

ARVIN LOUDERMILK

WOLF

ARVIN LOUDERMILK
VIGIL



COLLECTING THE EIGHT-PART NOVELLA SERIES

VIGIL

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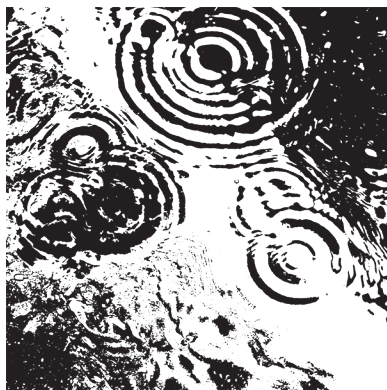
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FOR MIKE

THE BLOOD DETAIL



I'm going to kill them all, every motherfucking one of them. This is what you need to know about me. I do what I have to. I have no other choice. These pieces of shit that I'm after are hateful, power mad, and they prey on the innocent. They cannot be allowed to live.

EATEN ALIVE

It was 1991, and the rain was coming down in buckets.

My partner Angela Chen and I were on patrol in Northeast Los Angeles, just outside of Lincoln Heights, and I was bitching and moaning like I always seemed to do when I found myself not behind the wheel. Add the blinding downpour to the indignity of not being in control, and I was raring to go.

“I moved west to avoid weather like this,” I said, bristling in my seat. “So much for sunny California. I knew I should have picked Arizona or Nevada when I relocated. They have real sunshine there—and droughts. Constant, unyielding droughts.”

Angie steered our black and white into the leftmost lane, her concentration fully affixed on the drenched roadway. “Stop with the martyr routine, Grace. It almost never rains, especially like this, and yet you still have to treat it as if it were some regular occurrence. If you were getting mad at the unusualness of it, then fine. But no, you’re using it to indict the entire city, and that’s just nuts.”

Angie’s jet-black hair was wound back in a braided ponytail, the way she liked to wear it while she was on the job. My own hair was blonde and bright, cut in a bob about an inch or so below my jawline. The light and dark look of us once prompted a dipshit from our station to start referring to us as Salt & Pepper. He only did it once to my face. After I shoved him into a corner and used his head to cave in the drywall, he avoided us

altogether. Most of the macho dickheads avoided us at the station—not because of a sweetheart like Angie, of course, but because of me. As hard as it is to believe, I had a reputation as a bruiser, this despite my wispy, 5'9" frame. The rep went back a ways, too. I've always had real skills with my hands, feet, and fists—and when necessary—even my head. Back in my Academy days, I beat every comer, no matter their size, and word got around. If you didn't want to get your ass beaten by a girl, you'd better keep far away from me.

"Sorry about all the grousing," I said after an extended stretch of silence. "I'm just in a shit mood."

Angie nodded and tightened her grip on the steering wheel.

Coming up behind us at my five o'clock, I caught a glimpse of a convertible VW Bug with red racing stripes emblazoned on its side. Three idiots were inside, standing upright and screeching. Thanks to all the water spilling down, it took a second look for me to get a complete picture of the stupidity that was on display. These kids were traveling at breakneck speed through the pounding rain, about to pass a cop car, their arms raised high as big, round droplets pelted them across the face and the wind blew back their hair. Like I said, stupid. Rock stupid.

I ignited our red and blue overheads and rolled down my window. The kids had already noticed our presence and were in the process of sitting back down. The driver had reduced his speed by half. I gave them a stern glare as they dropped back behind us.

"Their asses need to be pulled over," Angie said.

A dispatch call blasted from our dashboard radio. A Code 3 was in progress at the Las Rosas townhouse complex, reports of an assault and possible rape in progress. I unhooked the microphone and confirmed our vehicle number—we were a mile and a half out.

Angie glanced at the driver's side mirror. "I cannot believe those morons are going to get away scot-free," she said, initiating a hard U-turn into the southbound lane. Water sprayed everywhere, and yet she negotiated the maneuver with her usual precision.

"They'll get themselves caught one way or another." I said, flicking on

the sirens. “That kind of idiocy always does. It’s deep-seated.”

We were at the front entrance of the Las Rosas complex ninety seconds later. Angie pulled into one of the empty visitors parking spots and killed the engine and popped the trunk. I put on my cap and got out first, hustling around the side of the vehicle in the rain and retrieving a poncho and a modified shotgun from the opened trunk. I snatched a second poncho for myself and closed the lid with some force. Angie was already outside with her own cap on, and the car was all closed up. Somebody screamed in the distance. I tossed Angie the rain protection and her trusty shotgun as I took off in a sprint in the direction of the wail, slipping on my own poncho on as I ran. Angie was quick to follow. I could hear her footsteps splashing behind me.

The complex we were charging into was pseudo-Spanish in design, vintage LA, with red ceramic roof tiles and arched doorways. The perimeter of the place was contained by a seven-foot cinder block wall. The three primary residential buildings were arranged in an open-ended square—a pool and a courtyard at its center, and a large administration building at the top of the grounds, right around where we had left our vehicle. Between the outer wall and the back patios of the various townhouses was a covered parking area which backed the entire location in a loop. The scream had originated in the rear of this blacktopped lot—precisely where Angie and I were headed.

We hit the first turn and a beam of light shone out. Angie had lit up the flashlight she kept duct-taped to the barrel of her shotgun like a sighting apparatus. That wasn’t our only light source either. A chain of amber security lights towered above the cinder block wall. But the flashlight was more directed than the soft-hued lamps, and therefore more helpful.

