes it was the seemingly innocuous details that cracked a case wide open.

Dana stretched her neck to the left and punched in Gary Templeton's number on her cellphone. As big of a deal as a bank robbery might be, *this* was even bigger. A possible killer who'd been caught on video was on the

loose out there somewhere in Cleveland, and Dana needed Templeton's help to track that person down. *Now*. If they split up the responsibilities, they could probably get twice the amount of work done in the same length of time. And she also wanted to hear the Cleveland cop's thoughts on why he might think the woman in the video had called her out by name. Maybe *he* could make sense

out of this mess. Lord knew she couldn't.

Dana gritted her teeth and snapped shut her phone when Templeton didn't answer his. No doubt he was up to his elbows in crime already working the bank robbery, but even though she sympathized with him, sympathy didn't catch killers. But that was you got in the world of law-enforcement. A cop's life never seemed to get any easier, whether

you were FBI or Cleveland PD. No matter how many cases you solved – no matter how many bad guys you put away – for each case you managed to put to bed there were always twenty more *unsolved* cases staring you dead in the face at the end of each exhausting workday. *Mocking* you. *Daring* you to try to solve them.

Dana closed her eyes and

slipped her cellphone back into her purse, wishing with all her heart and soul that Jeremy was still around for her to bounce some ideas off. Because in addition to being her lover and one of her best friends, he'd also been a damned fine investigator – one of the finest she'd ever known. *He'd* have had plenty of ideas concerning the identity of the woman in the video. But Jeremy wasn't around anymore. Not now and

not ever again. He was dead and rotting six feet beneath the ground in a cemetery out in Los Angeles now.

All thanks to Dana and her supposedly sterling work in the FBI.

She shook her head sorrowfully. She guessed it was true what they said: you reaped what you sowed.

And from the look of things, she'd sowed *a lot* of heartache.

Dana twisted at her hips in an effort to loosen up the cramped muscles in her badly aching lower back, realizing that with Templeton already busy with his own problems she'd be puzzling out this one on her own until further notice. No big surprise there, though. She'd jumped into this case willy-nilly from the start, hadn't stopped to think things through properly or ask for backup,

which protocol clearly dictated she do. So alone was exactly the way she *deserved* to be working right now.

She let out a slow breath and bit down into her lip again, wondering what had changed about her. There'd been a time in her career not too long ago when she'd actually *preferred* working alone. Clearly, though, those days were long gone now. In the past, however, she'd often found that doing most of the work

herself actually made it *easier* for her to get the job done when the pressure was on. Because when you worked alone, there was nobody else around to get in your way, nobody to slow you down, nobody to send you off on wild-goose chases that rarely – if ever – panned out.

Dana reached out and twisted on the warm-water tap in front of her, pumping some fruity-smelling soap into

her palm from the plastic dispenser above the sink and vigorously scrubbing her hands. She felt dirty, *filthy*, like she just couldn't get clean for the life of her. No big surprise there, either, though. After all, when you'd spent as much time as she had chasing the lowest common denominators of humanity through the gutters of life, some of that dirt was eventually bound to rub off on you.

She was drying off her hands

with a wad of industrial-strength paper towels from the automatic dispenser to her left when the door to the bathroom suddenly flew open with a violent bang, nearly causing her heart to explode in her chest.

Dana whirled around in a panic and shot her right hand inside her leather bomber jacket for her Glock, curling her fingers tightly around the weapon's

corrugated-plastic grip as her gaze went automatically to Nancy Lawson's left wrist to see if she was wearing a watch.

And, if so, what *kind* of watch.

“Hey there, Agent Whitestone,” Lawson said, smiling brightly and stepping farther into the otherwise-deserted bathroom. “Long time, no see, huh?”

PART IV

STORM FRONT MOVING IN

“Conversation about the weather is the
last refuge of the unimaginative.” –

Oscar Wilde

CHAPTER 28

My first murder had taken place the previous August.

Leaning in closer to the bathroom mirror at 969 Turning Oaks Drive on the west side of Chicago, I reapply my bright red lipstick and remember the night that I'd stood inside the bathroom at a popular nightclub just outside of Atlanta before making my way back out onto the crowded dance floor.

I'd felt a little nervous then, of course, but if I'd still had a penis it would have stiffened in delicious anticipation. And why the hell not? Murdering people was a lot like fucking them, wasn't it? Of course it was. Both were intimate acts filled with extreme violence when done properly, and both caused stains that were *very* difficult to scrub away.

So, looking at things that way,
I'd decided I'd grow a new pair and do
what I'd come there to do that night.
Enough with all the preliminaries
already. Enough with all the build-up.
No more talking the talk and not walking
the walk.

My mother was *expecting* this.

After scoping out the scene for

several minutes, I check my Mickey Mouse watch while I stand in the northeast corner of the club with my face mostly hidden by an Atlanta Braves baseball cap. I've chosen to appear as a man tonight in the hopes that it would eliminate all of the unwanted attention I surely would have received had I been dressed as a woman. As a man, though, I won't need to worry about any drunks offering to buy me shots or trying to cop

a cheap feel over my dress, drooling all over themselves as they did their best Brad Pitt imitations and tried their damndest to get into my pants.

I smile to myself, wondering how many of them would still be trying to spread my thighs if they'd known what had *used* to dangle between my legs...

Fifty percent of them, at the very least.

The Mickey Mouse watch is extremely difficult to read in the darkened nightclub. Straining my eyes, I finally catch sight of the little black hands as they're illuminated in the intermittent strobe lights flashing overhead and threatening to bring on a full-blown seizure in my brain.

One-thirty a.m. Only an hour or

so to go now until show time.

Around that time, the curtains will finally go up and Dinah Leach will finally go down for the count forever, never to rise again.

Assuming, of course, that the weather reports were to be believed.

I shudder with delight at the delicious prospect of what lay ahead, both tonight and for the rest of my life. Following several months of careful

planning, my mother and I had decided that Johnny's Hideaway on Roswell Road would be the perfect place for all of the action to start going down. And, from all appearances, it seems like a natural fit.

Absolutely *perfect* for my intentions for the evening.

“The Devil Went Down To Georgia” plays in my mind, competing

with the chest-thumping rap music that's blaring over the speakers in the club to provide a jarring, discordant soundtrack for the surreal scene. I wrinkle up my face in distaste against the audible onslaught in my ears and take a deep breath through my nostrils, steeling myself for what will come next. The devil has come down to Georgia, indeed. And if the devil had *her* way, she'd be wearing a beautiful red dress, a

stunning pearl necklace and six-inch stilettos, to boot.

I've followed my prey for a solid week now – *stalked* her, actually, if you wanted to get technical about the whole thing, appropriately changing my appearance each night to avoid being recognized by her as a familiar face. Now all I need to do is wait for the

powerful storm to strike. And on this night – blessed of all nights – Hurricane Allison is scheduled to arrive in all of her glory at precisely two-thirty a.m., at least according to the weatherman on the radio station that I'd been listening to when I'd pulled into the parking lot of Johnny's Hideaway a little more than an hour earlier.

My stomach had flipped over on itself as I'd listened to the report,

knowing that the hurricane would provide the very noisy cover I'd need to get away with what I already knew would be my *exceedingly* bloody crime.

First things first, though. I still need to get the woman alone.

Hardly an insignificant hurdle to leap, at all.

Johnny's Hideaway is a hip,

eclectic, upscale joint – the kind of place that plays music ranging anywhere from Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett and The Beach Boys to Madonna and Eminem and Rihanna. A little something for everybody. Just like *I* have a little something for Dinah Leach, right? *Damn* right. The reality television star just needs to wait a little bit longer to find out exactly what my gift to her will be. But it won't be the suspense that

will be killing her.

Instead, it'll be *me* pulling the dirty deed.

Fifty feet away, Dinah Leach shakes her shimmy to the frenetic sounds of Lady Gaga – looking like a complete and total slut as she does so, of course. As usual, the fame whore is obviously *enjoying* the feeling of all the adoring eyeballs glued to her. *Fake-ass*

celebrity bitch. Who the fuck does she think she *is*? With any luck at all, though, her fifteen minutes of fame will expire at just about the same time her worthless life does. And the clock's ticking now. I wonder if she can hear it. It's getting louder now.

Tick, tick, tick.

I stretch my slender neck to the left while I sip ice water through a plastic straw; wetting my lips at the

same time I whet my enormous appetite for murder. *Of course* Dinah Leach can't hear the clock ticking. She's much too consumed with her own fleeting celebrity to notice something like that. Much too *full* of herself. That being said, I suppose it would've been difficult for anybody to hear *anything* above the deafening music that's blasting over the fifty or so speakers stationed

around Johnny's Hideaway, vibrating the floor beneath my shiny black dress shoes so violently that it reminds me of standing on the platform of a busy subway station in New York City.

From my shielded position over in the corner of the club, I watch Dinah Leach swivel her hips suggestively in perfect time to Gaga's "Poker Face". The woman's jeans look expensive to me, and I have an eye trained to notice

such things. The fancy denim had no doubt cost her five hundred bucks at a bare minimum, and they'd clearly been tailored to show off her best asset. Her *only* asset, really.

The only thing anyone in the world really values about her.

I narrow my glittering green eyes when a pair of hulking, muscular black men wearing oversized Atlanta Falcons

football jerseys and backward-facing baseball caps move forward and sandwich Dinah Leach out on the crowded dance floor, trying their damndest to get some of her undeserved fame to rub off on them.

I smirk and take another sip of my ice water. *Jesus Christ*. Don't these idiots know that fake celebrity comes with its own fake gloss that never quite rubs off, no matter how hard you try?

Apparently not.

I lift my left wrist and check my watch again. One forty-two a.m. now. Just a little bit longer until we can finally get this show on the road. And the clock is still ticking. I wonder again if Dinah Leach can hear it. It's barreling down on her like a goddamn *freight train* now.

Tick, tick, tick...

CHAPTER 29

Dana's eyes homed in like a powerful laser on the watch strapped around Nancy Lawson's left wrist.

It was a Tag Heuer.

She blew out a slow breath that deflated her chest four inches and tried to control the manic jackhammering of her heartbeat against her ribcage. No use.

Nancy Lawson's timepiece

looked like a fairly expensive piece of jewelry to her – especially for someone who'd been complaining about money just ten minutes earlier – but it wasn't the cheap Mickey Mouse watch that the woman in the video had been wearing.

Dana shook herself and tried to calm down. Wasn't easy. She closed her eyes and briefly wondered if she'd *ever* recover from the trauma of her life-

and-death struggle in her brother's underground bunker at the conclusion of the Cleveland Slasher case two years earlier. She'd faced down other killers in the past, of course – *lots* of other killers – but never before had she felt this jumpy, this unsure of herself. The sad fact of the matter was that she was acting like a scared little rabbit right now when what she *needed* to be acting like right now was a goddamn *lion*.

People's lives depended on it.

“Is everything OK, Agent Whitestone? What's wrong, honey? You look like you're going to be sick.”

Dana opened her eyes and pursed her lips, wadding up the wet paper towels in her hand and tossed the resulting ball into the metal garbage receptacle two feet away. “Actually, no, Miss Lawson,” she said. “Everything's

not OK. Not even close.”

She paused when the idea occurred to her. To hell with it. As long as she had Nancy Lawson here in the restroom with her, she might as well put their time to good use and take advantage of the impromptu meeting. “I hate to bother you any further, ma’am,” Dana said, “but I wonder if you help me out with something else. It’ll only take a minute or two of your time, I promise.”

The corner's office employee looked hesitant, a concerned frown creasing her flawlessly painted lips. "Help you out with what, Agent Whitestone?" she asked. "To tell you the truth, I think I've already done everything I can for you."

The woman paused. "Probably a little *more* than I should have, come to think of it. I don't mind helping you,

Agent Whitestone, I really don't, but I also want keep my job. *Need* to keep my job, for that matter. And there's no point in me ticking off Dr. Johnson any more than he's usually ticked off at me for no good reason. He's not exactly the kind of man who suffers slights lightly, if you catch my meaning."

Dana nodded and dug her cellphone from her purse again. Flipping it open, she covered the short

distance between them. “I do, Miss Lawson, but this is *extremely* important. And I assure you that Dr. Johnson will never find out about it. It’ll be our little secret.”

She held up the screen so they could both see. “Anyhow, I know you don’t like watching these things, but I was wondering if you could take a look at this autopsy video and see if you can

identify the woman in it for me. There's nothing graphic in the video, I swear. No cutting or surgical procedures of any kind. Just take a quick look, OK? Like I said before, it'll only take a minute or two of your time."

Lawson still didn't look so sure. "I *really* don't think that's a very good idea, Agent Whitestone."

Dana resisted the urge to scream. But she really needed the

woman's help right now.

And she knew that there was nothing quite as effective as cold hard cash to persuade someone to reconsider his or her previously hard-line stance.

“There's a monetary reward in it for you,” she said quickly, remembering Lawson's earlier consternation over being denied a raise in conjunction with her additional duties as the backup A/V

person. “I can offer you five hundred dollars right here and now for your help, no strings attached. If you can help me out, great. If not, you get the money anyway. I’ll write out a check to you just as soon as we’re done here. It’s a win-win situation for you any way you look at it.”

Just as Dana had suspected, Lawson’s ears perked up at the mention of money,

Pulling down the sleeves of her smart-looking blue blazer, the human-resources worker straightened her posture. “Well, I guess it couldn’t hurt to just *look*.”

Dana nodded. “Nope. Couldn’t hurt at all. And you just might help me catch a killer while you’re at it. Anyway, I want you to watch this video and tell me if you recognize the woman

in it.”

She tapped the PLAY button on the touch-screen telephone and both she and Lawson looked on as the images flashed across the screen.

Lawson’s bright blue eyes widened when the woman wearing the fancy dress entered the autopsy room and mouthed the words “fuck you, Dana” to the camera while holding up the picture of Nathan Stiedowe to the

camera.

When the video stopped, Lawson shook her head emphatically. “I’ve never seen that woman before in my entire life,” she said, completely sure of herself. “I’m very sorry, Agent Whitestone, but I’m *extremely* good with faces, and I know for a fact that I’ve never seen her before.”

Dana sighed and flipped shut her

phone. She hadn't *really* expected Lawson to recognize the woman in the video, of course, but at least the *possibility* had been there. In any event, there went five hundred dollars of the taxpayers' hard-earned money down the toilet. Wasteful government spending at its worst.

She put her cellphone back into her purse and dug out a pen and notebook next. "It's fine, Miss

Lawson,” she said, fighting back a wave of disappointment. “Thank you for taking the time to watch. Anyway, if you’ll just write down your address for me, I’ll make sure you get your check within the next week.”

Lawson took the pen and notebook and scribbled down her address. When she’d finished, she handed them back to Dana and said,

“How the heck did that woman even get *into* the building in the first place, Agent Whitestone? That’s what’s bugging the crap out of me. I mean, security’s not all that tight around here, but still...”

Dana shook her head, not especially interested in continuing the conversation with Lawson since the woman didn’t have any useful information to offer her. And anything other than useful information basically

amounted to small talk at this point, a complete and utter waste of time.

Not to mention a very *expensive* waste of her time.

“I don’t know,” Dana said, slipping out a business card from her purse and handing it over. “That’s what I’m hoping to find out. Anyway, if anything occurs to you later on I’d really appreciate it if you’d give me a call at

the number on this card. Anytime. Day or night.”

Lawson took the card from her and tucked it away inside her own purse. “Absolutely, Agent Whitestone. I’ll make sure I do just that.”

And with that, the coroner’s office employee simply left the bathroom – five hundred dollars richer but without ever having used the facilities at all.

CHAPTER 30

From my unobtrusive position over in the corner of the noisy nightclub, I watch as a third huge black guy indelicately muscles his way in on the shameless *ménage-a-trois* currently taking place out on the crowded dance floor.

Already sandwiched by the other two thugs from earlier, Dinah Leach doesn't seem to mind the added attention

one little bit. Quite the opposite, actually. After all, why settle for just two pieces of cake when you can have *three*, right?

I narrow my eyes in distaste. Judging by the hair graying at the new guy's temples, no doubt he's known on his block as an "O.G." – an "original gangster". One of those guys who don't seem to realize that the concept of being

cool had passed him by a long time ago.

A moment later, the sounds of Gaga fade away and the DJ flips the wax over to “Bullet With A Name” by the heavy metal group Nonpoint. Almost comically, the three thugs pause as one and look at each other in confusion. I almost choke on my ice water. Obviously, the idiots don’t have the slightest *clue* of how to dance to white-people’s music.

I shake my head in bemusement, both at the thugs' cartoonish reaction to the new music and also at the song selection itself. The lyrics couldn't have been any more appropriate if Clive Barker himself had written them. Because *I* have a bullet with Dinah Leach's name on it, don't I? Even if I'd go with the knife tonight?

I sure do. Just to be safe, I'd

tucked a .45-caliber handgun into my jacket pocket before leaving for the club that night. A little added security to ensure that I lived up to my mother's *extremely* lofty expectations of me.

In a perfect world, I'd have marched directly out into the middle of the dance floor and put a bullet right into Dinah Leach's worthless skull right then and there. Sadly for me, however, this wasn't a perfect world. Not even close.

Not yet, anyway.

But I was working on it.

The heavy bass coming from the nightclub's speakers punches at my chest like fists, making me wish I could somehow punch it right back. *Doosh-doosh-doosh-doosh.*

Finally, the song switches over again, this time to “Stronger” by Kanye West. Out on the dance floor, Dinah

Leach gleefully succumbs to the renewed dry-humping foisted upon her by her three thuggish-ruggish friends, who seem *much* more confident in their dance moves now that a fellow brother is supplying the beat.

When the sounds of Kanye fade away several minutes later and gives way to Justin Bieber's latest, Dinah Leach disengages herself from the panting pack and heads in a beeline for

the bar.

Crestfallen looks color in the faces of her dance-mates as they watch her walk away. Three necks swivel on three sets of powerful shoulders. Six bloodshot eyes immediately scan the dance floor for another willing whore with whom they might get their respective grooves on.

I chuckle to myself and check my

watch again in the strobe lights flashing overhead. I allow a full thirty seconds to pass before following Dinah Leach to the bar at a discrete distance. Isn't difficult in the packed nightclub.

But to hell with all of the foreplay already, right? I'm ready to get my *own* groove on.

Fighting my way through the bumping and grinding going on out on the dance floor – to the maddeningly catchy

chorus of JB's "Girlfriend" now – I shoulder my way up to the long bar lined with people and ready myself for what will come next. Any nervousness I'd felt earlier in the night has completely dissipated now. In its place, a calm like none I've ever experienced before settles over me like a mother's warm and comforting embrace.

At least what I *imagine* a

mother's warm and comforting embrace must feel like.

Taking a deep breath through my nostrils, I sidle up next to Dinah Leach at the bar and get into character. Almost time for the payoff. Just a little bit longer now. And the clock's still ticking. I wonder if Dinah Leach can hear it yet.

Tick, tick, tick...

CHAPTER 31

Dana finally left the coroner's office through the same doors that she and Templeton had entered half an hour earlier, stepping outside into the frigid winter air and flipping open her cellphone before punching in the number for Bill Krugman down in DC.

The howling wind gusting in off Lake Erie sliced hard through her body while she walked quickly to her car,

whipping her short blonde hair wildly around her scalp and chilling her all the way down to her bone marrow.

Dana shivered violently as she carefully navigated the frozen pavement beneath her feet. She probably should've waited until she'd reached her car to make the call, but she wanted to bring the Director up to speed on what was going on in Cleveland as quickly as

possible – not to mention receive his blessing to send the autopsy-room video to the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Services Division down in Clarksburg, West Virginia. The Bureau was in the midst of a billion-dollar project to compile the world's largest database of suspects' physical characteristics, and Dana hoped that the technicians stationed in the foothills of Appalachia could match up the face of the woman in

the autopsy video to an existing face already on record. The hope of those in charge of the FBI's sweeping new project was that in the next few years or so law-enforcement officials would be able to access the biometric information, including iris patterns, face shapes, scars – even the way people *walked and talked* – to crack cases and identify terrorists and fugitives. More than a

million images of fingerprints, irises and faces of Iraqi and Afghan detainees had been collected over the past few years alone, and domestically that number wasn't very far behind. As things stood currently, the FBI maintained *fifty-five million* sets of electronic fingerprints on file, with a possible match made or ruled out somewhere in the vicinity of a hundred thousand times a day. So any way you looked at it, it wasn't a small-

potatoes operation by any stretch of the imagination.

Dana stopped walking and turned her face away from the bitter wind that was turning the left side of her face into a Popsicle as the Director finally picked up his ringing phone on the other end of the line. “Agent Whitestone,” he said immediately. “What’s going on? Is everything OK? Are *you* OK?”

Dana scrunched up her shoulders against the freezing cold. Against the *vicious* cold. “I’m fine, sir,” she said. “Almost back to a hundred percent now.”

Krugman blew out a slow breath. “Great. I’m very happy to hear that. Anyway, what’s up then? You never call me this late unless it’s about work. *Please* don’t tell me you’re back

on the clock already.”

Dana shivered again against the unrelenting cold. “I’m afraid so, sir,” she said, then she brought the Director up to speed on the details of Christian Manhoff’s brutal murder as quickly as she could.

When she’d finished, she then told him about the mystery woman in the autopsy-room video.

Krugman grunted into the

mouthpiece on his end when she'd finished briefing him. "By all means, send in the video," he said. "But I want you to have backup on this one, Agent Whitestone. I don't like the idea of you getting called out by name again, Dana, and it's standard operating procedure to team up when something like that happens. You know that."

Dana let out a relieved breath;

happy to find that Krugman wasn't going to give her a hard time about getting back to work so soon after emerging from her coma. "I do, sir," she said. "And I'll take all the backup I can get at this point. Who did you have in mind?"

The Director paused. Then he said, "Bruce Blankenship, I think. Works out of our field office in Nebraska. Something of a technological wizard, from all reports. Might come in

handy with this autopsy-video mystery. In any event, I'll forward him your contact information and instruct him to call you first thing in the morning."

"Thanks a lot, sir. I really appreciate it."

"Don't mention it. But Agent Whitestone?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Promise me that you won't

overdo it out there. Promise me you'll take it easy."

Dana smiled softly at the Director's concern. Sometimes Krugman seemed more like a grandfather than her boss.

It was a nice feeling.

"OK, sir," she said. "I promise."

Krugman grunted into the mouthpiece again. "Why don't I believe

you when you tell me that, Whitestone?"

Dana laughed. "Probably because you're a very smart man, sir."

The Director laughed, too. "Luckily for you, young lady, flattery will get you everywhere with me. But I'm serious about what I said, Dana. Be careful out there, OK? Watch your back."

"Yes, sir. Will do."

After chatting with her boss for another moment or two, Dana switched off the connection and glanced around the mostly deserted parking lot. Other than a few scattered cars and two men in overalls who were loading boxes into the back of the coroner's office building, everything looked typically Cleveland to her at the moment.

In other words: cold and gray

and dark.

Fishing her car keys out of her purse, she finished making her way over to her Protégé, again concentrating on navigating the black ice beneath her feet as she went. She didn't want to wind up looking like Brent Price from Channel 4. *She* had no interest in learning how to ride a skateboard.

Finally reaching her car twenty seconds later, she inserted the proper

key into the lock and twisted until she heard the locking mechanism disengage. Then she slid behind the wheel and reached over to pull shut the door behind her against the soul-numbing cold.

But that was when she looked up to see the two men dressed in overalls who'd been loading boxes into the back of the coroner's office building a moment earlier standing directly over

her.

“Hey, bitch,” said the taller of the pair. “Tell me something: what’s a fine piece of ass like you doing out here all by herself on a night like this? Don’t you know that it’s *dangerous* out here?”

Dana shot her hand inside her jacket for her Glock 17 but by then it was already too late. The smaller of the two men shot out his own hand and twisted her left wrist around hard,

sending a searing jolt of pain rocketing up her arm as the taller of the pair moved forward and pressed a damp white cloth over her mouth and nose.

A medicinal smell filled Dana's nostrils. Her brain went fuzzy. A moment later, everything around her went as pitch-black as the inside of a coffin. Chloroform, she supposed – a favorite prop of all the bad guys in the

movies.

As her world gradually floated away into nothingness, in her mind's eye she and Jeremy Brown were riding through New York City's Central Park in a horse-drawn carriage.

Jeremy was just leaning in for their first kiss when an even sharper pain between her thighs replaced the agonizing pain in her arm, snapping her mind back into the horrifying present.

A horrifying present in which two men dressed in blue overalls were brutally raping her in the otherwise-deserted parking lot of the Cuyahoga County Coroner's Office.

PART V

SOMETHING WICKED

THIS WAY COMES

“Named for *Huracan*, the Carib god of evil, hurricanes are amazing and destructive natural phenomena that occur 40 to 50 times worldwide each year.

Hurricane season takes place in the Atlantic, Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico and Central Pacific from June 1st to

November 30th, while in the Eastern Pacific the season stretches from May 15th to November 30th.” — Matt Rosenberg, in his article, *Terror of the Coasts*.

CHAPTER 32

Dinah Leach is leaning her lithe body over the bar at Johnny's Hideaway directly to my right and attempting to catch a bartender's attention.

I study her face from the corner of my eye for a moment before sneaking a quick peek down the front of her blouse. From the look of things, she's trying to trade in on her small measure of notoriety for some faster service.

Presumptuous bitch. Does she really think that she's better than everyone else in the nightclub? Better than *me*? If so, then she'd better enjoy it while she still can. Because pretty soon she'd never feel *anything* again.

I cock my head in her direction as she leans her glistening body even farther across the long bar, showing off her impressive cleavage to a male

bartender. Works like a charm. Then again, where's the great big surprise in that? Good boob jobs tend to draw their fair share of attention, and Dinah Leach has a *great* boob job. Twenty thousand bucks at a bare minimum, and I would know.

A smart business move for her when you looked at things honestly – just like it had been for me.

Straining my ears, I catch the

whore's words above the deafening music. She's ordering just one more drink before tabbing out for the night.

“Vodka and Red Bull,” she shouts, favoring the bartender with a seductive smile and a slight shimmy of her gorgeous silicone hooters. “Easy on the Red Bull.”

The bartender nods and steals a furtive peek of his own down the front of

her blouse before moving away quickly to prepare her drink.

Thirty seconds later, the reality-television star is throwing back her head and draining the booze in four quick swallows.

From this distance, I can actually *hear* the ice cubes bang against her veneer-covered teeth. I cut my gaze down to the bill lying on the beer-soaked bar and lift my eyebrows, impressed.

Two hundred and twelve bucks, not counting tip. A solid night of drinking by anyone's measure.

Curious, I watch as she fills in the line for the gratuity. Another forty bucks for the leering bartender. And why not? What the hell does *she* care? It's all just dirty paper to her, right?

With the woman standing no more than two feet away from me now, I

realize how much *older* she looks in person than she does on television. Her face is a little more haggard, her features a little more drawn, the wrinkles around her mouth a bit more pronounced.

Still, there's nothing at all wrong with the way Dinah Leach *smells*. Not even close. The light and fruity scent of her perfume floats up into my nostrils and makes me feel hopelessly dizzy, sending wave after delicious wave of

olfactory delight flooding through my
amped-up system.

I breathe in deeply and savor her
sweet smell, mentally handing it to her.
Even after all her frantic dancing, she
still smells like a brisk walk through a
garden on a fresh spring day.

I lean over and whisper into her
ear. “You smell absolutely *wonderful*,
princess.”

Dinah Leach whips her face over to mine and pulls back her head on her shoulders in offense, her bright green eyes locking onto mine like heat-seeking missiles.

“Don’t waste your time, pal. Whatever clever thing you’re thinking of saying next, don’t bother, because it’s not going to work. I’m already spoken for.”

And with *that* decidedly rude comment, she simply turns on her heel and marches briskly out of the crowded bar, not even bothering to turn around to look back at me. Smug, self-satisfied, completely sure of herself – that's Dinah Leach, all right.

The poor thing. Who the hell does she think she's *kidding*?

A hot jolt of anticipation rockets

through my veins as I watch the cocky slut saunter away, the urge to kill her even stronger now than it had been before. More *insistent*. I'm happy to feel this. Because her bitchy attitude would only make it that much more enjoyable for me when the time finally comes to kill her. No guilt. No worries. Just good old-fashioned *murder*.

Exactly the way my mother likes

it.

“Nice try, white boy.”

I turn in the direction of the deep voice that’s coming from my left side. The “O.G.” from the dance floor; grinning like a fool with his mouth hanging wide open to display the ridiculous silver hardware flashing inside.

I lift up my eyebrows on my

forehead quizzically. “*Excuse me?*”

The wannabe gangster shakes his head and barks out a short, ugly laugh. “I seen you talkin’ to that bitch, dude. Well, you can just forget about it. She belongs to *me*.”

I hold his stare. It’s an easy thing for me to do even though he must outweigh me by seventy-five pounds. Because once you’d looked into Annabeth Preston’s freezing green eyes,

everything else was a cakewalk after that. “Well, now,” I say calmly, “is that a fact? Does *she* know that?”

The black guy widens his grin. “Not yet, but she’s about to find out. Ya heard me?”

I frown. Apparently, he’d been watching Dinah Leach while she’d been ordering her drink at the bar. So had he been watching *me*, as well?

Probably not something I should leave up to chance at this point.

I lift the corners of my mouth into the semblance of a smile. “Go get her, tiger,” I say in a perfectly even voice. Above all else, you needed to show guys like this one that you weren’t afraid of them, much like you needed to do when confronting an aggressive dog. Or was that *dawg*? Hard for me to remember

these days. “She’s more your speed, anyway,” I go on. “She’s just a worthless whore to me.”

I pause and lift my eyebrows again. “*Real* nice tits, though.”

The black guy rounds his eyes in surprise. For several long moments, he looks as though he’s thinking of attacking me. But when he sees the cold, dead look residing in my own freezing green eyes, he immediately thinks better of it.

So, instead of attacking me physically, the black guy simply flips me off with both of his middle fingers before following Dinah Leach out of the crowded bar. Fake bravado, of course, but at least he has sense enough to leave it at that.

I shake my head and curse the inconvenience of it all as I watch the black guy stalk his mark out of the

crowded nightclub. No matter how much time and effort you put into these sorts of things, murder was *never* an easy feat to accomplish, was it?

Not logistically, at least.

I remind myself to stay calm. No doubt the black guy with the ridiculous teeth in his mouth has a little bit of nonconsensual sex with Dinah Leach out in the parking lot on his mind right about now, but that isn't going to happen. Not

tonight, anyway. Not on *my* watch.

My mother wouldn't have liked that one bit.

Finally trailing the black man toward the exit and out of the club, I keep no more than fifteen feet behind him the entire way, rolling my neck on my narrow shoulders to loosen up the muscles as I go, knowing I'll need to act fast here.

This was it. Show time. Time to clear this unexpected obstacle from my path so that the main festivities could finally get under way. Grunt work, really.

Nevertheless, work that needs to be done.

The wind has already started to pick up outside, blowing various bits of garbage and other debris around the

surprisingly empty parking lot. Little bits of dust kick up into my face and sting my eyes, making them water profusely. Still, I'm actually *happy* to welcome the first signs of my accomplice.

From all indications, Hurricane Allison is *definitely* on her way.

When we reach a blind spot around the corner of the building twenty seconds later, I pick up my pace and

remove the .45 from the inside pocket of my Armani blazer before stopping less than a foot behind the black guy.

Flicking off the safety, I glance around quickly to make sure no one's watching me. I don't want an audience for this, after all. Not yet, anyway.

Seeing that the coast is clear, I lift the gun to the base of the black man's skull and pull the trigger once, timing the

action perfectly to coincide with a loud crash of thunder overhead.

The “O.G.” immediately crumples to the ground like a bag of dropped bricks, his backward-facing Atlanta Falcons baseball cap flying off his head as he tumbles to the ground. Blood rushes out of his shattered skull and onto the blacktopped pavement before pooling at my feet. Bits of white bone and gray brain matter spray onto

the sidewalk in front of us.

Stepping over the shimmering pool, I lean down to examine the lifeless body. No need for a second shot, that much seems clear. The man's already deader than a doornail.

Putting away my gun, I check my pulse by placing two fingers against my throat. My heart rate hadn't risen above a hundred the entire time I'd been killing

the other man, and I'm gratified to realize this. My hands are still steady; my palms still dry. The evenness of my breath makes even *me* wonder what I've just done.

Turning away from him, I walk quickly back around the corner of the building and catch one last glimpse of my quarry before she leaves the parking lot.

Fifty yards away, Dinah Leach is

just getting inside her silver BMW for her fifteen-minute drive home; blissfully unaware of the fact that I'd just saved her from what most likely would have been a *very* brutal rape. The self-absorbed moron is much too closed off in her own little world to notice anything going on around her, though. Much too consumed with her own insignificant little life to sense the danger I represent,

completely confident in the knowledge that nothing can *ever* hurt her.

After all, she's *famous*, right?

I purse my lips as I watch Dinah Leach drive away into the darkness; infinitely pleased that she's decided to leave the nightclub earlier than usual. Normally, she'd have stayed out until the early-morning hours dancing her ghetto booty off, but tonight she's obviously in a great big hurry to beat the storm home.

I close my eyes and luxuriate in the feeling of the bracing wind on my face. For a brief moment, I almost feel *sorry* for Dinah Leach as the wind picks up even more and flutters my perfectly tailored blazer wildly around my trim waist. No matter how hard you tried, though, you could never *really* beat the storm, could you? And Hurricane Allison is almost here now. I can *sense*

her; feel her soft breath against my cheek; the moistness of her saliva in the spitting rain.

And that was *very* bad news for Dinah Leach.

Very bad news, indeed.

Finally heading to the perfect-replica ambulance out in the parking lot that is serving as my transportation down here in Georgia – another luxury made possible by the residual checks from

Timmy's television commercials all those years ago – I prepare myself mentally to step out onto the global stage in front of the blinding floodlights, ready to give the performance of my life.

Climbing up into the ambulance, I switch on the flashers and hit the siren before tearing away from the nightclub in a wail of screeching tires, knowing that I'll need to hurry if I'm to beat

Dinah Leach to our shared destination
and follow my mother's instructions
properly, no matter what the cost.

Once I'm finally on the highway,
I glance down at my Mickey Mouse and
allow myself a small smile.

Almost time now.

Tick, tick, tick...

CHAPTER 33

Head spinning from the alcohol, Dinah Leach wheeled her silver BMW onto the highway just east of Atlanta and leaned forward in her leather-covered seat, squinting ahead into the darkness.

The night was blacker than a funeral veil already, and it matched her foul mood perfectly. According to the weather reports, Hurricane Allison was headed directly toward them now, and

Dinah knew she never should've been out in this kind of weather in the first place. Much less *drunk*. Not only was it unsafe, it was absolutely *pointless*.

She gritted her teeth and flipped open her cellphone before hitting the voice-activation feature. If she needed to be miserable out here, then she'd damned well have some company for the ride.

And she knew *exactly* who to call.

“Call Derrick Coleman,” she said.

The Motorola Droid went to work dialing the number of her agent, a smooth-talking, almost *heartbreakingly* handsome man whom she’d first met while they’d both been studying drama at Spellman College back in the late-

1980s.

Derrick answered his phone after five rings, his deep voice booming over the car speakers via Dinah's BlueTooth setup.

“Dinah, baby! What's the good word, sweetheart? What's new and exciting in the life of my favorite reality-television star? Tell me something good, girl.”

Dinah rolled her eyes but

couldn't fight back an insistent smile. Derrick had been her agent for the past five years now and one of her best friends for even longer than that – going on almost twenty years now, hard as *that* was to believe.

Dinah widened her smile. When they'd first met, both she and Derrick had been fresh-faced teenagers hell-bent on taking the world by storm – or at least

taking the world and fashioning it to suit their needs as well as they possibly could. Sometimes it seemed to her like she'd *blinked* and half her life had passed her by.

“Can it, Derrick,” she said, still grinning. “I don’t have time for any of your silver-tongued charm right now, playboy. I’ve got a bone to pick with you.”

Derrick grunted. “How big of a

bone are we talking about here?”

“Ever heard of a Tyrannosaurus Rex?”

Her agent whistled. “Damn, that’s a pretty big bone. What’s the problem, babe?”

Dinah let out a frustrated breath. “The *problem*, Derrick, is that I don’t like going out every night like this,” she said. “I don’t care if it’s good for my

career or not. It's just not *natural*. I'm a *housewife*, for God's sake. It even says so right there in the title of my show: 'The Real Housewives of Atlanta'. But I'm never home long enough anymore to actually *be* a housewife these days. You've always got me running around like a chicken with its damn neck cut off, and I need a *break* already. I'm not twenty-two anymore, you know. I don't need to be

club-hopping like this all the time.”

She heard Derrick scribbling notes on his end of the line, no doubt finalizing the details on yet *another* public appearance for her to make. “I hear ya, babe,” he finally said after several long moments of scribbling. “But you *do* know that we’ve got to keep you in the public eye, don’t you? That’s just the way these things work. We’re

trying to stretch your fifteen minutes of fame into at least twenty here – if not even *longer* than that. So we’ve got to ride this train as far as it’ll take us. Out of sight, out of mind and all that.”

Dinah smirked. They’d played this game ever since college, each trying to one-up the other with competing clichés that possessed exactly opposite meanings.

“How about absence makes the

heart grow fonder?” she asked, slipping right back into the familiar game as though they’d never stopped playing at all.

“She who hesitates is lost,”
Derrick countered.

“Look before you leap.”

“Strike while the iron is hot.”

“A stitch in time saves nine.”

Derrick Coleman paused. “Dead

men don't wear plaid?"

Dinah burst out laughing. "Ha! I win, sucker! *Again*. I'd say that puts the all-time score at somewhere around a billion to one, wouldn't you? Anyway, what's my schedule look like this week? I haven't seen Tyree in what seems like forever now and I need some alone time with my man."

"Hmmm," Derrick said. "Let me take a look here real quick."

While her agent shuffled through some more papers on his end of the connection, Dinah stretched her neck to the left and thought of her husband. Between his job as the starting power forward for the Atlanta Hawks basketball team and Dinah's own job on the reality television show, spending any quality time together seemed a virtual impossibility these days. She knew that

other couples had it worse than they did and that they always needed to remember to count their blessings, but she still couldn't help resenting their busy schedules sometimes. After all, what was the point of working so hard all the time if they couldn't enjoy the fruits of their labor together every once in a while?

Derrick finally stopped shuffling papers. "You've got a book signing at

Borders on Tuesday, a speech to the rotary club in Roswell on Thursday and that cancer benefit thing at the children's hospital on Friday.”

He paused and cleared his throat. “Speaking of the cancer benefit, Dinah, are you *sure* you won't let me alert the press to the fact that you'll be appearing at the hospital? It would look really great to the public and up your rep

with all the bleeding-heart liberals out there. Probably score you a few more fans for your Facebook page, too, while you're at it."

Dinah shook her head while she pulled the BMW onto the freeway just north of Buckhead just as the skies *really* opened and the rain began to pound even harder against her windshield – to the point where flicking on the wipers to the most powerful

setting made hardly any difference at all. “No, Derrick,” she said, raising her voice to be heard clearly above the incessant whine of the wipers. “I’m not trying to cash in on my charity work; you know that. This is *personal* to me.”

Her eyes misted up with the words. Ever since her and Tyree’s only child had died of leukemia three years earlier, she’d worked tirelessly to help

find a cure. Still, she never felt like she was doing enough. There was always *more* she could do. More money she could give. More charity events she could attend.

Derrick shifted back into friend-mode for a moment. “We *all* miss, Marilyn,” he said. “I hope you know that. She was an absolute angel.”

Dinah wiped at her misty eyes with the back of her left hand. Between

the tears coming from her eyes and the waterworks coming down from the heavens, it was almost impossible to see *anything* on the road in front of her.

“Yeah, she *was* an angel, Derrick,’ she said, sighing softly with the words. “She was an absolute angel sent to me directly from God. And I know that she’s always watching over me from up there. As a matter of fact, I

can feel her watching over me *right now*.”

She paused and swallowed away a huge dry lump from her throat. “Anyway, it’s raining cats and dogs out here, D, so I need to let you go. I need to concentrate on driving.”

“How far away from home are you?”

Dinah squinted through the windshield again. Almost as if on cue, a

bright flash of lighting exploded overhead, allowing her to catch a quick glimpse of a green exit sign on the side of the highway. *Maverick Road.*

“Only about five miles now,” she said. “But at the rate I’m going I’ll be lucky if it only takes me twenty more years from this point.”

Derrick clucked his tongue. “That really sucks, girl, but better you

than me, I suppose. Anyway, be careful out there, OK? I'd really hate for anything to happen to my favorite client."

Dinah twisted up her face.

"Don't you mean your *only* client?"

Her agent laughed. "Yeah, that's what I said the first time. Anyway, I'll call you in the morning, OK? I've got some ideas I want to run by you. Some really big stuff in the works."

Dinah switched off the connection with Derrick and sighed again. No doubt her agent was cooking up even *more* crazy schemes designed to get her even *more* publicity – as if *publicity* was something she needed any more of these days. Hell, she already had more than enough publicity than she knew what to do with. Enough to choke a damned horse.

Lost in her thoughts, her heart abruptly stopped beating dead in her chest when her tires suddenly hydroplaned on the slick pavement.

Adrenaline shot through her veins. Perspiration flooded into her palms. Without thinking, she slammed down her foot violently against the brake pedal – the exact *opposite* of what all the experts told you to do in situations

like this.

The car fishtailed wildly out of control, taking a sharp left-hand turn and heading directly toward the concrete divider in the middle of the highway. Dinah squeezed shut her eyes tight and gripped the steering wheel with all her might, bracing herself for the bone-crushing impact.

But it never came.

She opened up her eyes again

when the car finally came to a gentle stop five seconds later and gasped.

The concrete divider was staring her dead in the face from no more than three feet away.

Before she knew what was happening, she was laughing and crying at the same time. Against all odds, she was still *alive*.

And she knew *exactly* who to

thank for that, too.

She breathed out a grateful sigh of relief and lifted her stare to the heavens.

“Thank you, Marilyn,” she said in a voice choked with emotion. “You’ve always been mama’s little angel, haven’t you? I love you, baby girl.”

Just then, five more quick flashes of lighting lit up the night sky.

I love you, too, Mommy.

CHAPTER 34

Twenty minutes of racing down the rain-slicked highway later, I finally switch off the flashing lights and silence the wildly blaring siren before swinging the ambulance around the southwest side of Dinah Leach's guesthouse.

I kill the engine and lean forward in my seat, study the guesthouse closely through the pounding rain, my green eyes no doubt turning even *greener* in their

sockets with envy.

The reality star's overflow housing is impressive in its own right. Twice the size of most normal people's houses and a hundred times nicer. Set about thirty yards away from the main dwelling, it provides the perfect cover I'll need to get away with the extremely bloody scene that will unfold from here.