Regardless of the surrounding illumination, a half-blind person could have spotted the ten-speed bike overturned on the asphalt. It was just sitting out there on its own, its front wheel still spinning. I slowed my gait and shuffled around the fallen bicycle in an arc, and finally unholstered my sidearm. Angie came up on my left so we could move in from two separate angles. She was breathing heavily, which was nothing new. She was not

much of a runner, and I was always getting on her about her breath control. It's important to manage your body. There was no way a quick sprint was going to wear me out.

Angie started swiping the flashlight/shotgun conglomeration back and forth between the parked vehicles. I heard a muffled grunt and I slipped between the van and the compact car in front of me, my Glock at attention. Angie cut through herself, one car length down. As we stepped out from under the grated overhang, the swaying flashlight beam found what we'd been looking for—a hulking male in the grass, sprawled on top of an unknown female.

“LAPD officers,” I said. “Roll the *hell* off that woman *now!*”

Angela came up on my right. “We are *not* going to tell you again,” she said, much louder than I had spoken. “We’re *armed*. Do not make us come over there and remove you ourselves.”

Something was seriously wrong, and I knew it at once. The only movement I was getting off the guy was his scraggly head bobbing up and down. His clothes were old and ratty, particularly the leather duster which was splaying out every which way. The grunting I'd heard before had this enthusiasm to it, and it was definitely emanating from where the guy's head was continuing to jostle. We couldn't wait around for him to do as he was told.

I motioned for Angie to cover me and I moved closer. I could see the woman better from a more slanted viewpoint. She had on blue bike shorts and a white stretch top. I could not make out her face, and would probably not be able to until we had gotten him clear of her.

I gave Angie another two-finger signal, counted off, and rammed the bottom of my boot against the guy's hip. He was a strong bastard, because my blow was hefty, and he did not shift an inch. I kicked him several more times, and he started to take an interest. He looked up at me, mouth open, and I swear he was the ugliest thing I had ever seen. Calling him unkempt wouldn't even have been scratching the surface. Both his hair and beard were long and filthy, like dreadlocks, except in no way attractive or cool. Mud had been mixing with the rain across his face and torso, and was

dripping everywhere. The freak was a real mess, to say the least.

"Get your ass *off* of her," I shouted. "Don't you *listen*, moron?"

He hissed at me, and that was when I realized it wasn't just mud smeared all over him. The coloring was too red to only be mud. I tried to get a better look at things, but the light Angie was casting was coming in from the right, which left everything where I was standing in shadow. With the perp tilted toward me, however, I *could* see the girl better, and this cretin had been going to town on her. Angie must have noticed too, because she shifted around and put some more light on the subject. The girl had been seriously chewed on. Everything from her neck to her shoulders was bloody and raw, little more than chunks of meat on bone. I sloshed forward, my gun aimed at the attacker's face.

"This is your last warning, asshole. Back away or I'll blow your fucking head off."

The guy smiled, which made the blood and flesh in his teeth easier to recognize. "You purty," he said as he stood upright.

"On your *knees*," Angie screamed, struggling to be heard above the quickening wind. "Away from the girl and get *on-your-knees*."

"Real purty." He let out a whistle, and then leapfrogged over me. It was like he had springs in his shoes. I turned and watched as he clanged atop the parking overhang.

"Call for backup and see to her," I told Angie as I followed the noise being made on the metal grating. "I got this nut."

Angie gasped as she closed in on what was left of the victim. I had no time to think about it. I was not going to let this guy get away. I brandished my own flashlight, and with my left hand, began to swing it upward until I found my target, thirty yards ahead of me, still on the overhang. But he didn't stay there for long. As I got within a few feet, he leapt again, this time from the parking area to the second story roof of one of the townhouses. The distance was massive, and he landed with a thud. The slickness of the rain and the crushed roof tiles almost brought him tumbling back down, but he quickly regained his grip and balance, scrambling upward and disappearing from view.

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A man had just done the impossible in front of me, but the only thing on my mind was finding a shortcut through to the courtyard. I had to race all the way down to the end of the last building before I could find a path inward. Once I'd made it through, I searched for any sign of the attacker. The first place I checked was the roof. When that came up empty, I began to shine my flashlight into every nook and cranny I could find. If he was still lurking somewhere—which a lot of smacked up weirdos liked to do—I had to be extra thorough. I searched every bush along the building he had jumped on top of. That turned out to be a big goose egg as well. In a rush, I jogged over to a small playground in the corner of the courtyard. I didn't get two steps in that direction before I heard a splash. It had come from the pool. I hotfooted it over there and stared through the wrought iron fence. It was well after midnight, so the underwater lights were off, but the rain showering downward was causing a ton of movement on the surface. For an instant, I thought there may have been a dark mass in the deep end, though I couldn't be sure. I considered hopping over for a better look, but thought better of it. If it was him, he couldn't stay underwater forever.

Less than a minute later the killer surfaced noisily and drew himself out of the water, slipping and sliding his way across the cool decking. All I did was blink for a second, and he was gone—again. I began to rotate in circles, scanning for any movement in the rain. I started my third revolution and he was just standing in front of me, his tongue clicking wildly.

“Purty,” he said.

I peered up at him. The guy stood seven feet plus and was extremely wide in the shoulders, but I was not going to let him rabbit away on me again. He was unarmed—which ruled out shooting him—so I kicked him in the goods instead. The bastard collapsed in a heap. I stood over him with my Glock threatening in one hand and the flashlight in the other, and read him his Miranda rights. All the while, I was thinking about how I was going to get him rolled over and cuffed on my own. The man was a damn mountain.

As I considered my options, he reached up at me, catching hold of

both my wrists and yanking me downward. I'm not certain if I pulled the trigger or if he made me pull the trigger. Either way, the trigger was pulled, and a shot fired into his rib cage. He buckled, but kept on struggling with me. I eventually lost my grip on my flashlight, and then my sidearm. I could not worm my way loose, no matter how hard I fought. Out of alternatives, I drove my right foot down onto his kneecap. I'm sure I must have shattered it, for what good it did. He just pulled me lower and sniffed me.

"You even smell purty."

Unfortunately, he did not. The stink coming off him was rancid. But I was too occupied at the moment to lob any insults. I kept kicking wherever I could, stomping the living hell out of the guy. It just made him grip me harder. I must have screamed at some point. A smattering of lights had been on before—and had been since we had arrived—but suddenly every single one was snapping to life. It must have been the gun shot more than anything. I hoped everyone was smart enough to stay indoors.

"Everything I coulda asked for," he said, then snorted loudly. "I took a bath for ya...to make this nice." He opened up his mouth as our faces became nose to nose. There was nothing I could do to stop him. He was just way too strong.

To the east, a shotgun blast filled the air. It was Angie, to the rescue.

Startled, the creep slackened his hold on me and I was able to pull free, falling straight back onto my ass. The guy leapt up, not moving as swiftly as he had before. Angie fired from my blind spot and nailed him in the chest. He was knocked backward and fell out of the light. Angie swung her shotgun, found him again, and fired. She winged his leg, but he was still up and running. I waved her on, telling her to keep going, to pursue him. I popped up and retrieved my fallen weapon and went with her. It didn't take me long to catch up, and we ran all the way out to the front entrance. But we were too slow. The guy was gone, nowhere to be seen.

"Did you call for backup?" I said, pulling up along the edge of the not-so-busy street.

Angie looked at me strangely. "Can't you hear the sirens?"

After she said it, I did hear them. But before she had spoken, all I could

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hear was the rain. I shook my head as my gun hand dangled. My arms, both of them, were throbbing. "Come on," I said. "We need to get back to the girl and protect the scene."

"She's dead, you know."

"All the more reason to keep the area cordoned off. The rain's already made a mess of things. I don't want anyone accusing us of making it even messier. Not after we let that prick get away."

STRANGE AND UNUSUAL

It took approximately twenty minutes for the hordes of techies, uniforms, and plainclothes officers to descend upon the complex and stake out their various operational fiefdoms. Angie and I were separated at once. I was sent to the hind end of an ambulance to have my injured wrists seen to, and Angie was absconded by two late-arriving detectives, one burly and mustachioed, the other reed thin, yet also kind of nice looking in that soft, non-threatening kind of way.

The rain stopped, and I grew ever more antsy. From the position where I'd been banished, I could only see what was going on right in front of me, this despite the department's utilization of every conceivable form of portable outdoor lighting. I was just too far away from the action. And every time I tried to crane my head around for a better look, the EMT tugged me back toward him. Not that I blamed the guy. The pimple-faced kid was working hard to bandage my wrists, and I sure wasn't making it easy on him.

"You'll need to be taken to the emergency room after we're done here," the medic told me. I detected a trace of firmness in his voice, which I found amusing. "As far as I can tell, it looks like your wrists are only sprained. But they should be x-rayed and tended to by a—"

"Professional," I said with a smirk.

He scowled back at me and finished securing my second bandage.

"This should do for now," he said, before getting feisty again and telling

me there were detectives waiting to grill me good.

Like I needed a twerp to help me figure that one out. The detectives with Angie had been eyeing me for a while at that point. They appeared to be done with her because neither of them were speaking to her any longer, and Angie had wandered off. The medic waved Frick and Frack over and I settled in on the ambulance's bumper, dropping my taped arms into my lap in an attempt to make myself look relaxed and in control.

The two detectives began to mosey my way, forced to dodge every speeding nitwit with a purpose who crossed into their path. It took them awhile, but they eventually broke through. Up close, they both had a put-on pleasantness about them.

"Officer Kimble," the good-looking one said. "Are you up for a few quick questions?"

"I don't know...can't say for sure. I've never seen you two before." I was summoning up every ounce of smarm I had in me. "I mean you could be just about anyone. Maybe you should show me some ID."

They both dug into the linings of their dampened overcoats and did my bidding, revealing matching billfolds with shiny metal badges and photographic proof they were both important peace officers I should be giving the proper deference to.

The good-looking one made the formal introductions. "I'm Detective Mac Douglass," he said as he put away his badge. "My partner here is Sam Racine. If you would not mind, we would like to go over some of the particulars of your rather eventful evening."

I grinned. "Have at me."

Douglass pressed the outside of his pants pockets and clicked some sort of recording device.

"In your own words," he said, "how would you characterize the suspect?"

The inaneness of the question threw me. All I could do was shake my head. "I'm not sure what you mean. He killed that girl. Are you wondering if he was a nice guy or not?"

"No, I would like to hear about any specific oddness that you noticed about him. Your partner said that she shot him twice, once directly in the

chest, but he still managed to get away. She also said she heard a shot before she caught up with you, which we presume means you fired your own sidearm. The question relates to that. What was this person like, this man who can withstand multiple gunshot wounds?"

I delayed my response, for no other reason than I was tired and annoyed. "Well, he was stinky and covered in blood and flesh. He also kept telling me how pretty I was, which I guess you could call strange, considering the circumstances. But then again, maybe it was love at first sight and this mangy cannibal just couldn't resist me. I am fairly decent looking. Men have been known to swoon in my presence. What do you two geniuses think?"

Racine stepped forward. It looked like he would be the one to threaten me with reprisals. "Look, lady. We have been nothing but pleasant with you. Why the grief? You're forcing us to tell your commanding officer how uncooperative you're being."