I roll my neck around my

shoulders before checking my Mickey Mouse watch again. With any luck at all, the two ladies I'm waiting for will arrive at just about the same time.

I peer through the windshield some more and nod approvingly. The sky has reached its darkest point of the night now, and the howling wind seems more insistent, transforming the spitting rain from earlier into a thunderous downpour that dances a gleeful,

hammering jig on the ambulance's metal roof. From the look of things, Hurricane Allison will be here at any minute now. Fantastic. But where the hell is *Dinah Leach*? Impending hurricane or not, the nightclub is just seventeen short miles away. She should've been here already.

As if on cue, her tricked-out BMW pulls into the long, winding driveway of her palatial pad, the

vehicle's bright headlights bobbing up and down in perfect time with the shocks and piercing the foreboding night like sharp silver knives stabbing hard through a huge black sheet.

From the driver's side of the ambulance, I watch her exit her car and hurry her way up to the front door before fumbling around with her key for a moment. My heartbeat ramps up in my chest as I throw open the ambulance

door and the howling wind slams me squarely in the face. I cover the thirty yards between us in a flash.

Torrential rain soaks deep into my clothing and the booming thunder masks the sound of my pounding footfalls as I approach her. All five of my senses tingle violently, as though I've just stuck my pre-moistened finger directly into a live electrical socket

featuring an exposed-wiring problem.

Slipping up behind the woman twenty seconds later, I stab the sleep drug deep into her neck, rendering her completely unconscious almost at once. Her body goes as limp as a rag doll in my arms as I remove the house keys from her left hand and slide the correct one into the lock, simultaneously balancing her body in one arm. Stepping inside the house a moment later, I pause and take a

look around.

Nice place. Fifteen thousand square feet at a bare minimum. Thirty-foot-high arched ceilings and expensive Italian marble tile on the floors. African art and sculptures scattered throughout. I breathe in deeply through my nostrils and treat my olfactory sense to what I'm experiencing right now. The entire place smells of *money*.

Pretty soon, though, it will smell of something else.

Something coppery.

Gathering Dinah Leach into both of my arms now, I ascend the spiral staircase edged with a gold-leaf design that sits just off the elaborate foyer. In the master bedroom upstairs, I lay the reality-TV star's unconscious body across the massive king-sized bed and

lean over before putting my ear to her mouth, listening for the sounds of breathing.

Faint, but still there, tickling the tiny hairs on my left cheek.

Just then, a brilliant flash of lightning flares outside the second-floor bedroom windows of her eight-million-dollar dwelling, followed almost immediately by another deafening crash of thunder that gives my heart a terrible

start.

I smile at my own skittishness,
and then I begin to laugh.

Hurricane Allison has arrived
just in time for the festivities to begin.

Humming softly to myself
beneath my breath, I remove Dinah
Leach's Jimmy Choo shoes and unbutton
her tailored DKNY jeans before sliding
the fancy denim down her hips and

pulling them over her ankles. Another powerful wave of anticipation floods through my chest at the sight of the bright-pink Victoria's Secret thong that stares back at me.

Only the finest in lingerie for Atlanta's queen of the boob tube, right?

Climbing up onto the bed on top of her, I straddle Dinah Leach's motionless body and position my palms just beneath her belly button. Then I

begin to push gently. Urine leaks out of her bladder and spreads across the crotch of her expensive pink panties.

Feeling dizzy, I pull off the soiled undergarments and slide the panties over her mouth and nose like a blindfold, wanting her to breathe in her own waste, to taste her own sin.

Just like *I*'d been forced to do all those years ago.

Swinging my feet back down onto the floor, I grab Dinah Leach roughly by her ankles and pull her body over to the edge of the bed before taking off her shirt and unsnapping her matching Victoria's Secret bra. Tossing both pieces of clothing to one side, I remove the eight-inch-long carving knife from my waistband.

And then I begin to cut.

Dinah Leach's bright green eyes immediately fly open shock and terror as I dig the gleaming steel even deeper into the tender flesh of her surgically enhanced left breast, my sharp knife completely overriding the effects of the powerful sleep drug. A bloodcurdling scream explodes from her mouth.

A well-placed punch to her face immediately shuts her up again, knocking

her out cold.

“Just go to sleep, princess,” I whisper into her ear, stroking the woman’s hair softly. “It’ll be so much easier on you that way.”

Working the knife on her breast in a circular, sawing fashion, I wince a little at the slight popping noise it makes as it separates completely from her torso. I balance the gelatinous blob in my right hand, savor its surprising

weight in my palm, enjoy its heft.

Five minutes later, her right breast and labia come off in similar fashion.

Tossing Dinah Leach's sexual organs to the floor in a bloody pile of flesh as yet *another* deafening explosion of thunder rocks the mansion all the way down to its foundation; I wipe a thin line of perspiration from my forehead and

glance down at my watch. Time for me to get the fuck out of here. Tyree Leach will be home any minute now following his basketball squad's humiliating 110-79 loss to the Los Angeles Lakers earlier in the night, and any way you looked at it, tangling with a six-foot-nine professional athlete sporting an Afro roughly the size of a mushroom cloud isn't a good idea.

Gathering Dinah Leach's

unconscious body into my arms again, I cradle her as gently as a newborn baby as I leave the bedroom and descend the staircase before exiting the house.

Out in the heart of the storm, the howling wind and torrential rain immediately buffet my body from all directions, slamming me hard in the chest and threatening to push me off balance as I struggle down the long

driveway. Luckily, the added weight in my arms steadies me somewhat against the gale-force gusts. Thank God for small favors. Or thank Hurricane Allison. Either one of them would do at this point.

Fifty feet away from the ambulance, the sharp edge of an airborne street sign suddenly whistles through the air and catches me just above the left eyebrow, opening up a wicked red gash

that instantly starts gushing bright red blood.

Stumbling forward, I nearly drop Dinah Leach's body to the ground. Still, I'm not in the least bit concerned about the possibility of leaving any of my DNA behind. No worries here. The rain is my friend. Hell, *all* of nature is my friend tonight. The rain will wash my blood away.

But never – not in a million fucking years – will it ever wash *her* blood away.

Finally reaching the ambulance forty-five seconds later, I dump her unconscious body onto the ground like a sack of drenched potatoes and fight with the powerful wind to open up the back doors to the ambulance. Ten seconds after that, in she goes.

Stepping into the back of the vehicle after her, I place her body inside an unzipped body bag that I've positioned on a waiting stretcher, pausing a moment and looking around at our surroundings. Nowhere near as comfortable as the fancy limousines she's used to riding in, of course, but *almost* dead people can't be choosers, now can they?

Of course they can't.

Especially on a night like this.

CHAPTER 35

Hitting the flashers and siren again, I back the ambulance carefully down Dinah Leach's driveway and turn on the windshield wipers full-blast to whisk away the torrential rain.

God, it's a mess out here.

And I fucking love it.

I concentrate on the road in front of me while the frenetic sound of the wipers fills my brain like a million

swarming mosquitoes. The only other vehicles on the streets right now belong to emergency responders on their way to various points of trouble all around the besieged city – *exactly* the reason my mother and I had chosen to put our beautifully crafted game plan into action under these very specific conditions and on this very specific night.

With law-enforcement officials

and emergency responders already stretched to the point of snapping dealing with all of the fallout from Hurricane Allison, I can really take my time here and get everything exactly right. Not only am I a kid in a candy store right now; I'm a kid in a candy store with what amounts to an *unlimited* budget.

I can take *whatever* I want.

An Atlanta PD patrol car whizzes by in the opposite direction at

seventy miles an hour, blue-and-red lights flashing and its powerful sirens screaming bloody murder to let everyone in the vicinity know that the men inside the vehicle are in a goddamn *hurry* here.

I smile so widely that it makes my jaw ache.

Hey there, officers! Got some pretty interesting cargo in the back of my rig here if you'd care to take a

look. No? You're too goddamned busy right now? What about a murder? Would something like that interest you at all? How about if the victim is famous? Still no? I see. Well, I understand, officers. Have a nice day. And thank you so very much for your service to our community.

Leaning forward and adjusting the police scanner to the correct frequency, I listen in joyfully as the

reports crackle over the electrified airwaves.

“Flooding at 187 Mockingbird Lane. Infant trapped in an upstairs bedroom. Mother’s frantic and screaming that she can’t get to her baby”

“Broken leg and multiple contusions at 23 Jamaica Way. Address belongs to City Councilman Bryan Manlow. If you’re a Republican, head

over that way.”

I wince at the ill-timed joke.

There went somebody’s job.

“Call regarding a ninety-one-year-old man having trouble breathing at 19420 La Serena Drive. History of heart problems. Better hurry.”

Half an hour later, I pull the ambulance over to the side of the road about a quarter of a mile away from the hospital and make my way into the back

of the vehicle. Unzipping the body bag constructed of industrial-strength rubber that I've left open just a *sliver*, a hot rush of adrenaline bolts through my veins at the sight of Dinah Leach's lovely face.

There she is, just waiting for me.

The woman is conscious now, but just barely. The reality-television star gasps for air through the soiled panties covering her face, but she is far

too woozy to do much of anything else.

When I slide the panties up onto her forehead, she widens her bloodshot green eyes in confusion. “What’s happening?” she breathes. “Who *are* you? Where *am* I?”

I smile down at her. She looks so goddamn *beautiful* in this state that I can’t resist the urge to lean in for a quick kiss, tasting her expensive lipstick on my tongue as I do so. Once again, much like

the woman's jeans and perfume, she'd obviously bought the good stuff. Estee Lauder, judging by the flavor of it.

Regretfully breaking the kiss, I slide the panties back over her face and shut the body bag once more, zipping it up all the way this time. No need to make a big show over our good-byes, right? After all, I wouldn't want anyone to feel embarrassed here.

Making my way back into the driver's seat up front, I quickly trade in my bloody clothes for a pair of brand-new scrubs, knowing that I'll need to look the part for what will come next. Hell, looking the part is half the battle here.

Ten minutes later – having given Dinah Leach sufficient time to suffocate inside the body bag – I wheel the vehicle

up to the emergency-room entrance of the hospital and take my place waiting in line.

The scene around the hospital is an absolute *madhouse*, but it isn't very long before three EMTs come hustling up to meet me.

“What do we have here?” one of the EMTs asks me as I roll down the driver's-side window. He's shielding his eyes from the pounding rain that's

still pouring down from the heavens above.

I shake my head sadly and tell the man the bad news in a solemn voice. “I’m afraid this one is just a drop-off for some post-mortem work,” I say. “Forty-two-year-old female. It’s that Dinah Leach chick from the *Real Housewives* show.”

The EMT lifts his eyebrows in

surprise. “Holy shit. You don’t say. You’ve got to be kidding me. How’d she die?”

“Overexposure.”

“To what?”

Me, I think.

Out loud, I say, “Hell, I don’t know, pal. Too much excitement, I suppose. Heart gave out on her, is my guess. Anyway, the docs are going to have to cut her open to find out for sure.

They don't pay me enough to make those kind of calls.”

The EMT laughs. “Yeah, I hear ya there. Me either.”

He pauses and studies my face. “Hey, are you new around here or something? I don't think I've ever seen you before.”

Like everything else in my mother's flawless plan, my lie has been

prepared well in advance. “Just helping out,” I say, just another good ol’ boy commiserating with a colleague deep in the heart of Dixie. “Studying to become an EMT at the community college. They said they wanted me to get some real-time experience and lend a hand because of the storm and all. Pretty exciting job you’ve got here, huh?”

The EMT nods. “Yeah, *too* exciting sometimes. Anyway, pop the

locks on the back doors here and we'll take her off your hands."

I do as I'm instructed. A moment later, the other two EMTs extract Dinah Leach's lifeless body from the back of the ambulance before slamming shut the doors again and wheeling her into the hospital.

The remaining EMT pounds once on the ambulance's roof to let me know I

can take off. “Thanks a lot, buddy. Good luck in school. I guess I’ll see ya around whenever you graduate.”

I smile at him and press down my foot lightly against the accelerator. My heart thrums gleefully in my chest as I pull away from the absolutely perfect final act of my absolutely perfect first murder.

See me around? I think.

Not if you’re lucky, pal. Not if

you're fucking lucky.

PART VI

TROPICAL DEPRESSION

“Therefore, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: In My wrath I will unleash a violent wind and in My anger hailstones and torrents of rain will fall with destructive fury.” – Book of Ezekiel, chapter 13, verse 13.

CHAPTER 36

More than a year after my exquisitely flawless murder of Dinah Leach down in Atlanta, Georgia, I sit in my rental car outside the Cuyahoga County Coroner's Office in Cleveland, Ohio on a snowy winter's night and idly thumb through a slender copy of *People* magazine while listening to Boy George work his way through a soulful rendition of "The Crying Game".

The cover of my magazine features a very pretty woman about the same age as me. Her short blonde hair frames a beautiful face punctuated by a pair of pale blue eyes. Her milky-white skin would have looked right at home in a Noxzema advertisement within the glossy pages of my magazine. A small brown mole sits just above the right side of her mouth. Her lips appear thin-but-

kissable – if you're into that kind of thing, which I most certainly am not, my brief lip-lock with Dinah Leach all those months ago notwithstanding.

But Dana Whitestone is a good-looking woman, no debating that simple fact. Hell, she's *almost* as beautiful as my mother.

Almost as beautiful as *me*.

According to the article I'm reading at the moment, the FBI agent has

never been married. I wonder why. Someone as attractive and successful as her should have been hitched *years* ago. The combination of her youthful good looks and cerebral nature would have presented quite the catch for most men: a real piece of arm-candy with a highly functioning brain to match.

I shake my head to chase away the thoroughly insignificant thought.

Isn't any of my *business* why she'd never gotten married. I'm sure she has her reasons. We *all* have our reasons for what we do. Still, the FBI agent is another one of those people who doesn't quite deserve all the publicity she's been getting lately. For what? For doing her *job*? So she'd caught a few serial killers over the past couple of years and had bumped her head in a minor plane crash where hardly anybody had died at

all. BFD. What was all the *fuss* about?

I press my painted lips together in irritation, knowing that it'll take a lot more than just a few magazine articles singing her praises as the top law-enforcement official in the country to escape *my* special list.

Though Dana Whitestone doesn't know it yet, she'll be the one to ultimately ensure my *own* fame. And I

know exactly how she'll do it, too. Exactly *when* she'll do it, as well, for that matter. My mother has spelled out everything for me in excruciating detail, right down to killing blow. And the climax my mother has penned for this story is an absolute *beauty*. A worthy conclusion to this thrilling ride. Pretty soon, Dana Whitestone will know how the story ends, too. Know it until she begs for me to just put her out of her

misery already and let sweet, sweet death take her away.

I narrow my beautiful green eyes when the celebrated FBI agent finally steps out of the coroner's office twenty minutes later, punching in a number on her cellphone as she does so. No doubt the self-absorbed bitch is giving yet *another* interminable interview to the press, gleefully recounting her

hopelessly boring story for the billionth
goddamn time and grinning like the
goddamn Cheshire Cat the entire time.

Big mistake, honey, I think.

*Because I'm not the sort of woman you
should fuck around with. Neither is my
mother, for that matter.*

I chuckle softly as I watch her. I
just can't help myself. I'm feeling
especially catty tonight, that much seems
apparent. As catty as I've ever felt

before in my entire life. And why not?
I'm looking *good* tonight. My dress and shoes and jewelry have been selected precisely for the occasion, as have my hair, makeup and underwear – a bright pink Victoria's Secret thong and matching bra worn in honor of the late and not-so-great Dinah Leach. Any way you looked at it, I was *ready* for this.

Still, Dana Whitestone

represents the *last* name on my list. If she's really lucky, she might even survive the night due to that annoying little technicality. No guarantees, though, of course.

For now, though, I'd simply need to content myself with watching her from a distance. Watching her and *waiting*. When the time is absolutely right, *that* was when I'd spring out from the shadows like a rapist in the night and

catch her completely off-guard. Teach her the lesson that my mother had taught *me* so well all those years ago.

Pride cometh before a fall.

That being said, it doesn't mean I can't have a little bit of fun with her *right now*, does it? Of course it doesn't. Why the hell should I wait any longer? Why not get the festivities underway while I'm looking this *good*?

Stepping out of my rental car, I approach the two men in overalls who are loading boxes into the back of the coroner's office building while the FBI agent continues to gab away into the cellphone at her ear, much too preoccupied with her own story to notice my movements. The men's pupils widen in admiration as they take in my stunning feminine beauty, causing me to

shake my head in bemusement.

Men. They're all the same.

Only interested in one thing. Eight years old or eighty, some things never changed.

“Hey there, boys,” I say, sounding *exactly* like the confident woman I'd always dreamed I'd be.

“You two interested in making a little bit of money tonight? If you play your cards right, there might even be a couple of

blowjobs in it for you, too.”

As the older and taller of the two workers present in the parking lot of the coroner’s office – not to mention the *tougher* of the pair – Larry Randle spoke first.

At fifty-seven years old and on work release from prison for the ninth time, he’d begun to suspect lately that

working for a living just wasn't going to cut it. Too much bullshit to deal with. Too many asses to kiss. Hell, being in prison was actually *easier* than living in the real world. He *wanted* to go back to the joint. After all, three hots and a cot were certainly nothing to sneeze at.

“Hell yeah,” he said, digging his elbow into his partner’s ribs. “Some cash and a couple of BJs sound just about right to us. What did you have in

mind, honey?”

CHAPTER 37

When Dana's world finally swam back into focus fifteen minutes later, she found herself bent forward over the driver's-side seat of her Protégé with her jeans and underwear ripped down around her ankles.

Cold winter air froze the backs of her exposed thighs. She tried to straighten but found she couldn't. She was pinned down hard beneath a heavy

weight.

Vomit rocketed up her throat and burned the thin lining of her esophagus before flooding into her mouth and wearing away the enamel on her teeth. One of the men in blue overalls who'd been loading boxes into the back of the building when she'd been speaking on the telephone with Bill Krugman had positioned himself between her legs and

was now pumping himself furiously in and out, shredding her insides and grunting hard with his efforts like a wild beast in heat.

Dana choked on the contents of her stomach. Hot tears sprang into her eyes and blurred her vision, burning her retinas and making it impossible to see anything clearly. She tried to straighten again but the man on top of her shoved her face roughly back down into the

leather of the car seat.

“Just stay down, bitch,” he hissed, wrapping a thick handful of her hair in his fist to keep her in place. “Just stay down and try to enjoy yourself.”

Dana closed her eyes and tried to ignore the searing pain between her legs, still fighting with every last ounce of energy she possessed. She kicked her legs. She bowed her back. She gritted

her teeth. Tears streaked down her cheeks and dropped down into the grooves of the car seat, sliding down the leather before collecting in a saltwater pool at the bottom of the backrest. She wondered if this was what her mother had felt when Nathan Stiedowe's father had raped her over a church altar back in 1957. A feeling of complete and utter hopelessness. A feeling of complete and utter violation.

A feeling of wanting to *kill* the person who was doing this to you.

She took a deep breath that filled her lungs to capacity and opened her eyes. She knew that she needed to remain in the moment here, no matter how horrific the moment might be. Marshalling every last ounce of strength left in her body, she took another deep breath, ready to scream with all of her

might in order to alert someone to the fact that she was being brutally raped just fifty feet away from the entrance to the coroner's office. Suddenly, though, a different scream ripped through the night. A high-pitched yelp of terror that sounded eerily similar to that of a mortally wounded animal.

The man on top of her withdrew quickly from between her legs and whirled around to trace the source of the

scream. Dana did the same. Her pale blue eyes burned in their sockets, glistening with hot tears of rage and shame.

Five feet away, the rapist's partner writhed in agony on the snow-covered pavement, clutching his neck as rivers of bright red blood pulsed from between his trembling fingers and soaked into the pristine white snow

covering the ground. A horrible gurgling noise came from deep within his slashed-open throat.

Dana widened her eyes in shock and amazement. A woman stood over the prone man, holding a long knife in her right hand. Its sharp silver edge glinted with her target's fresh blood.

The primary rapist – the one who'd been violating Dana only moments earlier – fumbled with the belt

on his overalls. “What the...” he began.

But the words died in his throat when the woman sprang forward in one quick flash of movement and shoved the knife deep into his Adam’s apple, twisting hard before pulling it out again, causing the man’s esophagus to collapse on itself. Falling to the ground next to his partner, he, too, began to choke on his own blood.

Dana stared up in confusion at the woman holding the knife in her hand. Utter disbelief filled her mind. She found it impossible to breathe, to speak...

To *thank* the woman.

She blinked hard, trying desperately to process the surreal scene before her. Her savior had dressed in formal attire for the occasion, her long

blonde hair streaked with subtle shades of red. Dana's hands trembled uncontrollably as she yanked up her pants and underwear around her waist.

She coughed painfully and wiped tears from her eyes with the back of her right hand. "Thank you," she sobbed. "Thank you so much."

The woman smiled at her and waved a delicate hand in front of her face. "Hell, don't go thanking me just

yet, honey. We girls need to stick together, don't we? Anyway, you would have done the same thing for me, right?"

Dana narrowed her eyes, not understanding the woman's meaning. To say the least, it was an odd thing to say considering the gravity of the moment. Flippant. Out of place. "Of course I would have," she said. "I'm an FBI agent."

The woman narrowed her own beautiful green eyes, which were sparkling in her face like glistening emeralds set into a face carved out of pure porcelain. “Yeah, I know that, Agent Whitestone. That’s why I’m here.”