"Go ahead—tell him. I could care less. You two may have fancy badges, but you have also come at me with a very knowing question. And I am not going to help out someone whose true agenda is being withheld from me. Seriously, you could be IAD as far as I know. I did fire my weapon, as you so adroitly pointed out."

"We're with a special task force," Douglass said. "It's a joint LAPD-FBI detail. Highly classified. I can't go into too many specifics without breaking a billion and one regs, but this is not the first homicide of this nature we have come across."

The Fed angle had my immediate attention. "Now, was that so hard?" I said, sitting up straight. "When you're both ready, you can ask me anything that you like."

Douglass was smiling. Racine was not.

"Mac has already asked you a question," he said. "How about you give the man a serious answer."

I fought back a chuckle and said, "In my humble opinion, the guy was drugged up. He had to have been. My shot nailed him right in the gut—but it did not slow him. I gave him a hard kick to the nuts as well,

and that didn't faze him in the slightest." I held up my bandaged arms. "When he had hold of my wrists, I stomped the living shit out of him. Still...nothing."

Douglass followed up. "Your partner said he executed a standing broad jump right over you. To hear her tell it, he landed on the top of the parking eaves over there. He accomplished this in one move, with no running start. How do you explain that?"

"I don't," I said, holding the pause. "But I'll bet you can."

Douglass and Racine had no reply. They had no reaction at all really. I was more sure than ever that they knew a hell of a lot more than what they were sharing.

"Whatever," I said. "I may only be a lowly patrol person, but I saw what I saw, and you big bad detectives don't seem affected by any of it. In fact, you went straight to the oddness in your questions. That tells me loads about this task force of yours. I'd say the superhuman feats are the only reason you are here. The murder is just secondary, a means to an end."

"You would be wrong," Douglass said. "Very wrong."

Racine nodded.

"Well, we're certainly not seeing things from the same perspective," I said. "All that's on my mind at the moment is the memory I have of some freakishly tall guy devouring that poor woman over there. Let's all remember that's the heart of what went down here. A young woman is out riding her bike unsuspectingly and she gets dragged into the dark and is chowed down on by a psychotic. This is what's going to haunt me—not that a perp was jumping around like he was on trampoline. There's some reasonable explanation for that, there has to be. But the manner in which he killed her...that's the shit that makes me tremble. There is no damn rationalization for that."

"Can we get back to it?" Douglass said.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Can we?"

He ignored my dickishness and went on. "You started saying something earlier about the suspect calling you pretty. Can you be more specific with that?"

"Yeah. He said it several times. I was 'purty,' I smelled 'purty,' and so on. It was like the only damn word he knew." I shrugged again. "I mean he's not the first guy to comment on my looks. He's not even the first homeless guy to do it. It's a man thing. When your blood is rushing down there, you all get weak-kneed over attractive women. You swoon, remember?"

I caught Douglass staring at me. I stared right back until he looked away.

"Then you would classify the suspect as homeless?" Racine asked me, his mind on his work.

"Without a doubt. He had all the trappings and telltale signs. He was definitely not a business man, that's for sure."

I heard several car doors slam in succession. I recognized the specificity of the sound. It was the black and whites. The extra uniforms were heading out.

"How many of us do you have out canvassing?" I asked them.

"The rest of our detail," Racine said. "The complex is not that big. They should have it covered in a couple of hours."

"How many people do you have out searching for this guy? He's been shot three times, you know. He's probably bled out in an alley somewhere."

Douglass fiddled with his tie. "You're probably right."

The guy started staring at me again, but I was sick and tired of staring back.

"I'll ask you one more time. How many of us do you have out searching?"

"Enough. More than enough."

"Sorry to press," I said. "If you don't want to answer."

The conversation stalled out there. For some reason or another, Douglass and Racine thought going after this guy was futile, and not just because he was shot up by Angie and me. It was best that I drop it. I could find out more on my own anyway. A few well-placed flirtatious questions with a crime scene nerd would get me what I needed a whole lot easier than dealing with these yahoos.

"We may need to speak with you again tomorrow," Douglass said as he shut off his recorder. "Just so you are aware."

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“Fine, but I’ll be at home,” I said. “I fired my weapon, so did Officer Chen. We’re going to be put on leave. We won’t be allowed to just hang out at the station until we pass review.”

Douglass tipped his head at his partner, and Racine strolled off. Douglass inched closer to me and his entire demeanor softened.

“We’ll back you up with IAD,” he said. “Just be as clear as possible and tell them everything, even the outlandish bits. There’s no reason to lie. If you’re honest, you will be back on duty by next week.”

“Thank you?” I said, all sarcastically.

“Thank you is right.” He turned, walked several strides, and then spun back to me. “We are on top of this, you know. It may not seem like it, but there is method to our madness.”

I watched him saunter off. The cryptic bullshit was not going to cut it with me. Neither were his limp attempts at charm. On leave or not, I was about to get on Douglass’ case like he wouldn’t believe. He may not have cared whether the suspect had bled out or not, but I did. That smelly prick was not getting away with killing that girl.

WHO'S WHO

I could see Angie waiting outside the ER as I walked toward the exit. When the automatic doors slid all the way open, I saw someone else—someone I hadn't spoken to in months. The sawed-off little runt smiled at me, still thick and sturdy, with a graying buzz cut and ugly-as-ass horn-rimmed glasses. Both Angie and this long-lost pal of mine were leaning against one of the new make of cruisers, parked indifferently aside the emergency curbside drop-off. There may not have been any rain coming down any longer, but the smell of it still permeated the air.

"Burt Kendrick," I said, storming over to the only two partners I'd ever known. "How the heck are you, old man?" We shook hands, which left me cringing in pain. I must have left my brain back in the examination room. Burt's grip had always been notoriously mighty, but never so much so as when one had just been diagnosed with a severely sprained wrist. I covered as best as I could, but both Angie and Burt noticed my discomfort.

"Gracie girl. Good to see you," Burt said as he let go of my hand. "But shouldn't you be in a sling? You need to keep those things raised up above your heart, kiddo. That's how they heal." He glanced down at the fresh bandaging around my wrists. X-rays were conclusive on one, but not the other. My left wrist had a boo-boo. My right one was pretty fucked up.

I reached back and patted my slacks with the side of my one decent arm. "The sling is here. I stowed it as soon as I got out of the doctor's sight. I was not going to wear it while I was still in uniform."

"Gracie," Burt muttered.

Angie just shook her head.

"What?" I said. "I'll wear it when I change. I want to heal more than anybody. Otherwise, I won't be able to get back to work. But a uniform and physical impairment do not mix. You both know that. I am not going to look weak for a single second in this city."

Burt laughed. "I see you haven't changed. Officer Chen here tells me you've only gotten worse. I heard the same thing from the investigating detective. He told me you gave him all sorts of lip tonight."

"You talked to that asswipe?"

"About an hour ago. He called and said you'd been hurt. He knew that I knew you and he had some questions. I was Mac's training officer. He's a good guy, and an excellent detective."

Burt had been my training officer as well. And as of that moment, he was also the only person on the force bright enough to figure out who I really was. Not that there was anything necessarily nefarious going on with me, but when I'd migrated to LA a couple of years prior, I legally changed my name to Grace Leigh Kimble. I was born Grace Anne McMartin. The Leigh came from a friend in grade school, and Kimble just popped into my head as I was filling out the paperwork. For a brief couple of seconds there I even considered changing Grace to something else as well. My father always said I was the most inappropriately named child in the universe. But my mother had picked the name Grace for me, and she loved it, so I kept it. I owed her that much.

The name change stratagem in and of itself would have impressed Daddy—if he had ever found out about it, which he never did. He keeled over from his inevitable heart attack a year and a half after I got out here, making all the effort I put into not being myself anymore rather useless. He was, after all, the sole reason for my big switcheroo. The great Grant McMartin was, for half of his life, a Deputy Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. His eldest child, who just happened to be a girl, wanted nothing more than to become a special agent and continue on with the family tradition. You would think a father would be proud to

have a child who wanted to honor him in such a way, but not my father. I even trained my heart out for years, mastering every form of hand-to-hand combat available to me in the tiny suburban Virginia village where I grew up. But from the time I was little, Daddy turned up his nose at the mere suggestion of me as a law enforcement officer.

When I graduated from ECU with a degree in criminology, I applied for the Bureau and was unceremoniously rejected. I confronted my father, knowing he was behind the kiss off, and he gave me some rigmarole about me not having the appropriate temperament for the position. But that wasn't the truth. He just didn't like the idea of his baby girl being put into any kind of danger after the way we had lost my mother. I was not deterred, though. I would serve in law enforcement in one way or another. So, I applied to all the big city police departments from Philly to Miami, and was turned down and stymied at every turn. One of the decent fellows who told me no to my face said my father had sent out word about my bad behavior and penchant for violence and warned the various departments against hiring me. I had been blackballed, up and down the East Coast. Even small town departments wanted nothing to do with me, his reach extended that far. That was when I took the desperate steps that I took. I suspected my father's influence might not have the same resonance out west. I picked the largest city in the country's largest state and got lucky.

Funnily enough, it was my father who had taught me how to play fast and loose with alternative identities—it was a game we played all the time when I was growing up. According to him, the trick to it was to create a doppelgänger as close to oneself as was reasonably possible. I didn't even do that exactly. All I changed was my name, legally as I said, and I omitted the fact that my father was then currently employed as a Deputy Director of the FBI. The rest of the information I gave on my application was true. I admitted that I had changed my name, and the LAPD didn't look any deeper than that. No one in my family had a criminal record, so all I can assume is I passed through undetected by any of Daddy's potential pals.

As I said, the only person to do any sort of digging beneath the surface was Burt, just as we were about to start our training patrols together. Being

a junkie for such things, he recognized my father's name right off. He mentioned it to me, and I fessed up and told him the whole story. Other than an occasional question about Daddy's storied career, it was never a big thing between us.

"Well, you may think highly of the guy," I said to Burt, who had kept going on about the wonders of Detective Douglass. "But to me, your dashing pal came off as a little too disinterested. He didn't give two shits about the dead girl Angie and I found."

It was still pitch black out and I took a position between Burt and Angie and we stood together against the car as patients, doctors, and late-night visitors whisked by us, making sure they avoided direct eye contact with the loitering trio of cops.

"Maybe Mac's got a different objective than you," Burt said. "The man's been detailed. Major investigations like that are not comparable to regular street work. The agendas and behind-the-scenes machinations can be byzantine."

"What do you know about this detail of his?" I asked.

"Nothing much. It operates from downtown, and it's fairly new."

"He told me it was a joint task force with the Feds."

"Really," he said, the Fed connection barely registering. "I don't know anything about that. But Mac wouldn't say something if it weren't true."

I rolled my eyes. "I get it. You're telling me the guy's a saint. And I guess I don't know him well enough to disagree." I took a breath. "What did you tell him about me?"

"The basics. Name, rank, and service number. But he had you fairly well sussed out on his own." Burt laughed so hard his mouth exploded into a hacking cough. Cigarettes weren't his only vice, but they were his favorite. Almost on cue, he pulled out a pack of Marlboro Reds, tapping the bottom like a pro. "Have you two got your stories straight for IAD?" He lit up with his Bic. "Because you need to."