Dana pulled back her head on her shoulders in surprise. An uneasy feeling boiled deep in the pit of her

stomach. Still, her traumatized brain didn't seem capable of processing the woman's odd words.

Her pulse crashed in her wrists. Her knees went weak. "How do you know my name?" she said.

The woman smiled again and adjusted one of her small gold hoop earrings; as though the two of them were simply engaged in a little bit of mindless chitchat right now rather than

acknowledging the horrific rape to which Dana had just been subjected.

“Oh, I know *a lot* of things about you, Agent Whitestone,” the woman said.

“Let’s see here: I know that your parents were murdered when you were four years old – a murder that you yourself had the great misfortune of witnessing. I know that you live in Lakewood with your pet cat and that you enjoy watching

the same television program on Showtime every Wednesday night. *Weeds*, isn't it? The one starring Mary-Louise Parker? Anyway, I also know that you probably think you're better than me. It's not true, of course, but in short I know *plenty* about you."

The woman paused and lifted one of her perfectly plucked eyebrows. "Can't say I like a single goddamn one of them, though."

Dana reached inside her leather jacket for her Glock and curled her fingers around the corrugated-plastic grip. “What the fuck are you talking about?” she barked, following the training that told her to keep her voice even but still speaking harshly enough to display control. It was important to never show fear to your adversary. That would only reinforce their confidence

and encourage them to attack. “You’d better start making goddamn sense or I’m going to arrest you right now. Tell me how you know these things about me.”

The woman dressed in black widened her beautiful smile and took a step forward, at the same time producing a syringe loaded with a clear liquid.

Dana slid out the Glock from her shoulder holster and pointed it directly at the woman’s head. “Stop right there,”

she ordered, both her hands and voice perfectly steady now. “Just stop right there or I’ll put a bullet in your fucking brain.”

But the woman *didn’t* stop.

Dana lowered the gun and pulled the trigger once, aiming for the woman’s kneecap, just like she’d done with her half-brother in his underground bunker two years earlier. A warning shot meant

to drive home the painful reminder that the predators weren't in charge here. The *good guys* were.

But the gun only clicked dryly.

She stared down at the Glock in her hand dumbly. Shaking her head, she pulled the trigger again, praying that a particle of dust had somehow caused a temporary malfunction. Again, nothing happened.

The woman in black widened the

smile on her pretty face even farther, showing off two rows of perfectly straight white teeth. Without warning, she then suddenly shot out a hand and grabbed Dana hard by her throat, squeezing forcefully enough to cut off her air supply. The power in the woman's grip was unbelievable, *unladylike*, to say the very least, practically *inhuman*.

Pain like a scorpion's sting bit deep into Dana's flesh as the woman jabbed the sharp needle deep into her throbbing carotid artery and depressed the plunger, the pinching sensation reminding Dana of the yearly influenza shots she'd received as a kid. Only then did she realize that the woman accosting her at the moment was the same woman from the one in the autopsy-room video.

The woman's hair and clothes were different now, sure, but her eyes were the same brilliant shade of green. Sadly, though, Dana didn't have time to process this information before her eyelids abruptly grew heavy and her world faded away again.

Through the fog in her brain, she heard metallic clinks echo against the frozen pavement.

The woman's last words – just

like all of her previous words – were delivered in a voice positively *dripping* with contempt.

“In case you were wondering, dear, those men were *working* for me,” the woman said, letting the remaining bullets from Dana’s gun drop from her hand and scatter onto the hard surface of the parking lot below. “We took the liberty of emptying your gun while you

were passed out the first time. Anyway, like I said before, you shouldn't thank me just yet. I may be done with you for the time being, but I'm certainly not done with you for *good*. I saved you only because I want you for *myself*, Agent Whitestone. Sweet dreams, sweetheart. I'll be seeing you again very soon."

The woman paused. Then, almost as an afterthought, she added, "Better look twice, though. I know that

you're supposed to be the world's greatest cop and all, but you probably won't recognize me the next time around."

CHAPTER 38

Dana came to again twenty minutes later, woozy and nauseous from the effects of the powerful drug still coursing through her system.

She shook her head hard in an effort to clear away the cobwebs in her frazzled brain and pulled herself up off the ground before punching 911 into her cellphone. She paced the parking lot of the Cuyahoga County Coroner's Office

for ten solid minutes while waiting impatiently for the cops to arrive.

Dana forced herself to not cry during the interminable six hundred seconds. Wasn't easy. Her head was killing her and her body temperature had soared to a feverish level despite the bitterly cold wind that was whipping in hard off the lake and knifing viciously through her traumatized body. Still, the

bitter cold couldn't *touch* her right now. Nothing in the *world* could touch her right now. Not today and maybe never again.

She stomped back and forth in front of her car: twenty feet forward and twenty feet back, tracing and re-tracing the same path until she'd worn a patch three feet wide into the snow. Sweat rolled down her temples and plastered her short blonde hair to her forehead.

More sweat seeped into the armpits of her shirt beneath the leather bomber jacket. Still *more* perspiration flooded into her palms. Her ears rang. Her skin crawled. Her stomach churned. Her Glock – useless as the goddamn thing had been tonight – rubbed the left side of her ribcage raw, until the entire left side of her body had been turned into a painful hunk of tenderized meat.

Dana ignored the pain and sweat and nausea and paced on, the gun continuing to shift back and forth inside its holster and further mutilating her side. But it was a *good* kind of pain. The kind of pain she *needed* to feel right now. It was like working a loose tooth back and forth in your mouth and actually *enjoying* the way it hurt, unable to keep your fingers away from it for the

life of you. Unable to keep yourself from *wanting* the pain.

More importantly, it was the exact *opposite* kind of pain that she'd just experienced. The kind of pain that violated your mind every bit as much as it violated your body. Probably more so.

One thing was for certain: with every last cell in her body Dana wanted revenge. *Needed* revenge, as a matter of

fact. With everything she'd been through in her thoroughly fucked-up life, she was sick and goddamn tired of playing by the rules. Sick and goddamn tired of being one of the *good* guys. Constant subjectivity was way too much to ask of *anybody*, much less a person in her already-weakened psychological condition. After all, there were limits to what the human spirit could endure, no

matter how tough you thought you were or how many inspirational posters they tacked onto the walls of your warm, safe office buildings. Stupid, third-grade-level shit that urged you to keep on keeping on, to keep on trucking, to continue trudging through the muck of your everyday existence and to look at all of the trash surrounding you and convince yourself that it was actually flowers.

When everything was said and done, though, Dana knew that there were no atheists in the foxholes of life. No matter what anyone said to the contrary, when you'd reached the breaking point that every person in the world possessed you got down on your fucking knees and prayed to God in a trembling voice to please, please, *please* take away the other kind of pain. To relieve the

agonizing pressure, if only for a moment. To grant you sanctuary from the hellish reality of your life.

That being said, snapping mentally wasn't an option for Dana at this point. Not now and not ever again. The only option left to her now was the one where she made everything right again – by *not* playing by the rules, if necessary. Somehow, some way, she needed to restore proper order to the

world. To bust the bad guys asses so hard that their *grandchildren* felt it. To make sure that they paid for their crimes until it *hurt*. To make sure that they paid for their crimes until it hurt their *descendants*. Hurt them all the way down to their goddamn *souls*. And not the good kind of pain, either. The other kind of pain. It was exactly what the killers and drug dealers and child

molesters deserved.

Not to mention the motherfucking, piece-of-shit *rapists*.

Dana shook her head violently some more and cursed a blue streak beneath her breath while she tried desperately to organize her jumbled thoughts. Once again, it seemed, an unspeakable nightmare had invaded her life and reinforced her entire purpose for *breathing*. As an FBI agent, she'd been

tasked with making sure that the human trash piles littering the world rotted away in prison for the rest of their natural-born lives. As a woman who'd just been raped, however, she needed something more than that. Needed to make the animals hurt like they'd made *her* hurt. Because no matter how much it might seem that way sometimes, the bad guys weren't in charge here.

Or, in this case, the bad *girls*.

Dana clenched her fists into tight balls at her sides and resisted the urge to start throwing punches in the air, once again fighting back the insistent tears that were pooling in her eyes, feeling angry with herself for even *considering* tears at this point. Tears were for the weak, losers, schoolchildren. Still, how another woman could possibly take part

in the soul-numbing violation that had just been so savagely foisted upon her was completely beyond her comprehension, utterly beyond her ability to understand.

With more than a quarter-million rapes reported across the world each year, Dana knew that she wasn't alone. Still, that knowledge didn't make her feel in the least bit better about what had just happened to her. How *could* it?

Nobody on the Titanic had taken comfort in the knowledge that so many others were sinking down to their watery graves with them, had they? Hadn't taken solace from the fact that they'd have plenty of company in their icy tombs for eternity, right? Not unless they'd been complete fucking assholes who'd deserved to die anyway.

Worse, the astronomical number

of reported rapes didn't even scratch the *surface* of the problem. One National Crime Victimization Survey showed that just thirty-nine percent of all rapes and sexual assaults in the United States were reported to law-enforcement officials each year. And less than *ten* percent of all male-on-male rapes were ever reported, with the victims most often believing that it was a personal matter or fearing reprisal from the assailant.

Dana stretched her neck sharply to the right, feeling like a prizefighter who was preparing to climb through the ropes and enter the ring. She knew *exactly* how those other victims felt. But she didn't fear reprisal from her primary assailants at this point. They were *dead*, after all – killed by the woman dressed in black. What she *did* fear, however, was what she'd *do* to the

sadistic bitch who'd killed the rapists once she finally caught up with the conniving whore.

Horrible thoughts crept into her mind. Thoughts of how she might murder another human being in cold blood and actually get away with it.

First things first, though. Before she could do anything else, Dana needed to *find* the woman. Luckily for her, though, as an FBI agent, that was

precisely what she was best at doing. The best in the entire *country*, according to *Newsweek's* recent cover story.

Dana clamped her teeth together so hard that her jaw began to ache. Rape had always been a crime that she'd despised almost as much as murder. And why not? It was practically the same thing, for Christ's sake. Rapists took lives, too, even if their victims

survived the brutal attacks. There were lots of different kinds of deaths, after all. The death of innocence. The death of a getting a good night's sleep. The death of knowing that you could walk freely around your fellow man without becoming a victim. In Dana's mind, the perpetrators of rape deserved nothing less than the death sentence. Or, at the very least, total castration. And their accomplices – cowardly jackals like the

woman dressed in black – should be held every bit as accountable as the hyenas that had performed the animalistic acts of invasion in the first place.

Dana finally stopped her pacing when the squad cars and ambulances came racing up to the scene with their sirens screaming and their blue-and-red lights flashing thirty seconds later,

casting eerie, dancing shadows across the parking lot. Two uniformed cops emerged quickly from the lead vehicle and ushered the looky-loos who'd come outside back inside the building. Five minutes later, yet *another* squad car pulled up to the scene, this one holding Gary Templeton and bringing the total number of emergency vehicles in the parking lot to more than twenty.

Dana immediately took

Templeton to the side and gave him her fabricated version of events while his boss set up a perimeter around the crime scene. Even in a city as violent as Cleveland – a city with a homicide rate that had shot up eighteen percent in the past year – no less an authority than the chief of police himself had rolled out of his warm, cozy bed to brave the frigid winter conditions when he'd been

informed that two men had been brutally murdered in a municipal parking lot, an incident that marked the *fourth* multiple-victim murders of the year in the besieged city. If Dana had her way, though, there would have been *three* dead bodies here tonight instead of just two. And she sure as hell wouldn't have been one of the ones they'd be zipping up into a body bag.

She closed her eyes briefly.

After all of these years on the job of never quite understanding how a human being could take another's life without remorse, she was starting to see how you could be *driven* to murder.

Hell, she was practically getting a limo ride there herself.

She refused Templeton's offer to go inside the coroner's office building where it was warmer. More heat was

the last thing in the world she needed right now. The intense rage boiling inside her chest at the moment could have powered all of Ohio's nuclear power plants for an entire year, if not even longer than that.

“At least let me get you a blanket,” Templeton persisted. Huge puffs of foggy breath issued from his mouth as he spoke. “It’s fucking freezing out here.”

Dana shook her head. Like she'd noted earlier, the cold couldn't touch her right now. *Nothing* could touch her right now. And she was sorry to say that she didn't give a shit what anybody else was feeling at the moment, including Templeton. Whatever petty problems they had – including something as insignificant as being *cold* – couldn't compare to *her* problems right now. “I

said I'm fine, Gary," she snapped, not even attempting to keep the sharp knife-edge of irritation out of her voice.

Templeton lifted his thick eyebrows on his forehead, no doubt remembering her promise earlier in the day to keep things professional between them from now on. He held up his hands with his palms facing her in a placating manner. "Whoa, take it easy, Dana," he said. "What's wrong? Other than these

two dead bodies here, I mean. Is everything else OK, though? You're acting really fucking aggressive right now."

Dana took a deep breath and forced herself to calm down. No matter how hard it was for her to accomplish right now, she couldn't let Templeton suspect what had *really* happened to her here tonight. This shit was *personal*

now, and she didn't need anybody getting in the way of her revenge. "I'm sorry, Gary," she said, shaking her head and dropping her gaze to the pavement. "It's just that..."

The words died in her throat when her gaze abruptly landed on the gold hoop earring that was lying on the ground near Templeton's right foot. Her heart stopped beating dead in her chest. Her mouth flooded with stomach acid.

Templeton followed her stare down to the ground but didn't notice the earring lying there. Thank God for small favors. Lifting his gaze to meet hers again, he asked, "What?"

Dana held his stare and forced herself to not look back down at the earring. If everything went well for her, the earring was one piece of evidence that would *never* make it into the official

record. “It’s nothing, Gary,” she said, waving a hand in front of her face to chase away his question. “It’s just that I’m completely fucking exhausted right now. It’s been a really long day and an even longer night. Can’t I just give you my statement and go home? I really need to sleep.”

Templeton pursed his lips, looking a little annoyed by her brusque attitude. Luckily for her, though, he

didn't push the issue any further than that. Something in her eyes must have told him that it would have been the wrong move at this point. "Of course," he said, removing a pen and notebook from the pocket of his trench coat to record her statement. "So, what happened here, anyway? What did you see?"

Dana relayed the lie that she'd

mentally rehearsed while waiting for the cops to arrive, suppressing a soft sigh as she did so. Lying to people was something she seemed to be getting awfully good at lately. First Dr. Spinks, and now Templeton. But sometimes the truth just hurt too much to share with others. Sometimes honesty *wasn't* the best policy. Sometime honesty could just go straight to hell, for all she cared.

And right now was *definitely*

one of those times.

“I came out of the coroner’s office and these two men were lying dead in the snow with their throats slashed open,” she told the Cleveland cop, gesturing down to the rapists, who were now being photographed on their red-and-white background by Doug Freeman, the forensic photographer who’d also worked with them on the

Cleveland Slasher case a few years earlier. Hell, it was starting to look like a regular class reunion around here. All they needed to do now was dig her brother's dead body out of the frozen ground and they'd be halfway home to reassembling the original cast of characters.

“I called you guys right away when I saw them,” Dana went on, returning her stare to Templeton. “I

canvassed the area for any possible suspects at that point but I didn't see anybody. Then I waited for you guys to arrive – a little bit longer than I cared to, to be perfectly honest. Anyway, now I'm *talking* to you guys. That's the whole story, Gary. That's all I've got for you."

Templeton flashed her a sympathetic look but he still had a job to

do. “You didn’t see *anybody* when you came out of the building?” he asked. “Nobody leaving the scene? Do you remember any cars entering or exiting the parking lot when you came out of the coroner’s office?”

Dana tried her best to keep her voice even but it wasn’t easy. “No, Gary,” she said. *Jesus Christ, how many goddamn times did she have to say this crap?* “I didn’t see anything or

anybody except for the dead bodies. I don't know what else to tell you. I'm really sorry, but I just don't have anything else to give you right now."

Templeton cast a weary eye at the crisscrossed tire tracks that were lacing the parking lot like the stitches on a freshly autopsied corpse. Then he stared up into the dark skies above their heads, from which yet *another* heavy

snow had begun to fall. The snow was wet and sticky, of course – the kind of snow that did an excellent job of blanketing crime scenes and destroying evidence. “I doubt we’ll be able to trace a fucking *thing* in this mess,” he said, letting out a heavy sigh that sagged his chest. “Hell, I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

The law-enforcement part of Dana’s brain empathized with him, but

she had other more *important* thoughts on her mind right now. *Murderous* thoughts. It was the reason why she hadn't wanted Templeton to see the gold hoop earring and why she hadn't yet told the Cleveland cop about the woman in the autopsy-room video – even though she knew he'd find out about it eventually. Probably sooner rather than later, too. Like Jeremy Brown had once

been, Gary Templeton was a damn good cop. One of the best she'd ever worked with.

“I’m really sorry, Gary, but I just didn’t see anything useful,” Dana said, wanting to get this conversation over with already so that she could *really* start plotting her revenge in earnest.

“Just the dead bodies. Like I said before, I wish I had more for you, but I just don’t.”

Templeton nodded and clicked shut his ballpoint pen before flipping closed his spiral notebook and shoving it back into the pocket of his trench coat.

“OK, Dana. If you didn’t see anything, you didn’t see anything.” He paused and looked around the parking lot again.

“Anyway, I know that you’re tired and all, but is there any way you could stick around and help us out here for a little

while? Hell, half these guys out here are rookies. They'll probably end up destroying more evidence than they uncover."

Dana resisted the urge to reach out and grab Templeton hard by his throat. This was just getting tedious now. She needed to *get the fuck out of there*. "Nope, can't do it, Gary," she said, shaking her head emphatically to underscore the words. "Not tonight,

anyway. I'm too fucking exhausted, and I really need to go home and sleep. Tomorrow morning I'll get back to work on finding out who might've attached the photograph of my brother to Christian Manhoff's body, but this is your jurisdiction, anyway. There's no call for federal involvement that I can see. Give me a call if you find something that changes that."

Templeton rolled his neck forward on his broad shoulders, looking like a man who'd already been beaten. Dana knew the feeling all too well for herself. "Gotcha," he said. "It's just that misery loves company, ya know? Anyway, go on home and get some rest. I'll give you a call if I have any more questions for you, but I doubt I will. I'm pretty sure I've got everything I need

from you.”

Dana thanked him and knelt down, pretending to tie her shoe. Lifting up her stare, she watched the Cleveland cop's eyes. When Templeton finally looked away, she reached out quickly and plucked the gold earring off the ground next to his foot before tucking it into her pocket and rising quickly to her feet, practically *running* to her Protégé.

Thankfully, Templeton cleared

out a path for her once she'd started up her car, waving his arms in irritation and signaling for the squad cars and ambulances to get the hell out of her way.

Dana didn't make eye contact with the scores of police officers processing the scene as she left. Nevertheless, she could feel their curious stares burning into both sides of

her face as she maneuvered the Protégé out of the parking lot.

Hell, she could practically *hear* the thoughts swirling around inside their brains:

There goes that crazy Dana Whitestone chick again. How is it that she's always involved in this kind of weird shit, anyway?

Dana shook herself and tried to reason herself out of her paranoia but it

didn't work. She was *convinced* that everybody knew what had happened to her tonight. Still, she was much too numb to think straight at the moment. Much too traumatized to process the horrific reality of what she'd just gone through. And the fact that Templeton had barely even questioned her story only made her feel that much worse. Then again, lying was something she'd *needed*

to do.

Because – much like the woman in the black dress had told her – Dana wanted the other woman for *herself*.

CHAPTER 39

Two days after I'd provided Special Agent Dana Whitestone of the Federal Bureau of Investigation with her very rude and extremely long-*overdue* wake-up call in order to snap the dumb bitch back to the reality of the lowly station she *actually* occupied in life, I checked into my room at the Ritz-Carlton in New York City and laid out my clothes for the night on the king-sized

Tempurpedic bed featuring six matching pillows.

First there was my red dress – Armani, of course – a perfect replica of the one my mother had worn on the day she'd dragged me inside the butcher's shop walk-in freezer way back in 1981. At my mother's insistence, I *only* wore name brands. She'd taught me very early on that to wear anything else was

beneath the Preston name. *Trashy*. And if there were one thing in this world I was not, it was *trashy*.

To go along with my pretty red dress, I've selected six-inch-high black heels, silver Tiffany jewelry and a matching silver Tiffany clip for my hair. With any luck at all, my genuine mink coat will keep me warm tonight against the frigid winter air that has put the Big Apple into such a deep freeze that it

doesn't seem likely to thaw out until somewhere around mid-April.

My confidence is strong, my color is good and my spirits are high.

I'm *ready* for this.

I look around my well-appointed room and sigh. The hotel has cost me a pretty penny, indeed – almost six hundred bucks a night. But I consider it money well spent. After all, money

marks the main theme of my entire trip to America's largest and most famous city. And while I'm here in New York City, I figure I might as well see how the other half lives for a little while. Enjoy the *good* life for a change.

Moving to the window of my twentieth-floor room, I open up the curtains and stare out at the breathtaking New York City skyline, admiring the view. Taking in a deep breath through

my nostrils, I let out the air again in a satisfied rush over my teeth. This is it. I'm here. I'd made it. And if I can make it here, I can make it *anywhere*, right? Isn't that what the song says?

I lift my wrist and check my Mickey Mouse watch, steeling myself for what will come next. The impending heart of the storm isn't scheduled to arrive until later on in the night, but New

York City has already been blanketed in a light dusting of white – a powdered-sugar topping for the Big Apple. And the weather reports are calling for the worst blizzard since – well – since only the previous February, really. Still, that doesn't mean that *this* particular blizzard won't be just as historic as the last, which in actuality had been two storms rolled into one, with the second one coming hot on the heels of the first.