"This is the first time we've spoken since they separated us at the scene," Angie said.

"Whatever else, make sure you are on the same page about everything,

especially how and when you fired your weapons. Contradictions are the only things that could trip you up. It's what IAD lives for."

All of what he said was obvious, but it was nice that he cared. I told him so. I also thanked him for taking the time to swing by.

He puffed away. "I'm still on duty. I'd better get going." He nodded farewell to the two of us and wandered around the front of his car. As he climbed into the vehicle, his hanging cig remained miraculously adhered to his lower lip.

The engine started and Angie and I stepped clear. We waved one last time as Burt surged forward and honked his horn. After he was gone, the outside of the hospital became still and silent, as if blown clean by a gust of wind.

I held my bandaged arms out, displaying them for Angie. "I can't drive myself. I'm helpless."

"Over here," she said, stepping out onto the two-lane roadway and leading me toward the open air parking lot. Our own cruiser was in the fourth spot down on the right side. Angie went around to the passenger door and opened it for me. I ducked inside, tucked in my legs, and then waited for the door to slam shut—which it did, two beats later. Beneath the dashboard, the radio was off, for some official reason, which made the interior of the car quieter than even the front of the hospital was. I'd never been a big fan of silence. I also never liked a whole lot of noise. I'm complicated that way.

Angie climbed into the driver's seat and backed us out of the parking spot. "What do you make of what happened tonight?" she asked me.

I didn't have a good answer for her, so all I did was shrug. I'm not sure if she even saw me do it.

"We'll drop this heap of junk back at the station and turn whatever we have to turn in," she said. "It's weird. I have no idea what we have to do to make the suspension official."

Neither did I. But we'd find out soon enough.

For the rest of the trip over, we sat shoulder to shoulder and said nothing. The goddamned silence was sticking to me like glue.

A HIDING SPOT

I was dropped off at home at five in the morning. Sunrise was still a good hour away, and I was officially on leave.

Angie offered to come inside and assist me with whatever physical tasks I was going to need help with, but I politely declined. I'd need to learn to function on my own. And besides, it wasn't like I'd broken a leg or anything. I tried to ease her concerns by bragging about being ambidextrous, which was somewhat but not entirely true. Before she left, Angie made me promise I wouldn't attempt to drive anywhere on my own. I agreed to this concession, and was then allowed to climb out of her Sentra under my own power. She waited until I had my front door all the way open before her engine revved, and she drove off.

A step inside my darkened home, and I was once again confronted by the ominous prospect of silence. To combat this now seemingly constant state of affairs, I went straight to the television set in the living room and turned it on, leaving the channel where it was, lodged on an all-news network I was watching the last time I was in the house. The health and fitness feature story they were running made me think of the murdered girl. I wondered if the case or my name was going to be mentioned on air. Then I remembered that the broadcast was national, and those East Coast bastards wouldn't give a crap about another dead girl in LA. I considered changing the channel to a local early morning show, but found my energy level waning. I left the t.v. on, dropped my bag on the breakfast bar stool,

and traipsed my way up the stairs.

My condo had one of those newfangled, three-story layouts. The bottommost level was a two-car garage which was accessed via an internal utility stairwell and an automatic door on the back side of the building. The ground level where I entered contained the living room, a kitchen, and a den. Upstairs were three bedrooms, two of which—the ones I didn't sleep in—were totally devoid of furniture.

I had only been living in the place a little over a month. It and a small Inglewood warehouse I coveted were purchased with the inheritance money I received from my father. The final sum was quite large. His estate ended up being split into thirds with my half-brother and his mother, Deanna, and me. Even chopped up, it remained a lot of dough, too much for me alone. I stowed the bulk of it away in a few offshore accounts in case of any future needs—another neat trick I learned from Daddy.

Amusingly, at least from my perspective, it took Dad's lawyers a heckuva long time to track me down. Changing my name turned out to be a better trick than I realized. The money itself, though—that was a double-edged sword. Yes, it was going to make my life as comfortable as the one I had growing up. But it also meant my stepmother Deanna now knew where I lived. She had been calling with visit requests constantly since I'd been found, attempting to use my kid brother as a cudgel to lure me back into the family fold. There was almost certainly a message from her waiting on the machine, there always seemed to be. My godfather Uncle Ray had been calling, too. And there was no reason I would want to talk to him. I made a mental note to change my number. That would solve both problems at once.

I entered my bedroom and hovered between the dresser and the master bath. I really wanted to take a shower, but I didn't want to futz with my bandages so soon after they'd been redressed. I collapsed onto the bed instead. I needed to strip down and take off my shoes, but I was exhausted, on pain relievers, and haunted by the memory of having to give up my gun and badge when Angie and I had swung by the station after the hospital.

After moping about things a good long while, I fell into a half-dream

state. All I could remember from la-la-land was running across a desert landscape, when all of a sudden, I plummeted over the side of a cliff, and woke up. The alarm clock on my nightstand told me I had only been out of it for six minutes—that was it. I tried to get back to sleep, but all I did was stare at the red digital numbers on the face of the clock.

At 5:22, I heard a noise downstairs—a loud clanging. It made me sit straight up. At first I thought it might have been something on the television, which I could still hear. On second thought, what I'd heard sounded more like a car colliding with my garage door. I got back onto my feet so I could go see what had happened. When I was halfway down the stairs, the telephone rang. I ignored it for the moment, barreling around the corner and speeding into the black-as-night garage.

The only vehicle down there currently was my bike, an undersized Kawasaki Ninja. Because I wasn't able to drive it back, my GTO was still in the parking lot at the station. I was hesitant about turning on any lights, not until I knew what was going on. After a moment, I could hear hushed voices on the other side of the big door, and I decided to surprise whoever it was outside. I pressed the controller next to the light switch and the motor began to grind and the segmented door rose up. The first thing I saw were legs, about a half dozen of them. I could make out a couple of startled gasps as the door began to churn, and a one or two of the yokels actually jumped back.

"Get the fuck *out* of here," I said, right at the same instant I realized what was going on.

What I thought were intruders were in fact LAPD tactical officers, in full helmeted gear, including some fancy night vision appliances. Once the door was all the way up, I counted three in the front, and three more racing across the isolated roadway.

"Freeze," one of them said, and then identified themselves as officers of the law.

Since they all had M-16s pointed at me, I did as I was told, even lifting my arms above my head for good measure. "This is my home, fellas. I'm on the job."

"We know who you are," the man in charge said, and then gave a grimace and a hand signal to two of his people, ordering them to move around to the front of the condo.

I was curious as hell. "What was that noise? And what the hell are you doing here?"

The boss man swung under the alcove and began to examine the interior of my garage. Two of his lackeys stood guard as he did so. None of them answered my question.

"I don't mind. Ignore me." My arms remained raised as I stepped backward and used my right elbow to bump the switch and turn on the overhead lights. The Tac guys shouted out in four-part harmony and ripped their night vision goggles from their heads.

"What'd you *do* that for?" the boss man asked me, spitting with anger. He began to blink furiously as his eyes were forced to adjust to the light.

"You weren't answering me," I said. "This is my house. I belong here. You do not."

"We were trying to protect you," he said as he shifted away from me.

"Protect me from what?"

A van came screeching in out of nowhere and hit the brakes. The side doors slid open and two familiar faces leapt out. Detectives Mac Douglass and Sam Racine charged into my garage, like their apparent colleagues, one hundred percent uninvited. Now that I understood who was involved here, I lowered my arms.

The lead Tac officer hooked his goggles onto his belt and spoke to his immediate superiors. "She blinded us, sirs."

"Any sign of the suspect?" Racine asked, completely ignoring my presence.

"Not a trace."

Racine glanced up at the garage door, which had snaked up into the ceiling. He put his hand on a rather large indentation on the metal. I hadn't noticed it had been damaged until he had reached up and touched it.

Douglass unlatched the closet door where my washer and dryer where

kept and gazed inside. "Take the rest of your men and initiate a search," he said in an attempt to sound authoritarian. "Cover as much ground as you can. Remain in pairs at all times."

The armed team left. Douglass closed the door and he and Racine huddled up. I strutted toward them.

"I'm thinking he wanted to use this spot to avoid the sun," Douglass said.

Racine nodded along. "Or he just wanted to get inside and have at her straight away. Indoors, he'd have all day to do what he wanted with her."

"What the fuck are you two talking about?" I asked, planting my feet behind them. My sneakers squeaked against the concrete.

Both men turned to me, but it was Douglass who responded. "You had a visitor. It looks like we scared him off."

The pennies began to drop. "It was that creep from tonight, wasn't it?"

"Yep," Racine said.

I had about a million questions.

"As you can see," Douglass said, cutting me off before I'd had the chance to get the first one out. "We care very much about this suspect. We've been tracking him all night. He's been on your ass since you left the murder scene."

LOWDOWN

To get my answers, I was whisked away.

We traveled southbound in the back of the surveillance van. I was seated on the left side, my hands on my knees, with Douglass and Racine on the right. My only view to the outside world was through the front windshield. We whipped past the headquarters building downtown, and kept driving for another couple of miles. The building we eventually pulled into, from a ground floor parking hub with an automated security system, was a bit nondescript—boxed-shaped with a glass exterior was the most you could say about it. If I was anybody else, I might have had trouble placing it after the fact.

The driver took us over to the elevators in the underground garage, so close that when Racine opened the van door I was able to step out of the vehicle and onto the waiting compartment. I couldn't see anything else in the building, which I guess was the plan. As the elevator headed down, I jokingly asked why they hadn't blindfolded me, but neither of them had a response, humorous or otherwise.

Our ultimate destination was an administrative bullpen, which appeared to take up an entire floor, with a myriad of cluttered desks at its core and enclosed offices along the outer walls. The place was hopping as we strolled down the center aisle, with Douglass and Racine flanking me on both sides. I felt like asking if they wanted to cuff me for good measure. But knowing that I'd be ignored, I kept my smart ass comment to myself.

We began to angle toward one office in particular. It had Douglass's name and title stenciled on the glass entrance. He opened the door for me and told me I could take a seat on the couch, he and Racine would get us all some coffee. Left alone to my own devices, I ignored the couch and took a seat behind the man's desk. There wasn't much sitting out I could snoop through. Almost no paperwork, and the computer terminal was off. I thought about turning it on, but decided instead to kick my legs up and take a moment to regroup.

On their way back, the detectives saw me through the clear enclosure. They stopped for a second, said something vital to one another, and returned to their trek toward the office. Racine held one mug of coffee. Douglass carried two. After they'd both reentered, Pretty Boy offered me the mug with the smiling sunshine character on the side. I leaned forward to accept it, keeping my feet lodged high on the desk. I took a sip as Douglass sat in the chair in front of me and Racine took the spot I was supposed to be filling on the couch.

"Comfortable?" Douglass asked me.

"Very."

"Do you think we may have this reversed?"

"Maybe," I said, holding my mug out and gesturing at the room. "Man, oh, man. This place is so freaking clean. How often do you use it? I mean, it's spotless. What kind of decent detective has a spotless office?"