The First North American Blizzard of 2010 had devastated the United States from California all the way to the Mid-Atlantic region, as well as having caused extensive flooding and landslides in Mexico. In New York, it had been followed quickly by the Second North American Blizzard of 2010, a cataclysmic weather anomaly that had rivaled the Knickerbocker

Storm of 1922 and the Great Blizzard of 1888 in both ferocity and duration, ultimately leading to the deaths of *dozens* of people.

I smile in delicious anticipation, knowing that *tonight's* blizzard will lead to the death of at least *one* person I know of.

An extremely *famous* person.

The second name on my special little list.

Humming softly beneath my breath, I continue to survey the wintry landscape, trying my best to get a feel for the lay of the land. Once again – just as had been the case with Dinah Leach down in Atlanta – Mother Nature will act as my accomplice tonight. Once again, she's a natural fit for the job. And once again, law-enforcement officials and emergency responders will be

stretched far too thin to stop me. My mother has planned this shit out *perfectly*.

And once again – as everyone will soon find out – I'll show the world *exactly* who's in charge here.

Penelope Hargrave had been born into a world of wealth, and tonight she'd *die* in a world of wealth.

I narrow my eyes in disgust as I

watch the socialite daughter of the most famous real-estate developer in all of New York City exit her long black limousine across the street outside one of the city's hippest nightclubs. Throngs of her fans rush immediately forward and shout out her name as two heavily muscled bouncers escort her past the velvet ropes lining both sides of the sidewalk, shouldering back the crowd

and paparazzi as they go.

Huddled in the doorway of a shuttered convenience store forty-five yards away, I train my powerful Nikon binoculars on Penelope Hargrave's beautiful face and bring the image into sharp focus. A sharp stab of irritation slices through my chest as she disappears into The Plaza.

What the hell's wrong with this country? I wonder. Doesn't anyone

have anything *better* to obsess over than people who were famous for no reason at all? And with the economy stuck in the toilet the way it had been for these past five years now, doesn't it annoy people to know that this whore actually gets *paid* to get her groove on, actually receives money for *partying*?

Apparently not.

Chalk another one up for never

being able to underestimate the tastes of the American public.

Still, the club's owners clearly know that Penelope Hargrave's mere presence boosts the profile of their establishment, so they're willing to part with some serious coin in order to get her to show up. Fifty grand for each appearance, according to a report I'd read recently on TMZ.com. Hell, Penelope Hargrave didn't even have to

dance if she didn't want to. All she needed to do was sit there in the club with that stupid, doe-eyed expression on her face and drink the thousand-bottles sent to her table *gratis* all night long. Maybe giggle every once in a while with her vacuous hangers-on while she basked in the warm light of a fame she hadn't done a goddamn thing to *deserve*.

I shake my head some more and

fight back a wave of anger in my chest, remembering the extremely troubling scene to which I'd been subjected just a few hours earlier. Despite my very best efforts, despite how *beautiful* I was, I hadn't been able to gain access to the exclusive club myself, had instead been turned away cold.

The embarrassing brush-off had wounded my pride, of course – had wounded it *a lot*, as a matter of fact –

but I'd managed to resist the urge to pull out my trusty knife and slit the doorman's stupid throat right then and there on the snow-covered sidewalk. My mother would have been *very* upset with me if I'd deviated from the plan at this late stage of the game, and it was *never* a good idea to upset my mother.

Experience had taught me that much.

Plan B wasn't half bad, either, though. Not too shabby for a backup plan of attack, if I did say so myself. And that was *exactly* what I had prepared for Penelope Hargrave tonight, wasn't it?

Goddamn right, it was.

A plan of *attack*.

After having been denied regular

entrance to the club, I'd been forced to wait outside most of the night to make my move. At around midnight or so, however, my opportunity finally presented itself just as the weather conditions *really* started getting bad, snow-blind conditions taking the city hard by the throat and strangling hard.

Just as I'd known they would all along.

My big moment finally comes

when Penelope Hargrave's limo driver ducks out of his vehicle half a block away from the fancy nightclub in order to suck down a quick cigarette in the frigid winter air. Carefully navigating my way across the frozen sidewalk in my six-inch heels, I wrap my beautiful mink coat even tighter around my shivering body and approach the man with a wide smile etched onto my

beautiful face.

“Hey there!” I say cheerfully to the driver. “How’s it goin’ tonight?”

The limo driver looks up from his cigarette and cocks his head slightly to one side in an effort to block out the gale-force winds that are whipping through the city. He lifts his free hand and cups his left ear. “What’s that?”

I widen my smile a little more and raise my voice several decibels so

as to be heard clearly above Mother Nature's deafening cacophony. "I *said*, how's it goin'? Fuckin' freezin' out here tonight, ain't it?"

The driver nods and looks me over from head to toe again, taking in the full measure of my splendid, feminine charms. "Yep, sure is. Colder than a witch's tit."

I ignore the crass remark and let

my mink fall open to show off my inviting cleavage. Every bit as inviting as Dinah Leach's had been, if I do say so myself. Every bit as inviting as my mother's, too.

“Interested in warming up *this* witch's tit?” I ask.

The driver flicks away his cigarette and finally smiles back at me.

“I thought you'd never ask, honey.”

In the back seat of the limousine ten minutes later, I take the horny driver into my mouth and begin to suck gently. Hard enough to provide the necessary friction, but not hard enough to actually hurt him. That was the secret to giving a great blowjob, wasn't it?

Moaning softly, the driver leans his head back against the leather seat and closes his eyes in satisfaction, enjoying

the intense sensations I'm providing with my swirling tongue. A moment later – just as he's *really* starting to get into it – I inhale deeply through my nostrils and ready myself for what will come next.

In the very next instant, I chomp down hard on his penis with my sharp white teeth, straining my jaw muscles with the effort.

A bloodcurdling scream immediately explodes from the limo

driver's throat. The sound is absolutely *deafening* inside the vehicle, leaving my ears ringing. Still, it's not quite loud enough for any passers-by to hear it above the howling winter winds outside.

Turning my head to the side, I spit out the sinful piece of flesh in my mouth onto the floorboards of the back seat. Wiping away blood from my mouth with the back of my left hand, I

smile mischievously. “Well, now, whaddya know?” I say. “I guess you’re just like me now.”

All of the blood has drained from the limo driver’s face now, turning his cheeks a ghostly white. His trembling hands cup his destroyed crotch as he tries desperately to staunch the sickening flow of blood. His bloodshot eyes bulge wildly from their sockets, watering profusely from the agonizing

pain.

I widen my smile a little more and slide out the preloaded hypodermic needle from the waistband of my nylons, clucking my tongue against the roof of my mouth as I do so.

“Oh, come on,” I say. “Quit being such a big baby, would ya? Look at it this way: now you and I can share clothes. If nothing else, it’ll save us a

lot of money.”

The man doesn't even *try* answering me. He is much too preoccupied with attending to his mutilated crotch at the moment. Slipping the syringe deep into his throbbing jugular vein, I depress the plunger with my thumb.

“Just go to sleep now, sweetheart,” I whisper, echoing my suggestion to Dinah Leach down in

Atlanta while brushing the back of my hand against his stubbled cheek. “It’ll be so much easier for you this way.”

Ten seconds later, his eyelids droop and he slumps over in his seat.

I feel around for the keys in the limo driver’s right pocket. Finally finding them, I then climb up into the front seat and crank the engine into life. A moment later, I wheel the limo into a

nearby alleyway and pop the trunk before moving his motionless body there. If anybody happens to be watching us right now, they'll most likely think that I'm a thoughtful friend taking care of a drunken pal.

I laugh. I just can't help myself. Yep. A real angel of mercy – that was me, all right.

Just like my mother.

At precisely one a.m., I pull the limousine up to the nightclub's main entrance, having found the pickup time in the travel log tucked away inside the limousine's glove compartment.

Thank God for the little things, right?

Ten long minutes pass before a path finally clears in the crowd that's still huddled around the entrance

outside. A moment later, Penelope Hargrave sashays her way through the mass of humanity on both sides of the velvet ropes, still looking like the fifty million bucks she's worth despite the inclement weather. She's clearly accustomed to the popping flashbulbs of the paparazzi, and the dumb whore smiles the same stupid smile she always smiles, luxuriating in the thoroughly undeserved adoration that's being

showered upon her by her adoring public.

A large Puerto Rican man dressed in a black tuxedo opens the back door of the limousine for her and holds it for the socialite as she steps inside. Looking up into the rearview mirror, I watch Penelope Hargrave immediately pour herself a drink from the fresh bottle of Black Label that's sitting in an ice

bucket in the climate-controlled center console.

I stare up into the mirror at the socialite's lovely reflection, study her closely. Penelope Hargrave's platinum blonde hair has obviously been dyed recently, probably at one of the finest salons in the entire city. The heavy scent of her perfume permeates the entirety of the vehicle – perfume that has no doubt cost her at least five hundred dollars an

ounce. The glittering diamond jewelry sparkling at her wrists and throat look to be equal to the gross domestic product of most third-world countries.

All in all, an *embarrassment* of riches.

“All alone tonight, miss?” I ask.

Penelope Hargrave looks up in irritation and locks stares with me in the mirror. Wrinkling up her face in disgust,

she then leans forward and activates the tinted window between us. “*Ugh*. Don’t even *talk* to me, OK? Just drive me home. Isn’t that what you get paid to do?”

I nod as the window slides up with a soft electric whine. “Yes, ma’am,” I say. “As a matter of fact, that’s *exactly* what I get paid to do.”

Forty minutes later, Penelope

Hargrave's is tied securely to the back seat of the limousine – spread-eagle, of course. Each one of her bloodcurdling screams pierces my eardrums and threatens to make my brain explode, but I know *exactly* how to shut her up.

After all, there's only one language she *understands*.

Removing a huge wad of one-dollar bills from the pocket of my soft

mink coat, I stuff them one by one down the socialite's throat with a long, thin piece of metal I've brought along for the occasion.

Penelope Hargrave's beautiful face turns purple after a measly ten greenbacks. Five more George Washingtons stops her breathing altogether.

I purse my painted lips in disappointment, cursing my rotten luck.

I'd brought along *a hundred* dollar bills with me tonight, had wanted to *enjoy* this a bit more. And I had absolutely *zero* idea of how I'll spend all the leftover loot. A new purse, maybe. Perhaps a manicure with Annabeth Preston. That might be nice. Hell, we could make a mother-daughter day out of it.

Half an hour later, I dump Penelope Hargrave's dead body into the

alleyway two hundred yards away from her multi-million-dollar brownstone in the heart of lower Manhattan. Just to make an artistic statement, I position her corpse right next to a long row of dented silver trashcans. Why not? Unlike me, that's *exactly* what Penelope Hargrave represents in this world, isn't it? *Trash?*

Goddamn right, it is. She'd been trash on the day she'd been born – given nearly every imaginable advantage in

life – and she remained trash to the
fateful day that she'd died in the
backseat of a beautiful stretch limousine
during one of the worst blizzards in the
history of New York City.

Trash. Nothing more and
nothing less.

Just like the next name on my
very special little list.

Sliding back behind the

limousine's steering wheel, I crank the engine into life and put the long, sleek vehicle into gear before driving away into the storm-ravaged night.

Time for me to get back to work.

And after I've dumped the limo into the icy waters of the Hudson River in order to properly dispose of the driver's unconscious body in the trunk, I'll turn my attention to the pop singer out in Arkansas, Amber Knightly.

And that was when things *really*
ought to start getting interesting for me.

PART VII

PERMANENT VACATION

“Fort Myers Beach forms the tourist heart of Lee County, Florida. Studies have shown that virtually every tourist who visits Lee County crosses the Matanzas Pass Bridge at least once during their stay on their way to a fun-filled day on the sun-soaked shore of Estero Island.” —

waterfrontfortmyers.com.

CHAPTER 40

Five months after her brutal rape in the parking lot of the Cuyahoga County Coroner's Office in Cleveland, Ohio, Dana Whitestone swiveled back and forth on her stool at the Smokin' Oyster Brewery on Fort Myers Beach down in sunny Southwest Florida and ordered up her fourth beer of the morning.

The bartender twisted off the cap

from an ice-cold Bud Light and slid it over to her with a smile. He needed to shout to be heard clearly above the group of drunken tourists who were noisily punctuating the sounds of Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline" on the jukebox over in the corner with the requisite "*bah-bah-bum!*"

Wiping up a puddle of spilled beer on the section of bar directly in

front of her, the bartender yelled,
“How’s your vacation going?”

Dana looked up at the man and gave him the once-over. Different guy than the one who’d served her the first three longnecks of the morning. About forty-five years old. Longish salt-and-pepper hair. Solid build. A throwback hippie quality about him.

“How’d you know I was on vacation?” she shouted back.

The bartender waited for a pause in the music before winking. “Tan lines,” he said, then immediately moved farther down the crowded bar to attend to the group of rowdy bikers that was hollering for more shots. Having picked their poison for the day, this particularly motley crew had settled in to do mortal combat with Jack Daniel’s – no beer chasers required.

Dana leaned back her head and took a long swallow of her fresh beer as the bartender moved away, savoring the pleasant way the icy alcohol cut into the back of her throat and enjoying the warm breeze that was blowing gently through the tiki bar with no walls and a thatched roof, fluttering her short blonde hair softly around her head and keeping her from sweating like a pig.

Even in March, the mercury had already reached eighty-five degrees in Southwest Florida, and thank God for that. If nothing else, it was certainly a far cry from Cleveland, where the wintry weather hadn't loosened its icy grip on the city one little bit since Dana had left, even though spring had supposedly sprung already. Then again, Cleveland had always been a place where nice

weather had never showed up until somewhere around mid-June. A gloomy place where the skies hanging over Lake Erie remained gray and cloudy and pregnant with either rain or snow far longer than most other parts of the country.

A place where Dana had lost her will to fight the good fight and had instead simply given up.

With her checkered past with the

bottle, Dana knew there was no way in hell that she should've drinking anything stronger than ice-water with a lemon twist right now, but they didn't call alcoholism a disease for the simple fun of it. The siren song of the booze had eventually won her over again after all of her useless fighting, dragging her down into the same sorry place she knew all too well. The same sorry place

she'd found herself following the deaths of Crawford Bell and Eric Carlton. The same sorry place she'd promised herself she'd *never* visit again.

Dana closed her eyes and sighed. Then she opened them up again and shrugged. Fuck it. Lifting her beer bottle, she took another healthy drink of her beer and swished it around in her mouth. With everything she'd gone through in her life she *deserved* a drink

whenever she damn well pleased. There was nothing for her to feel guilty about here. Nothing for her to feel remorse over. Those kinds of bullshit feelings were far better left to the circle-jerk AA meetings that she had absolutely *zero* intention of ever attending again.

Swiveling her barstool in a complete circle, she idly peeled the label from her sweating beer bottle as

the jukebox kicked over to Jimmy Buffet's "Margaritaville", drawing yet *another* orgasmic cheer from the tables full of tourists.

Dana swayed her butt in her seat and tapped her foot in perfect time to the infectious island music, feeling at home here. Fort Myers Beach was famous for having one of the safest beaches in the entire world, and if there was one thing she needed to feel right now, it was

safe. Down here in sunny Florida, the sugary-soft white sand reflected the sun's heat so that you didn't burn your feet on the way down to the warm water, the bathwater surf had absolutely no riptide to speak of, and the depth only dropped off a foot or two for every twenty yards you waded out.

Down here in sunny Florida, she didn't need to worry about insane

women wearing beautiful black dresses who called her out by name in autopsy videos before facilitating her horrific rape.

The locals on Fort Myers Beach referred to their hometown as “paradise”, and Dana could understand why. No hyperbole required. As long as you could put up with the hurricanes that routinely ripped through the place like a bull in a china shop (and also with

the flock of elderly snowbirds that flew down here every winter before completely taking the place over) it *was* paradise. A section of the country where you could just get lost in the crowd and maybe – just *maybe* – find yourself again in the process.

Dana lifted her stare to the ceiling and studied the fairly new construction. Though she'd missed the

devastating effects of Hurricane Allison by almost half a year, you wouldn't have known it simply by looking around the place. Winds of up to ninety-five miles an hour and a storm-surge five feet above normal had done no real damage to the charming pink and blue cottages dotting the sandy shore, and the cleanup afterward had been little more than an afterthought, much like plowing the snow off Interstate 90 back home in Cleveland

following yet *another* lake-effect blizzard was an afterthought to the residents there. And why not? After all, there were some things in this life you simply needed to do. You didn't bitch about them. You didn't whine about them. You didn't complain about them. You just *did* them. And if you didn't, you found yourself snowed in until April or enjoying warm sea breezes through

several windows in your home that the architect had never intended to exist.

Dana took another long swallow of her beer and swiveled in her bar stool a little more, wishing like hell that the alcohol would hurry the hell up already and drown her painful memories like the crying infants in a bathtub she knew them to be.

Shortly after her brutal rape in the parking lot of the coroner's office

back home in Cleveland, she'd received the devastating news that little Bradley had been adopted out to another family.

The well-dressed attorney and his June Cleaver wife who'd taken him in *seemed* like nice enough people to her.

Real stand-up folks, as a matter of fact.

Honest-to-God pillars of the community. Bradley's new father served as a lecturer at the Assemblies of

God Baptist church in Rocky River, and the little boy's new mother ran the PTA. Their four-bedroom house overlooked a tranquil lake stocked with steelhead trout and had looked positively *idyllic* to Dana every time she'd driven past.

Which had been a *lot*.

Lost in her self-pitying thoughts, she was abruptly jerked out of her reverie by the sickening sound of glass crunching against bone twenty feet

away.

Whipping her head around hard to the right, Dana saw bright red blood gushing down the face of a stunned-looking biker in his early fifties, courtesy of his fellow biker and bar mate. The wounded party put a hand to his head and came away with a palm-full of blood, his bloodshot eyes widening briefly in surprise. Then a slow, ugly

smile crossed his weathered face. Obviously, this didn't mark his first rodeo. Not by a long shot.

Reaching around to the back pocket of his filthy blue jeans, the man produced a switchblade knife and flipped it open before taking a menacing step toward his adversary.

Even as Dana's newfound bartender friend was frantically scrambling over the bar to get between

the drunken combatants – a short billy club in his right hand to underscore the point that he didn't especially care for fighting in his establishment – she fought every instinct in her body that was screaming out for her to intercede. Instead, she simply slipped a wrinkled twenty-dollar bill beneath her half-empty beer bottle to make sure it didn't blow away in the breeze and left the bar

before losing herself in the crowd of suntanned tourists that was strolling through Times Square, the quaint little beach town's unsubtle homage to New York City.

No reason for Dana to get involved here. No reason for her to risk her own neck. She wasn't law-enforcement anymore. She wasn't an FBI agent anymore. Hell, she didn't know *what* the hell she was anymore.

Except for broken, of course.

CHAPTER 41

Banks of the White River – Tichnor, Arkansas – 1

a.m.

“Get some more sandbags over here on the northwest side! It’s starting to give!”

Covered in full plastic flood-gear from head to toe, I nod to the man holding a bullhorn and scramble to take my new place in the relay line. Torrential rains fall down from the

heavens in *buckets*, making it seem as though God Himself has emerged from a long, leisurely bath before pulling the plug on His celestial bathtub without giving so much as second thought to the insignificant human insects darting around below.

Rivers of storm-propelled water stream into my eyes and make it difficult for me to see clearly as bright white

lightning zips across the pitch-black sky and fights for dominance with the pounding thunder that's shaking our universe. The sticky brown mud beneath my feet threatens to suck off my work boots with each slow, plodding step I take.

Once I'm in my new place in line, I twist at my aching hips and take the forty-pound sandbag from a fellow volunteer who's stationed on my left

before twisting at my hips again to hand it off to the portly man on my right.

Twist, hand off, repeat. On and on this goes for what seems an eternity, until my back has been turned into a pretzel and the muscles in my arms sing a high-pitched song of exquisite pain. But what *else* could we do? *Stop? Quit?* Isn't an option with the Montgomery Point Lock & Dam this close to bursting.

The bullhorn cuts through the cacophony of the pounding rain once more. “That’s it, ladies and gentlemen! Keep up the good work and keep those sandbags coming! Don’t give up now! We’ve worked way too damn long and way too damn hard to just stop now! We’ve almost got it shored up! Just a couple hundred more sandbags to go!”

I run my stare over the washed-

out landscape in front of me while I continue to work away with every last ounce of energy left in my exhausted body, which isn't much by this point. In a nearby field that's serving as a makeshift parking lot, the flashing lights of dozens of police cars, fire trucks and ambulances light up the night sky like a giant pinball arcade. It seems to me as though every last resident of Tichnor, Arkansas, has showed up to lend a

helping hand.

Every last resident, that is, save for one.

I shake my head in disgust as yet *another* heavy sandbag slams into my arms. Twisting at my hips, I hand it off to the man on my right before immediately twisting at my hips again to receive the next load. The most prolific storm in Arkansas' history – a storm of

apocalyptic proportions – doesn't appear likely to abate anytime soon and if nothing else, Amber Knightly should have been out here helping us in our attempt to avert certain disaster. If she doesn't want to participate in the grunt work, maybe she could do something else. Pour some coffee for the exhausted workers. Pass out dry clothing. Offer a little bit of encouragement. Something. *Anything.*

She should be out here *suffering* with us.

I take another sandbag in my bruised and battered arms and hand it off. No doubt the famous pop singer who'd put the tiny town of Tichnor on the map for all of the wrong reasons thinks she's *above* this sort of menial work. But while the rest of us are out here trying desperately to save her

backwater-ass town, the head-shaving, lesbian-kissing, out-of-wedlock-baby-having slut who'd made headlines every bit as much for her train wreck of a personal life as she had for her singing talent (which wasn't much, to my ears) – was nowhere to be seen. What did *she* care? *She* was rich. *She* wasn't one of hapless commoners who'd lose everything she owned should the dam happen to break.

She was on high ground. *She*
was untouchable.

Or so she probably thought.

A tap on my right shoulder pulls
me out of the wonderful fantasy where
I'm using my sharp knife to pluck out
Amber Knightly's vocal cords, strand by
bloody strand.

It's the man with the bullhorn.

“Go on home and get rested up

for a bit,” he shouts, squinting hard against the unceasing rain. “You’ve been out here longer than anybody else already. We’re going on four-hour shifts and you’ve already been here for six. That’s enough for now.”

I take another sandbag and hand it off. “Are you sure?” I yell back. “I can probably go another hour or two if you need me.”

The man with the bullhorn shakes

his head. “Go!” he orders. “We don’t need you collapsing on us out here. We need all the emergency responders we have to help with the sandbagging. And if they have to stop working to take care of you, that means they’re not available to me. Come back after you’ve warmed up a little and gotten some sleep.”

The man casts his stare up to the stormy heavens above. “I’m sure we’ll

still be out here.”

I nod and breathe out a grateful sigh of relief as I finally step out of the relay line. Behind me, the line immediately tightens up to compensate for my absence. It's a work of art, really. A well-oiled machine that does whatever it takes to get the job done. “OK,” I say as my mind continues to perform the endless *twist, handoff, twist* routine even though my aching muscles

have now stopped the maddening repetition, “but only if you’re absolutely *positive* you don’t need me.”

The man points to the makeshift parking lot a hundred yards away. What looks to be about four hundred muddy cars and pickup trucks join the emergency vehicles dotting the drenched landscape. “Go,” Mr. Bullhorn says again. “Get the hell out of here before I

change my mind and put you back to work.”

I nod again and unstick my boots from the mud that has formed around my feet while we’ve been talking, begin trudging through the primordial muck toward my rental car in the makeshift parking lot. I pause and take one final look behind me at all of the dedicated workers in the relay line. Seems like every last resident in Tichnor, Arkansas,

has shown up here tonight to lend a helping hand.

Every last resident, that is, save for one.

CHAPTER 42

Half an hour later, I slip undetected into Amber Knightly's house on Sweetbriar Lane about three miles away from the dam; helped along in no small part by the fact that the clinically lazy slut's home-alarm system has been disabled by the sweeping power outage brought about by the apocalyptic storm still raging on in the heavens outside.

Making my way quietly upstairs

to her bedroom even though stealth isn't something I need to worry about very seriously at this point, I pause on the stairs and ready myself for the next act in my mother's wonderfully written script. Another murder. Another step closer to finally fulfilling her deliciously diabolical plan for me.

Thankfully, the god-awful rainstorm drowns out every other

possible sound in the universe as I go, masking each muddy step I take up the thickly carpeted staircase. Brilliant flashes of intermittent lightning illuminate my way. Once again, just as had been the case back in Dinah Leach's Buckhead mansion and in Penelope Hargrave's fancy black limousine in New York City, all of nature is my friend tonight.

The only friend I've got in the

entire *world*, to be sure, but also the only friend I *need*.

With everybody in town – including law-enforcement – doing their damndest to keep the overworked dam from bursting just a few short miles away, Amber Knightly is all alone tonight. Just as I'd known she'd be from the very start.

I stop just outside the doorway of

her bedroom and simply watch her for a little while. The pop singer is seated in front of an elaborate vanity mirror with her eyes closed, dreamily running a silver-handled brush through her long blonde hair. A gas-powered lantern in the corner of the room casts an eerie yellow glow over both her pretty face and the rest of the sumptuous space around her.

Smiling, I come up behind her

and rest my hands lightly on her shoulders.

Her pretty blue eyes fly open in shock as she's abruptly jerked out of whatever reverie she'd been lost in and my reflection stares back at both of us from her spotless mirror. Try as she might, though, she can't produce even *one* horrified scream before I jab the sleep-drug deep into her neck and

depress the plunger.

I stretch my own neck as her body slips off the chair and down onto the floor.

Then I smile again.

Time for me to get back to work. And I have all the time in the world here, don't I? Of course I do. No need to worry about anyone interrupting us as we make our beautiful music together.

Removing from my waistband

the same knife that I'd used to slice off Dinah Leach's breasts and labia in her glamorous Atlanta home, I proceed to turn my wonderful fantasy back at the dam into a mind-bending reality. One by one, I begin to pluck at the selfish pop singer's million-dollar vocal cords like so many insignificant strings on an out-of-tune harp.

Strand by bloody strand.

CHAPTER 43

Thirty-six short hours after removing Amber Knightly from the ranks of the living and sparing the world from any more of her nerve-grating voice, I finally have my long-awaited showdown with my mother back home in Chicago.

I take a deep breath. This is it. The day I've been waiting for all these years, ever since the day that she'd brutally murdered my little brother in

cold blood right in front of my shocked and disbelieving eyes. The day I've been waiting for ever since the sadistic bitch had forced me to breathe in my own waste and to taste my own sin.

A day I'd *dreamed* about.

A day I'd never *truly* thought would ever arrive.

My mother is seated at the kitchen table in our shared home on 969

Turning Oaks Drive and idly flipping through the glossy pages of a gossip magazine. She doesn't even bother glancing up from the magazine's pages to acknowledge my presence when I enter the room behind her.

“How'd it go out in Arkansas?” she asks as she wets a manicured fingertip with her small pink tongue and flips another page.

My heart pounds in my chest.

My hands tremble. My armpits flood with sweat.

She finally turns around when I don't immediately answer her. Her emerald eyes lock onto mine and freeze me like an ice-sculpture in her paralyzing cobra stare. "I asked you a question, son," she says harshly. "*I said*, how'd it go out in Arkansas?"

I try to speak but no words will

come out. My tongue is too swollen right now; my vocal cords too tight, the crashing in my brain too loud.

My mother studies the sheen of fear that's coating my eyes and rises to her feet. The belt on her white satin robe falls open at the waist to reveal her beautiful body. A silver Tiffany heart necklace sits cushioned between her ample breasts. A lacy black bra supports perfect white globes. A small

brown mole winks out at me from the left side of her chest.

She takes a languid step in my direction. “You want this, don’t you, son?” she coos, pursing her painted lips and running her delicate fingers through her long, ink-black hair. The strands of her hair cascade over her shoulders in a glorious display of seduction. “You want to take your mother to bed and

show her what a big, strong man you are, don't you?"

She slides a finger teasingly along the elastic waistband of her white satin panties. "Are you ready for me, Nicholas?" she asks. "Finally ready to do something with all of those strange feelings you've got swirling around inside you?"

When I again fail to answer her, my mother laughs. "I know that you and

your little brother like me,” she says, taking another step forward. “Don’t pretend you don’t. I’ve seen the way you two boys have been looking at me lately. Disgusting, foul little creatures. You *do* know that little boys aren’t supposed to look at their mothers that way, don’t you? It’s *unholy*.”

I take a step back and hold up my hands in front of my body in a futile

effort to keep her away. I should have known better than to come here tonight. There is no escaping the power she holds over me. Never has been and never will be.

She *owns* me.

I struggle to work the muscles around my mouth. When my voice finally emerges from my badly constricted throat, it shakes uncontrollably, reducing me to sounding

like the same confused, pre-pubescent boy who didn't understand the feelings he'd felt.

“No,” I say, taking another step backward and feeling the wall next to the refrigerator press into the small of my back. “This isn't right. You shouldn't be doing this to me. You shouldn't have done *a lot* of things you did to me.”

My mother cocks her head quizzically to one side and takes another step forward. “Like what, son?” she asks. “Tell me *exactly* what you’re talking about here.”

My eyes fill with tears, blurring my vision. “You shouldn’t have...”

Annabeth Preston takes another step forward and cups a hand to her right ear. She’s no more than three feet away

from me now. “Yes, son?” she says.

“Go on. I shouldn’t have done *what* to you?”

My heart breaks into a million tiny pieces inside my badly constricted chest. “You shouldn’t have... *molested* me,’ I breathe, my voice shattering in my throat like a fumbled dinner plate. “I was just a little boy. You were supposed to *protect* me.”

Throwing back her head on her

shoulders, Annabeth Preston barks out a short, ugly laugh. Her bright green eyes flash like heated emeralds in their sockets. “*Molest* you?” she asks incredulously, shaking her head in disbelief with the words. “Are you fucking *kidding* me right now? I never laid a *finger* on you, boy. You were a freak, but I still took care of you. I *fed* you. I *bathed* you.”

She shakes her head again and exhales a long, disgusted breath through her mouth, producing a hard *pfft* sound with her beautiful lips. “*Molested* you. Give me a fucking break. You can just go to hell, for all I care, you ungrateful little sissy.”

The pure *venom* in her voice finally causes the sturdy wall that I’ve built up inside of me to break. Taking

one quick step forward, I punch her square in the mouth with all of my might, releasing all the pent-up ferocity I've kept stored behind that wall ever since I'd been eight years old.

She crashes down hard to floor in front of me. “*I am* going to hell, Mother,” I snarl, leaning down and wrapping a thick handful of her silken black hair in my right fist before yanking her up hard to her feet. “And I’m taking

you with me.”

Dragging my mother by her hair down the long hallway, I mock the way she’s always spoken to me. “You *do* know what this means, don’t you, you filthy little creature?” I ask, kicking open the front door to the house and pulling her down the sidewalk. I open the back door to our massive Lincoln Continental and toss her inside. “It means a trip to

the butcher's shop, you sadistic bitch," I go on. "And if you think that what I did to those other women was bad, Mommie Dearest, believe me, you ain't seen *nothin'* yet."

Leaning my body into the car, I hold my mother's panicked stare. For the first time in my life, the fear and uncertainty and confusion that has always ruled my movements is gone. In its place, a confidence like none I've

ever known before flows through my veins and gives me the strength for what I know I'll need to do next.

Annabeth Preston trembles like a frightened child in the backseat of the car – just like *I* used to tremble. A sickening gush of blood rushes from her broken nose, streaming down her gorgeous face and staining her satin night robe a beautiful crimson.

“I’m gonna *hurt* you, Annabeth,”

I tell her, wanting her to understand just how deadly *serious* I am about this. “As a matter of fact, I’m gonna hurt you *real* bad.”

Slamming shut the back door, I go around to the driver’s side and slide behind the steering wheel of the Continental before cranking the ancient engine into life with a quick twist of my

right wrist. Turning in my seat, I then spit directly into my mother's gorgeous face.

“I’m gonna hurt you *real* bad, bitch,” I repeat. “That much I *promise* you.

“Just like you hurt me and Timmy.”

CHAPTER 44

Still half-drunk from this morning's ill-advised four-pack at the Smokin' Oyster Brewery, Dana jogged past the long line of palm trees that were swaying in the breeze along Spellman Avenue and did her best to let the rhythmic pounding of her feet against pavement do its job.

Some people did their best thinking while out for a run, but it had

always been the opposite case for Dana. More than anything else, running provided an *escape* for her. An all-too-brief block of her day where she could erase the jumbled chalkboard of her mind and just *be*.

And the sad fact of the matter was that the jumbled chalkboard of Dana's mind was just too much for her to bear these days. Because not only had

she literally run away from an open case back home in Cleveland, just ten minutes earlier she'd received the sickening news that an Internet video starring little Bradley had gone viral on YouTube. In the video – a disgusting horror show that had already received more than two million hits on the World Wide Web – the seemingly upstanding lawyer who'd adopted the little boy was pictured whipping Bradley so violently across

his bare backside with a thick leather strap that huge red welts had piled up one on top of the other before finally splitting open and leaking torrents of bright red blood.

Upon first seeing this brain-jarring spectacle, Dana had immediately vomited up all four beers she'd drunk that morning onto the hardwood floor of her rented vacation residence on Indian

Bayou Avenue in Fort Myers Beach.

Dana gritted her teeth and fought back the murderous swell of anger that rose up in her chest as she continued to run. The irony of her actions wasn't lost on her. After all, why the hell should she stop running *now*? She'd already run away from her career – the job that had kept her going for so many years. She'd already run away from her responsibilities – including Oreo, who

she'd returned to the capable hands of Maggie Carter with the vague promise of returning to pick him up again one day. And she'd run from the woman dressed in black, practically *screaming* in terror.

Even more pathetically, Dana had run away from poor little Bradley, leaving him all alone in the world to fend for himself. And just look how *that*

had turned out.

Bitter tears streamed down her face and blurred her vision. She *hated* herself right now. *Despised* herself. Because she'd run away from everything and everybody in her life who'd ever meant anything to her, had let everyone down. And not for the first time, either. People she could never look in the eye again. Bill Krugman. Gary Templeton. Bradley. *Herself*.

More than anything else, she needed *redemption*.

But just *how*, exactly, could she get it?

As God as her witness, she just didn't know.

Dana's heart ached in her chest for poor little Bradley as her legs pushed back the warm pavement in steady five-foot increments. The boy

with the silken blonde hair and enormous blue eyes so similar to her own. That sweet, precious little baby who'd promised to marry her one day and who'd promised her that *after* they'd gotten married they could live in a castle and ride horses and pick flowers all day long and go swimming whenever they wanted to. He'd needed her to be there for him, to stand up for him, to *protect* him, but she'd let him

down. Could *he* ever forgive her?

Didn't seem likely.

From the look of things, now she'd *never* be a mother.

Still, Dana knew for a fact that before she could even *dream* of taking care of Bradley, or anyone else, she'd first need to learn how to take care of *herself* again. Anything less would be unfair to the little boy. He'd already

been through enough pain and heartbreak in his short life as it was.

Dana blinked back the bitter tears. With each passing day the thought of lifting her Glock to her temple and pulling the trigger seemed less and less ridiculous. The previous night, she'd actually given it a trial run with no bullets in the gun.

She'd been surprised at just how *easy* it had been to pull the trigger.

Dana put her head down and ran even *faster*, fast enough to dry the tears streaming down her face. She knew that she needed professional help, of course, but she didn't know how to go about asking for it. And, as broken as she was, she had very serious doubts that *anyone* could ever fix her.

The heavy smell of sea salt stung her nostrils as she turned the corner onto

Estero Boulevard and picked up her pace even more, the pounding surf across the two-lane street echoing loudly in her ears and the wind whipping hard through her short blonde hair. Hitting a good stride, she willed her legs to move faster, and even faster still, until she broke out into a dead sprint. The muscles in her thighs screamed out in pure *agony* as she tried desperately to outrun all of the howling demons chasing

her.

No good. The demons wouldn't let up. Wouldn't leave her alone. The muscles in her thighs burned even hotter from the overload of lactic acid coursing through her system, but Dana ignored the pain and pushed on.

Five hundred yards later she finally came to a panting stop with her lungs on *fire*, leaning over and pressing

her palms hard into her trembling thighs for support, the runner's high flooding through her bloodstream and clouding her mind while a faint, high-pitched ringing sounded in her ears.

Finally catching most of her breath, she looked up to see that she'd made it to just outside the sprawling, gated compound of Ascension Catholic Church now. Twenty feet away, an elderly landscaper was tending to a

large stand of bushes near the ornate, marble archway. The man smiled at her when he noticed her watching him and leaned his wooden-handled rake against an intricate hedge.

He mopped at his heavily sweating brow with one thin forearm.

“Mass every morning at eight a.m. if you’re interested, young lady,” he said.

“The pastor’s an awful bore – a bit long-

winded in his sermons and something of a doddering old drunk – but some people say we have the best choir in all of Lee County. Even better than the Baptists, if you can believe that.”

Dana forced the semblance of a smile onto her lips, but even *she* could tell just how fake it must have looked. But she just couldn't pretend that she was happy anymore, not when her soul had become a black hole of misery that

had completely sucked away whatever energy she'd once possessed. Besides, despite having lived with three different Catholic foster families when she'd been a kid after the deaths of her parents, she hadn't stepped foot inside a place of worship for more than ten years now. Why *would* she when there was still a God in charge up there who thought that it was perfectly reasonable to let

innocent people die perfectly horrible deaths? Her parents. Crawford Bell. Eric Carlton. Jeremy Brown.

“Just looking,” Dana said, then immediately felt foolish, like she’d just been caught window-shopping by a salesman who knew she had absolutely no intention of buying. She wished with everything she had that she could somehow reach out and snatch the words out of the air before they reached his

ears, but the damage had already been done.

Thankfully, though, the old man just smiled at her and retrieved his rake from its resting place against the hedge, nodding thoughtfully and jerking his thumb over his right shoulder and toward the church. “Well, if it’s answers you’re looking for, you can always find them in there, ma’am. I

know that they're not always easy to find, but they're definitely in there, that much I promise you."

Dana let out a relieved breath; grateful that he wasn't holding her feet to the fire for her stupid words. Finally working the muscles around her mouth into a *real* smile, she said, "Thank you very much. I'll keep that in mind."

And with that, she shook the stiffness out of her legs and turned back

in the direction of her rented vacation house, already looking forward to the long afternoon of drinking that lay in front of her.

As she jogged away, Dana shivered despite the intense Florida heat that was pounding down hard on her from high overhead in the cloudless blue sky above, unable to shake the eerie sensation that the old man's watery blue

eyes were burning twin holes into the back of her skull as she went.

Finally turning the corner back onto Spellman Avenue and jogging out of his sight, Dana shivered again, even harder this time. No chance in hell of shaking off *that* weird encounter. Still, maybe a few Rum Runners over at the Lanai Kai would turn the trick.

Only one way to find out.

CHAPTER 45

Like the other beach houses along Indian Bayou Avenue on Fort Myers Beach down in Florida – nicknamed “the Sunshine State” for very good reason – Dana Whitestone’s vacation residence sits on stilts in order to protect it from flooding in the event of a hurricane.

The house itself is weather-beaten in the extreme, light blue in color

and has a charming, laid-back feel. A metal seahorse with an elaborate curly tail adorns the face of the structure next to the front door.

The mere *sight* of it makes my heart leap for joy inside my chest. This is everything I could have dreamed of and more. I've come down to the pristine white sands of Florida's Gulf Coast to lure the greatest hunter of my

kind back to her job and into the final chapter of my mother's decidedly deadly little game.

Pretty soon, the beautiful FBI agent will know *exactly* how my mother's story ends.

An electric shiver skitters down the length of my spine as I drink in the pleasing tableau before me. Everything from the beach-cruiser bicycle parked out front to the black bikini draped over

the wooden porch slats to dry in the hot morning sun.

Dana Whitestone's bikini, I think – an article of clothing that has caressed the most intimate parts of her luscious body. Just like *I'll* caress the most intimate parts of her luscious body when the time comes, though there certainly won't be anything sexual about it when I do.

For three mornings in a row now, I've watched her leave her beach house at exactly the same time, following her daily ritual of getting buzzed at one of the tiny beach town's many seaside bars before taking a jog along Estero Boulevard to sober up, waving to her temporary neighbors while she goes as though they're lifelong friends. Still, she'll find it pretty

difficult to wave to people when her hands have been chopped off. But not just her hands. The more delicate bits of her, too. The bits of her that not even her bikini can shield from my view forever.

As if on cue, the front door across the street opens up a moment later and she descends the wooden stairs with her short blonde hair pulled back into a tight ponytail. I glance down at my

Mickey Mouse watch and smile.
Eleven-thirty a.m. Right on time. Some
masterful investigator *she* is. Hell, she
doesn't even know enough to vary her
daily routine. A rookie mistake on her
part for which she'll soon pay dearly.

I lift my eyebrows on my
forehead and run my gaze admiringly
over her well-toned body. Her vacation
has been treating her well, that much

seems clear. Her milky white skin is glazed a warm, golden brown now, and her silky blonde hair looks longer and fairer than it ever has before. If I'd still possessed the required equipment, no doubt my khaki shorts would've strained against my zipper as she stretches her elegant calf muscles against the stairs and rolls her slender neck forward on her soft shoulders. And why not?

She looks absolutely *delicious*.

Thirty seconds later, the former FBI agent begins her run, waving to a young couple pushing a baby stroller in front of them before disappearing around a bend in the street.

The most popular kid in class; that's Dana Whitestone, all right. The prettiest girl in town. The queen of the fucking prom.

And *I* have a date with her.

I turn away from the window and put on my game-face. The end game is finally upon us now; the third act finally at hand. And, thanks entirely to my mother; this last act will be an absolute *doozy*.

Exiting my own rental house precisely three minutes after Dana Whitestone has exited hers, I glance up and down the street to make sure that no

one's watching me, shuffling across the street with my head down. Being a stranger in this neighborhood is of no real concern – almost *everyone* is a stranger around here – but I know there's no point in pushing my luck any more than I absolutely need to.

Slipping around the back of her vacation residence several moments later, I ascend the rickety wooden staircase that's shielded by high

landscaping on both sides and pull open the unlocked sliding glass door to the lanai before stepping inside.

I pause and take stock of my surroundings, unable to believe how far I've come since that terrible day with my mother in the butcher shop's walk-in freezer way back in 1981.

Against all odds, I'm inside the cunt's lair!

CHAPTER 46

Inside the former FBI agent's bedroom thirty seconds later, I fish out a pair of Dana Whitestone's lacy, boy-cut panties from the dirty laundry hamper and press the crotch to my nose. Unbelievably, the panties are still moist. Inhaling deeply, I swoon, the scent of my prey sweeter to me than that of a dozen fragrant roses.

The sweet smell of success.

I smile and tuck the panties into my pocket, knowing that if I can get this close to the vaunted man-hunter in the middle of the day I can get this close to her anytime I damn well please. And I *will* be this close to her again very soon.

Just as close as two human beings can possibly get.

The woman's vacation house

feels light and airy to me as I treat myself to an unguided tour. Hardwood floors covered with a light dusting of sand. Very little furniture. An homage to the minimalist movement, perhaps, or maybe just easier for the landlord to maintain the place that way. In any event, it seems like a nice place to just kick back and relax. A nice place where you can just let all of your earthly worries slip from your shoulders.

A *safe* place.

Or so Dana Whitestone had probably thought when she'd rented it.

How painfully wrong she'd been.

There are no large windows in the front of the structure, so no one on the street can see me as I snoop around.

I whistle REO Speedwagon's "Keep on Lovin' You" softly beneath my

breath as I enter the bedroom and open up Dana Whitestone's dresser drawer to touch her things, rubbing my fingertips lightly over her personal belongings and soaking in her energy. Ten feet away, her clothes stare out at me from an open closet door – superhero costumes waiting patiently for her to slip them back on and get back to work.

The queen-sized bed in the middle of the room is made with sharp

hospital corners, just as I'd known it would be. From what I've gathered over the past few months of watching her, Dana Whitestone is something of a neat freak. Likes everything else in her life to be just *so*. And from the look of things, she still retains her endearing idiosyncrasies, even though she's back on the sauce now. Still, being a drunk didn't mean that you also need to be a

slob, now did it? Of course not.

I shiver hard despite the heavy warmth in the room, allowing myself to enjoy all of the titillating sensations rushing through my veins. Anticipation. Joy. *Revenge*.

Opening the woman's purse, I count the bills inside her wallet. Eighty-one dollars. Then I take out her driver's license and examine her vital statistics with great interest.

Born September 20th, 1972, she is forty-one years old now, a Virgo in the prime of her life. And good thing, too. Because she's young and healthy enough to prove the worthy foil I'll need to drive me to the very top of my game, even if it's her remarkable *brain* that interests me the most.

On my way out of the house, I stop in each of the rooms and plant small

listening devices throughout. Some go behind furniture, others in potted plants. With the end game upon us now, it's absolutely vital that I keep track of her movements at all times. Just like my mother has always tracked *me*.

Finally exiting the quaint beach house five minutes later, I shuffle across the street with my head down again, completely confident in the knowledge that not even the best investigator in the

world could tell I'd been inside the former FBI agent's house. And good thing, too. Because Dana Whitestone *is* one of the best investigators in the world, according to the media, at least. Maybe even *the* best. That being said, she has her own special gifts, and I have mine.

To say the least, it should make for a *very* interesting match-up when the

time finally comes for the last act in our murderous play to commence.

Back in my own bedroom two minutes later, I flop down on my bed and lift the pilfered panties to my face again, breathing in Dana Whitestone's intoxicating scent once more.

In my mind, I make love to her for the first time, though certainly not for the *last*.

Just as I've always suspected,

she proves to be an absolutely
wonderful lover.

CHAPTER 47

Bill Krugman shielded his eyes from the bright Florida sunlight that was pounding down hard from high overhead in the cloudless blue skies above, peering into his former agent's rental unit on Fort Myers Beach while exotic-looking seabirds squawked noisily in the air all around him.

Pressing his nose against the glass, Krugman tried to get a good look

inside the house, tunneling his vision with his palms and fogging up the window with his breath.

Straining his eyes, he could just make out a sparsely furnished living room decorated with two wicker armchairs, a rattan settee and the kinds of oil paintings that you could usually find at neighborhood rummage sales for fifteen bucks apiece.

Watching this as she jogged back down Indian Bayou a few minutes after her odd encounter with the old landscaper at the church, Dana felt a cold lump of dread form in the pit of her stomach. The man known to everyone in the FBI simply by his title of “the Director” didn’t pay former agents a personal visit for no good reason, which couldn’t be good news for her under

even the best of circumstances – and was probably enough to justify the expense of her running away to Bora Bora instead of the more easily accessible Gulf Coast of Florida.

She was sweating like a pig by the time she finally turned up the driveway thirty seconds later. Blinking hard against the salty rivers of perspiration that were sliding down her forehead and into her eyes, she cleared

her throat loudly in order to get his attention.

The Director turned around and smiled down at her from the landing.

“Dana,” he said warmly, not looking in the least embarrassed that he’d just been caught playing the role of the quaint, seaside town’s Peeping Tom.

Krugman’s gold Rolex glinted in the bright sunlight overhead as he

straightened the crisp white sleeves of his dress shirt, pulling them into sight from beneath the arms of a lightweight, flawlessly tailored blue suit. Dana wasn't at all surprised to see his choice of attire. Even considering the blazing temperatures, Krugman wasn't the kind of guy to break a sweat. *Ever*. Cool as a cucumber at all times, that was him, all right.

She nodded a hello up at her

former boss, still squinting against the irritating drops of sweat that were searing her eyes. “Hello, sir,” she said. “To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?”

Krugman descended the wooden steps with a laugh. “No time for pleasantries, huh, Agent Whitestone? Fair enough. I can understand that. I was never one for small talk myself.”

Reaching the foot of the stairs, Krugman squinted his own eyes against the blinding sun. “Could we maybe go inside, Agent Whitestone? It’s hotter than hell out here.”

Dana flushed, suddenly remembering her manners. She might have been raised in six different foster homes, but not a single one of them had been a barn. “Of course, sir,” she said

quickly. “Come on in and I’ll get you something cold to drink.”

She brushed past him and ascended the wooden steps before sliding her key into the lock and opening the door, stepping aside to let him in first.

“So, what can I get for you, sir?” she asked him once they’d both made it inside. “Beer? Water? Soda?”

The look on Krugman’s face let

her know that alcohol was out of the question for him – and probably should be for her, as well.

Dana's found herself hoping that he couldn't smell the beer on her breath, but then she shook her head to chase away the concern. What the hell did she care if he smelled beer on her breath? She didn't work for him anymore, so she could drink whatever she wanted,

whenever she damn well pleased.

“A water would be great, Agent Whitestone,” Krugman said. “Thanks.”

Dana did her best to ignore the fact that Krugman was still calling her by her former title as she headed into the kitchen with him following closely at her heels.

Pulling out a bottle of Aquafina from the refrigerator, she twisted off the cap with the gunshot sound of snapping

plastic and handed it over. Then she and Krugman went back into the living room and took seats on opposite ends of the rattan settee.

Krugman tilted back his head and took a long swallow of his water before clearing his throat. “I need you back, Dana,” he said, cutting right to the chase. The guy was more efficient than Dr. Michael Baden on an all-night

autopsy bender. “I’ve got a serial killer on my hands who’s murdering famous people.”

Dana looked away from him, knowing that she couldn’t even deal with what had happened to her in the parking lot of the coroner’s office back home in Cleveland yet, much less deal with chasing down another serial killer. Not now and probably never again. It was just too much to ask of her, not to

mention much too *soon*. After all of these years of somehow staying strong despite the nearly insurmountable odds that had been stacked up against her in her life, the woman in the autopsy video had finally broken her spirit. Crushed it, actually. She had nothing left to fight with anymore.

She'd been completely and utterly *emptied*.

Unfortunately for her, Krugman mistook her silence for interest. “The press has taken to calling this person ‘the Censor’,” he said. “The targets are mostly B-list celebrities. Dinah Leach from ‘The Real Housewives of Atlanta’ was the first victim last year. Penelope Hargrave – Steve Hargrave’s oldest daughter, the guy who’s trying to bankroll the rebuilding of the Twin

Towers – was the next to go in New York City. And Amber Knightly was murdered just two nights ago out in Arkansas.”

Dana lifted her eyebrows in surprise. The question tumbled out of her mouth before she could stop it, her curiosity piqued despite her resolve to stay just as far away from this sort of thing as she possibly could.

“Amber Knightly the pop

singer?” she asked.

Krugman nodded. “Yep.”

“Any leads?”

Krugman shifted in his seat. “As a matter of fact, we know *exactly* who the killer is.”

Dana waited for him to go on. When he didn’t immediately continue, she said, “*Well?* Who is it?”

Krugman caught her by surprise

again. “Her name’s Nicole Preston,” he said. “We found her prints at the scenes of each of the murders I was telling you about. Killed her mother late last night, too, according to the field office out in Illinois. Hung her dead body from a steel hook in the family’s butcher’s shop after the deed was done. Real sick piece of work.”

Krugman hesitated. Then he blew out a slow breath and said, “I

know what happened to you in the parking lot of the coroner's office, Agent Whitestone."

Dana's breath caught in her throat. Her heart slammed violently against her ribcage. She was so stunned for a moment that she couldn't even *breathe*.

She finally swallowed back the shame in her throat and whispered,

“How?”

Krugman stretched his fingers, looking uncomfortable. “We also found Nicole Preston’s prints in the autopsy room in Ohio,” he said. “I saw the video, Dana, saw Preston hold up the picture of your brother to the camera. That was when it occurred to me to check out the surveillance footage from the parking lot. I saw what those men did to you. I’m very sorry that

happened. It was absolutely awful.”

Dana’s lips trembled, but she didn’t speak. She didn’t know what to say.

Krugman straightened on the settee. “Anyway, Nicole Preston killed Christian Manhoff, too, but that’s not the main reason why she was in Cleveland. Manhoff was just a prop. She came to Cleveland because she’s targeting *you*

too, Dana. I don't know *why* she's targeting you, but that much I know for a fact."

Dana shook her head, unable to believe what she was hearing right now. Still, she already knew that Krugman was telling her the truth. Why would he lie?

She let out a deep breath that deflated her chest. "I know," she said. "Preston told me as much right to my

face. But how the hell do *you* know that?”

Krugman cleared his throat.
“Because the Illinois field office also found a list of five names pinned to the chest of Nicole Preston’s mother.”

Dana’s heart thrilled in her chest. “And?”

The Director dropped his stare.
“Your name was the last one on it,

Dana.”

CHAPTER 48

Kill two birds with one stone, I think as I watch Dana Whitestone and her former boss enter the vacation house across the street. Just murder them both right now in cold blood while they're together and speed along the entire process of achieving fame.

I shake my head to chase away the temptation, knowing that I need to stick to the game plan here; no matter

how strong the urge might be to alter it.
And the urge is *plenty* damned strong,
too. Practically *overwhelming*, for
Christ's sake.

I sigh heavily as I resign myself
to my fate. No doubt the authorities will
make short work of tracking me down
now with all of the evidence I've left
behind. Still, I don't really care. After
all, that's been my goal ever since the

very beginning, now hasn't it?

Of course, it has.

To go out in a blaze of glory.

On *national television*.

I press my lips together in anticipation. The simple fact of the matter is that you could murder *anyone* you wanted, just as long as you were willing to give your own life in return. Even an FBI agent. And I'm *more* than willing to give my own life in exchange

for Dana Whitestone's. Always have been ever since the day I'd watched my little brother brutally murdered by the same woman who'd given us life before snatching it away again with her sick compulsions to live out her own dreams of fame through her two little boys.

Two little boys who hadn't known any better. Two little boys who'd never stood a *chance* against a

woman like her.

I enter my kitchen and pull out an ice-cold Heineken from the refrigerator. The tinkling of glass hitting glass fills my ears as the bottle makes contact with the rest of the twelve-pack inside. *Time for some suds.* And why not?

Things were about to get *very* interesting now.

Returning to my living room, I pop the top on my beer and kick back on

the comfortable leather couch, at the same time positioning the tiny listening device in my left ear. With any luck at all, the bugs that I've planted around Dana Whitestone's vacation house will pick up every last word of her conversation with Bill Krugman, the head of the FBI.

Taking a long swallow of my beer, I catch the proper frequency and

listen intently as they talk. Krugman is updating his former charge on each of my exquisite murders, including the horrific butchering of Dinah Leach the previous year.

“The poor woman was *de-sexed*, Dana,” Krugman says to his famous protégé. An underlying edge of irritation laces his voice, which pleases me all the more. “Her breasts and vagina were sliced off with a knife, for God’s sake.

Please come back to the Bureau. We *need* you.”

From the comfort of my own living room, I can almost *see* Dana Whitestone’s face go white at her former boss’s shocking words. God, how I wish I’d have thought to put a video camera in there, as well. The look on her face right now had to be absolutely *priceless*. Why the hell had I skimped

on costs this close to the end? A video performance of this would have been so much more *fun*.

I sigh again and shrug my shoulders. To hell with it. There'll be *plenty* of cameras around when the final cut is made and delivered to the general public, so that isn't a major concern. Because whether or not anyone out there wanted it to happen, *my* fame has been all but assured now.

Dana Whitestone clears her throat softly and I sit up straighter on the couch and press the listening device farther into my ear. *This is it!* The vaunted former FBI agent will now return to the hunt – and then the fun and games can *really* begin in earnest.

I lean back my head and take another long, celebratory sip of beer.

And then I nearly choke on it,

spitting out a mouthful of foamy liquid all over the hardwood floor at my feet.

“No,” Dana Whitestone says in response to Krugman’s request that she rejoin the FBI. “Absolutely not.”

CHAPTER 49

Krugman narrowed his dark brown eyes. His disbelieving voice rumbled out of his throat like a freight train barreling off the rails.

“Dinah Leach didn’t die from the sexual mutilation, Agent Whitestone,” he snapped. “She was still *alive*, still breathing when they finally unzipped the goddamn body bag. That’s a miracle in and of itself, a testament to just how hard

she fought to live. She couldn't talk, but she *tried* to talk. Right up until her last breath. You could probably learn a thing or two from her."

Dana stared at her former boss.

"*Excuse me?*"

Krugman didn't blink. His own stare was hot enough to burn right through six inches of solid steel. "I said you could probably learn a thing or two

from Dinah Leach, Dana. Did I stutter?”

The Director closed his eyes and shook his head. Then he opened his eyes again and softened his voice. “Listen, Agent Whitestone, I can’t even imagine how terrible it must have been for you when those men violated you. I *understand* why you left work, I really do. But you represent the wall of protection that stands between the

animals out there and the rest of society. There aren't too many of us left, so we can't afford to lose a single brick in that wall. More than that, you're a goddamned *cornerstone*. People *depend* on you. Hell, *I* depend on you. Think it over, at least."

Dana pursed her lips. "I really don't see what good that would do, sir. My mind's already made up."

Krugman rose to his feet and shook his head again. “Just think it over,” he said, heading for the door. “Do it for me. Do it for Crawford. Do it for that little boy you want to adopt. Hell, do it for *yourself*, Dana. Everyone needs you. Don’t ever forget that. And no matter what you might think right now, running away from your problems isn’t going to make them disappear.”

Krugman paused as he reached the door and turned around. “Anyway, I’m putting a 24/7 watch on you. You’re a target of this whack-job now so we need to keep you safe.”

Dana shook her head. She didn’t need a baby-sitter. Didn’t *want* a baby-sitter. She was a grown woman, for Christ’s sake. She could take care of herself. And even if she *couldn’t* take

care of herself, that was nobody else's business but her own. "No, thank you, sir," she said firmly. "That won't be necessary."

Krugman opened the door. "Wasn't a request, Agent Whitestone. You'll have two agents here within the next twenty-four hours. They'll be shadowing every step you take until we can catch this lunatic, so you might as well just get used to the idea right now."

And with that, the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation left her vacation house and disappeared down the stairs.

Dana went to the window and watched him go. When he'd hopped into his rental car and had driven out of sight, she gritted her teeth before reaching into her pocket and extracting the small gold hoop earring that she'd appropriated

from the parking lot of the Cuyahoga County Coroner's Office, squeezing it hard in her fist.

Bile rose rocketed up her throat and burned the thin lining of her esophagus. Her temples throbbed. This wasn't what she'd wanted, at all.

Goddamn it, she'd wanted the woman in black for *herself*.

CHAPTER 50

Dana tossed and turned all night Saturday with the Director's words still echoing in her ears:

Do it for me, Dana. Do it for Crawford. Do it for that little boy you want to adopt.

Hell, do it for yourself.

She sat up in her bed in the darkness and wiped away tears from her eyes. The only problem with Krugman's

request was that she didn't know if she *could* do it for herself anymore. She'd focused so intently on helping other people her entire life, on putting her own selfish concerns to the side, that she'd lost sight of herself somewhere along the way. Now it felt like she didn't even know who she *was* anymore. Wasn't sure if she'd *ever* known who she was.

At quarter to eight on Sunday

morning, she dressed in a knee-length white skirt and a conservative, light-pink blouse before walking over to Ascension Catholic Church. She knew that she needed some help making this decision in front of her, and thankfully she knew *exactly* where to look for it.

Settling into a pew in the back of the church ten minutes later, she started to pray while the church began to fill up with people:

God, please help me. Tell me what I should do. I'm so lost right now.

Dana hadn't been to Mass in years, but there were some things in life that you never forgot, no matter how much time had passed.

At its heart, Catholic Mass was an assembly. Greeters met you at the door with warm smiles on their faces,

and everybody around you was literally dressed in his or her Sunday best. Near the entrances, bowls of holy water glistened, beckoning worshippers to dip in their fingers before making the Sign of the Cross, starting at your forehead and ending at your right shoulder. The act of genuflection before the altar had been imported from medieval Europe, where it had been customary to drop down to one knee in front of a king or nobleman.

A few minutes after she'd taken her seat in the back of the church, the first strains of the opening processional filled her ears, bringing a smile to her face.

The upbeat song lifted her spirits immediately. Before she knew it, she was singing "On Eagle's Wings" right along with the rest of the congregation at the top of her voice.

Several moments later, three altar boys – the lead one carrying a large crucifix affixed to the top of a long metal pole – processed down the main aisle in front of the priest.

Dana's jaw nearly smacked into her chest when she got her first look at the holy man bringing up the rear.

It was the old landscaper from the previous day, the same one who'd

urged her to look for the answers she was seeking within the walls of the building that he'd been working so hard to beautify out in the hot Florida sun.

Dana shook her head in bemusement. No wonder he's been so intent on selling her on the concept of attending church as a means to finding the answers she was looking for. He was the shepherd, and he'd led her right into his flock without her even realizing

it.

She had to admit, she was impressed.

When the last strains of the opening song drifted away, the landscaper/priest ascended the steps leading up to the altar and turned around to face the worshippers.

Stretching out his arms wide in front of his body in his flowing purple

robes, he greeted the faithful.

“Good morning, everyone. My name is Father Lance Middleton. Thank you so much for joining me on this fine Sunday morning to give thanks and glory to the Lord our God. All of us are truly His children, and He loves each and every one of us dearly. Please don’t ever forget that.”

The rest of the Mass was easily recognizable to Dana despite her long

absence from the Church. She'd minored in theology at Cleveland State, so she'd spent *plenty* of time inside places of worship just like this one. And much like the chapters of the FBI guidebook, the details of the rites had stuck to her brain like glue.

After the greeting came the penitential rite, followed by the opening prayer and the Liturgy of the Word.

Then there were three readings and a psalm before the congregation stood for the reading of the gospel. As it turned out, today's selection came from the Book of Job.

Appropriate, to say the least.

Clearing his throat dramatically, Father Middleton began to read, his deep voice booming over the church's sound system.

“In the land of Uz there lived a

man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil...”

The story continued from there to recount Job’s many trials following Satan’s challenge to God that Job only worshipped Him because he’d been blessed in his life. Even through the countless horrors Job faced – including the loss of his family, wealth and sanity

– he still praised God’s name.

When the reading ended, Father Middleton immediately launched into his homily.

The main crux of the priest’s sermon hit Dana in a very personal way.

“Whatever burdens we bear in this life, we must always remember that there is a reason for the trials the Lord give us,” he said. “We may lose our way from time to time, but God always

knows *exactly* where we're going. Follow His light and your path will always shine brightly before you. That much I promise."

The rest of the Mass passed quickly for Dana from there as she reflected on Father Middleton's words, just as she'd reflected on Bill Krugman's words the previous night. Before she knew it, the final blessing

and dismissal were being delivered. Never before had an hour of her life passed so quickly.

To top things off, the closing song was “Amazing Grace” – one of her all-time favorites.

Tears filled her eyes as she sang out the words along with the rest of the worshippers from the very bottom of her soul.

Ten minutes later, the church

gradually emptied out, but Dana remained on her knees for a while, still praying.

This time it was a prayer of thanks.

She couldn't explain it, but she felt filled with the Holy Spirit right now. No matter how hard things might have been for her in her life – and they'd been *plenty* hard – she knew there were

others out there who had it far worse than she did.

A renewed sense of strength flowed through her body. She finally felt ready to get back to work. Finally felt ready to fight the good fight again for those who weren't strong enough to fight it for themselves.

A tiny hand on her left shoulder jerked her mind back into the present. Looking up, she saw the lead altar boy

standing over her, dressed in his snow-white cassock.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” the boy said in a shy voice. Not much more than nine or ten years old, he had sandy brown hair and an angelic face that was sprinkled with freckles. “Father Lance asked me to invite you back to the sanctuary. He said to tell you that he was very happy to see you at Mass today

and that he'd like to thank you personally for coming."

Dana smiled at the boy and resisted the urge to reach up a hand to tousle his hair. "Please tell Father Lance I'll be back there in just a minute," she said.

The boy nodded and turned away. Closing her eyes, Dana exhaled deeply, feeling the entire weight of the world slip from her shoulders as she did

so.

Time for just one more quick
prayer of thanks.

CHAPTER 51

As quietly as a church mouse, I emerge from the bathroom of the sanctuary at Ascension Catholic Church just as Father Lance Middleton completes his disrobing following Mass, revealing pressed black clothing complete with a stiff white Roman collar fastened around his wrinkled old neck.

To pass the time while I'd waited, I'd spent the majority of the

service working the bottom portion of a handheld crucifix back and forth against the concrete floor in the bathroom, honing the metal until the bottom edge had sharpened into a gleaming point.

To the priest's great credit, Middleton doesn't seem at all surprised to see me standing there with the crucifix balanced in my right hand. Maybe the senile old goat thinks I'm just another

lost parishioner seeking some sort of guidance from above.

Boy, is he ever mistaken about *that*.

Middleton smiles at me, showing off crooked yellow teeth. “Well, hello there,” he says. “Can I help you with something? The public restrooms are located in the back of the church, if that’s what you’re looking for, but I certainly don’t mind sharing mine.

Share and share alike, that's what I always say."

I smile back at the man. "Thanks so much for the offer, Father. That's *awfully* generous of you. But, no, there isn't anything you can help me with. *I*, on the other hand, can definitely help *you* with something."

The priest lifts his bushy eyebrows halfway up his broad

forehead. “Oh, yeah?” he asks. “What’s that? What can you help me with, sir?”

I spring forward and jam the sharp point of the crucifix deep into the right side of his neck. Blood erupts from the priest’s throbbing jugular vein in a powerful explosion of red. A fine crimson mist of it sprays across my face and clothing.

“Help you with understanding that Dana Whitestone belongs to *me*,

Father,” I say calmly. “As a matter of fact, she’s *always* belonged to me.”

CHAPTER 52

Father Lance Middleton's high-pitched scream of agony echoed throughout the marble-tiled confines of Ascension Catholic Church.

From her position in the rear of the building, Dana's heart leapt up into her throat at the soul-freezing sound. Instinctively springing to her feet, she bolted down the main aisle toward the source of the noise. Most people ran

away from trouble, but thanks to her years of training with the FBI – training on which she'd turned her back until just this very morning – *she* ran *toward* it.

She came to a panting stop outside the doors of the sanctuary fifteen seconds later; her hand automatically going for her Glock before she suddenly realized that she'd left it back home at her vacation rental. After all, loaded

guns didn't usually make for acceptable fashion accessories in places of worship. So as a result, her Glock was still locked away in a fireproof metal box a mile away on Indian Bayou Avenue.

Dana took in a deep breath through her nostrils and forced herself to calm down. Unarmed or not, she was going in. She *had* to. Her job *demand*ed it. She was an agent with the

Federal Bureau of Investigation, for Christ's sake – no matter how confused about that she'd been before.

Stepping back, she kicked open the door to the sanctuary and stepped inside. Ten feet away, the priest lay on the floor surrounded by a rapidly expanding pool of blood.

Father Lance Middleton looked up at her with pleading eyes filled with

terror. Only the top portion of a metal crucifix was still visible in the right side of his neck.

The kindly old man tried to speak, but no words would come out. Reaching up with a trembling hand, he pulled out the crucifix from his neck before Dana had a chance to stop him. Thick blood coated his trembling fingers as he the crucifix fell to the floor next to him in an eerie cacophony of jangling

metal.

Dana winced, knowing that the crucifix had been the only thing keeping him alive. But what could she do about it now? Stick it back in his neck? Still, without the crucifix to staunch the powerful flow of blood, the red pulsed out even *faster* from Middleton's throat with every tortured beat of his badly laboring heart.

Finally, the priest's face went ghostly white.

A moment later, his eyeballs rolled up completely into the back of his head before he stopped breathing altogether.

The sudden voice that sounded directly behind Dana nearly caused her to jump five feet in the air. Her heart triple-pumped in her chest as she spun

around.

“Should I call 911?”

The altar boy from ten minutes earlier, tears filling his glistening blue eyes.

Dana closed her own eyes and shook her head sadly.

No, she thought. You should call a priest.

CHAPTER 53

Two days later, Dana went on national television to do an interview with Brent Price – the reporter from Cleveland who'd ambushed her outside the front doors of her apartment complex five months earlier.

After a lengthy discussion with Bill Krugman about how they wanted to proceed, they'd finally decided that their best bet would be to lure Nicole Preston

out from beneath whatever rock she was currently hiding under by staging an elaborate, televised presentation – ostensibly to talk about the recent, horrific murders of celebrities.

With the information they'd compiled about Preston's psychology and the woman's overwhelming *need* for the spotlight, Dana felt sure the murdering little bitch wouldn't be able

to stay away. And that was why the taping of the show would be accessible to the general public, as well. It was a dangerous gamble and one that probably bordered on the ethically questionable, but Dana and Krugman felt like they needed to take a chance at this point in the case, however dangerous that chance might be. To protect attendees, seventy-five plain-clothed FBI agents would be stationed all around Hammond Stadium,

posing as snack vendors and concessions workers.

The home of the minor-league affiliate of the Minnesota Twins was located on Six Mile Cypress Parkway and seemed like a perfect place for the highly scripted ruse to unfold. The underlying hope was that the outdoor setting and the throngs of people expected to attend would lure Nicole

Preston into a false sense of security.

Only time would tell.

At precisely eight o'clock in the evening, Dana took the stage in the middle of the baseball diamond following a short introduction from the public-address announcer. From her seat in the middle of the large wooden platform, she scanned the crowd.

More than a thousand people, easy. Just below the stage, dozens of

members of the press lined the fishbowl, cameras focused squarely on her. Still no sign of Preston yet, though.

Brent Price turned in his seat to face her and smiled warmly. “Special Agent Whitestone,” he said in a deep voice that boomed over the stadium’s PA system. “Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. I guess the main thing we all want to know is what

can you tell us about the Censor? What
can you tell us about Nicole Preston?
What makes this woman tick?”

Dana cleared her throat.

“Thanks for having me, Brent,” she said,
trying to ignore the unsettling feedback
of her own voice in her ears. “It’s a
pleasure to be here tonight. Anyway,
Nicole Preston – or *the Censor*, as the
press has taken to calling her – is a
serial killer who’s been targeting famous

people around the country. She's already killed four people that we know of and she'll undoubtedly kill more in the near future. She's an egomaniac, has delusions of grandeur. And killers like her *never* stop until they're finally caught."

Price tempted his fingers in front of his body and nodded, obviously playing up his time in the national

spotlight for all it was worth. No big surprise there, however. From all appearances, he intended to parlay this once-in-a-life opportunity into a glitzy new job in New York City – or anywhere else in the country not named Cleveland. “I see,” he said. “And what exactly is the FBI doing to catch this woman?”

Dana cleared her throat again. She was just about to answer him when

a gunshot suddenly cracked through the night.

A split-second later, a speeding bullet whizzed past her right ear.

Dana sprang to her feet as everything devolved into pure *pandemonium* from there, the screaming crowd stampeding toward the exits like a herd of terrified buffalo. Whipping out her Glock from the shoulder holster

underneath her FBI blazer, she scanned the crowd frantically.

Nothing but chaos.

Another bullet whistled past her head a moment later, zinging by her left ear this time. Dana scanned the crowd some more, her breath hitching in her throat and her stomach trying to crawl out of her mouth. She saw *plenty* of guns out there, but they all belonged to the undercover feds working the

stadium.

Finally, on the third shot from the crowd, she caught a muzzle flash coming from the fishbowl holding the press.

A huge chunk of stage exploded in a shower of splinters at her feet as a man with media credentials slung around his neck aimed the barrel of a huge black pistol directly at the center of her forehead.

Dana narrowed her eyes.

A Mickey Mouse watch was strapped around the man's left wrist.

A dozen thoughts raced through her mind at once, bumping into each other before shattering away into even *more* confusion.

Chief among them: *How the hell could she get off a clean shot with so many people around?*

Before she could outthink herself, before her brain could fuck this up for everyone, her instincts took over. Leveling her gun, she pulled back her finger on the Glock's trigger and a familiar blast of power exploded up her arm as the firearm went off with a tremendous bang.

Thankfully – unlike her confidence – Dana's *aim* hadn't suffered

one little bit since she'd been away from the job. Quite the opposite, as a matter of fact.

A split-second later, the bullet from her Glock tore off the top of the man's head cleanly at his hairline.

An absolutely *perfect* shot.

A moment after *that*, his bloody scalp came to a tumbling stop alongside the third-base foul line, a good fifty feet away from where it had initially begun.

CHAPTER 54

Nicholas Preston – a terribly confused soul who'd legally changed his name to “Nicole” at the tender age of twenty-one – had time enough for just one more thought before the bullet from Dana Whitestone's gun blew off the top of his head.

I'm going to be famous for this.

If he'd had the time, he would have smiled.

And why not?

This was everything he ever
could have dreamed of.

And a whole lot more, too.

CHAPTER 55

On the plane ride out to Chicago later that night in the Department of Justice's thirty-million-dollar Gulfstream IV, Dana again reflected on the events of her life, especially those of the past year. Once again, although things had been rough on her, she'd somehow made it through to the other side of a seemingly un-crossable chasm *alive*.

Above all else – no matter what anybody else might want to say about her – she was a *survivor*.

And that was certainly nothing to sneeze at.

Four hours later, she stepped inside the childhood home of Nicole Preston. In the master bedroom, she found a diary in the top drawer of a nightstand next to the bed.

Settling down onto the plaid comforter covering the top of the neatly made bed, she opened the well-worn red-leather cover and began to read:

November 18th, 1989

Dear Diary,

I just don't know what to do about Timothy anymore. He thinks that he's a girl and has started calling himself

Nicole. I believe it's the female version of his imaginary friend, Nicholas.

It all started when Timmy was seven years old. We were playing in the house one day when he slipped on the floor and banged his head against the bathroom sink. He was never the same after that. I've always blamed myself for this because I was chasing him at the time, playing a game of tag.

The doctors said there is nothing I can do.

When Timmy was thirteen years old, I came home from work one day to find that he'd chopped off his own penis with a meat cleaver. I barely managed to get him to the hospital in time to save his life.

Diary, I know that my son hates me, and this makes me sad beyond words.

Whatever happened to that cute little boy whose precious little face appeared in all of those televisions commercials? I'll never know.

One thing I do know, however:

I miss my son with every last inch of my heart and soul, and I want him back desperately.

CHAPTER 56

Dana closed the diary and wiped tears from her eyes. A moment later, her cellphone rang in her pocket.

She dug it out, flipped it open and placed it to her ear. “Hello?”

A male voice came across the line. “Dana, it’s Gary Templeton. I need to tell you something.”

Dana frowned. Templeton’s speech sounded slurred, like he’d been

drinking. And she knew better than just about anyone else how badly alcohol could cloud your judgment. How it could make you say and do things that you normally wouldn't say or do. Still, slurred or not, it was nice to hear his voice. It had been a long time.

“What do you need to tell me, Gary?” she asked softly.

Templeton paused. Then he

cleared his throat and said, “I’m in love with you, Dana. I’m sorry for telling you over the phone like this, but I’ve *always* been in love with you. Ever since the first time I laid eyes on you.”

Dana smiled and let down the Cleveland cop as gently as she could. She wasn’t ready for another relationship yet. Not even close. Wasn’t sure she’d *ever* be ready for another relationship after what had

happened to Jeremy. “Thank you for telling me this, Gary,” she said, “but I think it’s best if we just stay friends for now. Is that OK with you?”

A click sounded in her ear.

Dana frowned again and took away the phone away from her face, checked the battery indicator to make sure the damn thing hadn’t died on her.

Five strong bars.

She placed the phone back to her ear. “Hello? Are you still there, Gary?”

No response.

Dana flipped closed her phone and sighed. It wasn't easy, but that was just the way the world worked sometimes. Sometimes the people you fell in love with didn't love you in return. And if they *did* love you back, you'd better count yourself among the

lucky ones inhabiting this crazy, spinning blue ball upon which they were all stranded.

Thankfully, though, that wasn't something Dana needed to worry about right now.

Because she *already* counted herself among the lucky ones.

EPILOGUE

A week later, Dana flipped over onto her stomach on Fort Myers Beach down in sunny Southwest Florida, working on her tan and listening to Evanescence on her iPod while thoroughly enjoying the last day of her vacation.

She reached back and tugged at her yellow bikini bottoms to make sure she'd maintained full coverage

throughout the body-flipping manuever. Tomorrow morning, she'd board a plane back to Cleveland and retrieve Oreo from Maggie Carter's care. The old woman had already assured her it would be OK. And after that, she'd get on with her life as a special agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

After all, that was what she'd been *born* to do, wasn't it?

Damn right, it was.

It took Dana several moments to realize that her cellphone was ringing beside her while the hot sun pounded down from high overhead in the blindingly blue sky above. Finally hearing it, she looked down at the caller ID and frowned, not recognizing the number. Cleveland area code.

She removed the iPod earbuds

from her ears and flipped open the phone before wiping away sand from the mouthpiece and placing it to her ear. “Hello?”

A woman’s voice sounded on the other end of the line. “Hello, ma’am, my name is Shelley Margolis. I’m a case manager for Child Protective Services in Parma. I’m calling to ask if you still have any interest in adopting Bradley Taylor Thomas.”

Dana's stomach lurched.

“What?”

The case manager cleared her throat. “He’s been asking about you for two solid weeks, ma’am, says that he wants *you* to be his new mother.”

Dana's hands trembled. She nearly dropped the phone to the sand in shock. She couldn't have been any more stunned if her parents had just strolled

hand-in-hand up the beach and took a seat on her blanket beside her.

“Of *course* I want him,” she said. Her throat tightened so painfully with the words that it was difficult to choke them out. “What exactly would I need to do, Miss Margolis?”

Adrenaline coursed through Dana’s body as Shelley Margolis ran down the laundry list of requirements for adopting a child. There would be

background checks and home visits and a million other little things that Dana would need to go through. And no doubt the child-care advocates would want to make absolutely *sure* they got Bradley's adoption *exactly* right this time, considering the unspeakable horror to which the little boy been subjected at the hands of the belt-happy lawyer, who in turn would now be spending the next

fifteen years of his worthless life rotting away in prison from the heartless crime of aggravated child abuse.

Dana continued to struggle for breath the entire time that Shelley Margolis ticked off all of the requirements involved. Somehow, though – despite the complete lack of oxygen reaching her lungs – she managed to mumble one-word answers to the case manager's questions.

“So, I’ll see you next Saturday at noon then?” Margolis asked.

Dana sucked in a sharp breath that sent a bracing rush of oxygen flooding through her system, steadying both her nerves and her voice. “Yes, of course, Miss Margolis,” she said. “I look forward to seeing you then.”

The call switched off when Margolis cut the connection from her

end, and Dana placed the phone back down on the sand beside her, shaking her head in utter *disbelief*. After everything that had happened to the two of them, pretty soon, two broken people might just get the chance to make each other whole again.

And any way you looked at things, that wasn't a bad payoff, now was it?

Nope, wasn't a bad payoff, at

all.

Dana sniffled a little as the first tears of joy began to form in her eyes. Before she knew what was happening, tears were streaking down her cheeks in a wet rush of emotion.

Unlike the day she'd met the little boy on the plane, however, this time she didn't *care* if anyone saw her crying.

Dana stood up and brushed the sand off her thighs before gathering her things. To heck with tomorrow morning. She wanted to get home *tonight* to start preparing for Saturday's visit.

Tucking her beach towel into her backpack, she slipped her shoulders into the straps of her leather backpack and took another deep breath. Though she

hadn't known it, she'd waited her entire *life* for this day to finally arrive, and she didn't want to wait a single moment longer now. After all of these years of being alone, she finally had the chance to be part of a *family* again. A *real* family. After all of these years of being alone, she just might become a *mother*.

And if everything went well for the two of them, she'd become mother to the handsomest little boy she'd ever laid

eyes on in her entire life.

A regular *GQ* model, if she'd ever seen one.

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, as I'd like to know what you think! I'd also like to take this opportunity to invite you to join me on my Facebook page [here](#). Hope to see you there!

**skin: the white power
murders**

**A DANA
WHITESTONE THRILLER
BY JON OSBORNE**

PUBLISHED BY JON OSBORNE
BOOKS

COPYRIGHT © 2013

COVER BY LAURA MICHELE

(lauramichelecovers@gmail.com)

Join Jon Osborne on Facebook

[here.](#)

OTHER BOOKS BY JON OSBORNE

KILL ME ONCE

A GAME OF CHANCE

THREE TIMES A LADY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[PART I](#)

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 10

CHAPTER 11

CHAPTER 12

CHAPTER 13

CHAPTER 14

CHAPTER 15

CHAPTER 16

CHAPTER 17

CHAPTER 18

CHAPTER 19

CHAPTER 20

CHAPTER 21

PART II

CHAPTER 22

CHAPTER 23

CHAPTER 24

CHAPTER 25

CHAPTER 26

CHAPTER 27

CHAPTER 28

[CHAPTER 29](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31](#)

[CHAPTER 32](#)

[CHAPTER 33](#)

[CHAPTER 34](#)

[CHAPTER 35](#)

[CHAPTER 36](#)

[CHAPTER 37](#)

[CHAPTER 38](#)

[CHAPTER 39](#)

[CHAPTER 40](#)

[CHAPTER 41](#)

[CHAPTER 42](#)

[CHAPTER 43](#)

[CHAPTER 44](#)

[CHAPTER 45](#)

[CHAPTER 46](#)

[CHAPTER 47](#)

[CHAPTER 48](#)

[CHAPTER 49](#)

[CHAPTER 50](#)

[CHAPTER 51](#)

[CHAPTER 52](#)

[CHAPTER 53](#)

[CHAPTER 54](#)

[CHAPTER 55](#)

[CHAPTER 56](#)

[CHAPTER 57](#)

[CHAPTER 58](#)

[CHAPTER 59](#)

[CHAPTER 60](#)

[PART III](#)

[CHAPTER 61](#)

[CHAPTER 62](#)

[CHAPTER 63](#)

[CHAPTER 64](#)

[CHAPTER 65](#)

[CHAPTER 66](#)

[CHAPTER 67](#)

[CHAPTER 68](#)

[CHAPTER 69](#)

[CHAPTER 70](#)

[CHAPTER 71](#)

[CHAPTER 72](#)

[CHAPTER 73](#)

[CHAPTER 74](#)

[CHAPTER 75](#)

[CHAPTER 76](#)

[CHAPTER 77](#)

CHAPTER 78

PART IV

CHAPTER 79

CHAPTER 80

CHAPTER 81

CHAPTER 82

CHAPTER 83

CHAPTER 84

CHAPTER 85

CHAPTER 86

[CHAPTER 87](#)

[CHAPTER 88](#)

[CHAPTER 89](#)

[CHAPTER 90](#)

[CHAPTER 91](#)

[CHAPTER 92](#)

[CHAPTER 93](#)

[CHAPTER 94](#)

[CHAPTER 95](#)

[CHAPTER 96](#)

[CHAPTER 97](#)

[CHAPTER 98](#)

[CHAPTER 99](#)

[CHAPTER 100](#)

[CHAPTER 101](#)

[CHAPTER 102](#)

[CHAPTER 103](#)

[CHAPTER 104](#)

[CHAPTER 105](#)

[CHAPTER 106](#)

[CHAPTER 107](#)

[CHAPTER 108](#)

[CHAPTER 109](#)

[CHAPTER 110](#)

[CHAPTER 111](#)

[CHAPTER 112](#)

[CHAPTER 113](#)

[CHAPTER 114](#)

[CHAPTER 115](#)

[CHAPTER 116](#)

[CHAPTER 117](#)

[CHAPTER 118](#)

[CHAPTER 119](#)

[CHAPTER 120](#)

[CHAPTER 121](#)

[CHAPTER 122](#)

[CHAPTER 123](#)

[CHAPTER 124](#)

[CHAPTER 125](#)

[CHAPTER 126](#)

CHAPTER 127

CHAPTER 128

CHAPTER 129

CHAPTER 130

CHAPTER 131

CHAPTER 132

PART V

CHAPTER 133

CHAPTER 134

CHAPTER 135

[CHAPTER 136](#)

[CHAPTER 137](#)

[CHAPTER 138](#)

[CHAPTER 139](#)

[CHAPTER 140](#)

[CHAPTER 141](#)

[CHAPTER 142](#)

[CHAPTER 143](#)

[CHAPTER 144](#)

[CHAPTER 145](#)

[CHAPTER 146](#)

[CHAPTER 147](#)

[CHAPTER 148](#)

[CHAPTER 149](#)

[CHAPTER 150](#)

[CHAPTER 151](#)

[CHAPTER 152](#)

[CHAPTER 153](#)

[CHAPTER 154](#)

[CHAPTER 155](#)

[CHAPTER 156](#)

[CHAPTER 157](#)

[CHAPTER 158](#)

[CHAPTER 159](#)

[CHAPTER 160](#)

*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 10th, 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 20th, 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 4th, 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 25th 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 *Pres*

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 83rd 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 13th, 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, Treblehorn 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 30th, 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 4th, 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.

“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 9th 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. ¹² *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?”

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.

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.

Goddamn 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 14th 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 20th, 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.

In Dana's dream, she is four years old again. The date is July 4th, 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.

“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 she'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

screeched.

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, as I'd
like to know what you think!
I'd also like to take this
opportunity to invite you to
join me on my Facebook page
[here](#). Hope to see you there!