Racine chimed in, all smiles. "Mac's the fastidious type, like to an insane degree."

"I think the word is professional," Douglass said, correcting us both.

I looked the man over. After a long night of chasing crazy personified, his suit was still pressed like new and not a hair on his head was mussed. "I have serious questions about you," I said, with no further explanation.

"That's not exactly surprising. Questions seem to be your thing. You're always asking them, even when you're supposed to be the one answering them."

"Isn't that what policemen do?"

"It's what detectives do, and you are not that. Not yet, at least."

I shrugged. "Sorry that being attacked and pursued by a cannibalistic lunatic has made me overly curious tonight. Let's chalk it up as one of those things."

"About that, you are not wrong to wonder," Douglass said. "You do deserve an explanation. How about we start off with your lunatic's name—Danny Ray Jessup."

"What are his priors?" I asked.

"None that we know of."

"Then how did you identify him?"

"Through an informant. We got word of him potentially stepping out of line. But the murder call you caught was the first tangible evidence we have of his actual existence. We know he's old, very old. Or so our informant has told us."

"He wasn't decrepit or anything," I said. "I'd put him in his early forties, no older."

"Our source is pretty knowledgeable about such things, and if he says he's old, you can bet he's old. And also, it was dark when you saw him."

I took my feet off the desk, set down the mug, and straightened myself in the chair. "You are being evasive again. Just spit it out and tell me what's really going on here."

Racine's voice sprang out from behind Douglass. "You'll need to sign some non-disclosure documents first."

"All right," I said. "I can sign whatever. But I'm sick and tired of the runaround."

Douglass got up and bent down next to me, unlocking the bottom drawer of his desk. Some standard issue paperwork was stacked on top of a pile of notebooks. The white A1 stock he was after was filled with paragraph after paragraph of legalese and all manner of underlined blank spaces. There was a Department of Justice seal at the top of the document. Douglass retrieved a pen from a cup container and printed my name in the first blank. He then turned to the back page and signed his name as the primary witness, and handed the pen over to me. I scanned through all three pages and then left my scribbly mark in the space next to his.

With his lips pursed, Douglass loomed above me, waiting for me to get out of his chair. I appreciated that he was being stern with me, so I went ahead and switched places with him. It wasn't going to hurt to show him a modicum of respect.

"I'll start off with the basics," he said as he wiggled himself to comfort. "This detail or task force, or whatever you prefer to call it—we investigate and police a rather tiny but volatile segment of the population." He sucked in a hesitant breath. "Okay. What I'm about to say to you next will seem ridiculous at first, but I want you to hear me out. This man Jessup you encountered was extra strong and inhumanly athletic, and he could withstand multiple gunshot wounds. He also ate a woman, gorging on her blood. And like the rest of this subsection of the city I'm talking about, he cannot survive under direct sunlight for very long. Now—what does all of this suggest to you?"

"No way," I said, making the precise connection he had wanted me to make. "That's bullshit. You want me to believe that this asshole is a vampire? Pull the other one. I'm no moron."

"I never said vampire, but what we are dealing with here is certainly of that nature. People elsewhere in this building are trying to figure out what it all means. Sam and I don't have that luxury. We just have characteristics to go on for now—the need for blood to survive, altered strength, extended life, and an absolute aversion to daylight. I did not mention crosses, telepathy, or any other supernatural trapping. I mentioned what I know as fact—what we can prove. I thought you of all people would appreciate that."

"And I do. But I am also not going to call this guy a vampire, because that's stupid."

"Call him what you want. Though you need to remember, you're the one who wanted answers. No promises were made about how you would feel about those answers."

He had me there, the smug prick. "Go on," I said.

Douglass rolled his shoulders, as if he were trying to recall the next line in a prepared speech. "Okay, now that you have an inkling about what we

do around here, I think we need to bring in a higher authority.”

“Like an angel or a ghost?” I said, unable to resist.

Douglass shook his head. “No, our captain.” He motioned at Racine and the big detective zipped out of the room and left us alone. Through the glass wall, I watched him enter a corner office, five doors down.

“You probably should have answered your phone,” Douglass said, his voice low.

“Huh?” I swiveled back to him. I hadn’t been paying attention. My mind was mulling over what he had just told me.

“The phone at your house this morning. It was me calling to tell you to stay put. We had the suspect in our sights.”

“For a second maybe.”

“No, no. We had him. But they can hear things that we can’t. After he had trouble breaking into the garage, he got spooked for some reason and ran. I had twelve eyes on him, and no one saw which direction he took off in.”

“And there’s been no trace of him in the meantime?”

“I haven’t checked in since we left, but there wouldn’t be. Not while the sun is still up.”

I felt the urge to mock him again, but chose not to. I needed to play it cool until I’d heard their Captain out. I may not have bought into their bloodsucking supposition, but it was impossible to believe the department would go to this kind of effort unless there was *something* to it. Jessup was in no way normal when I fought him, that I did know. The truth was, my only option at the moment was to keep an open mind.

I tugged on the hem of my shirt and pulled it down over my hips. I was suddenly aware of how I looked, dressed like a civilian in jeans and a pale blue tee, and about to meet a ranking officer.

“Do you have an idea why Jessup’s so interested in me?” I asked.

“Let’s wait on that,” Douglas said. “That’s what the Captain wants to speak to you about. I think it would be best if we left that to him.”

I had no problem with that, but this Captain sure was taking his sweet-ass time. Racine had been gone five minutes, and then ten. I was getting

fidgety, and Douglass was having less and less to say to me, which was pissing me off. He delayed the answer to every question I brought up. It was just like the van ride over here, dull and tedious, capped by the distinct feeling I was being lead around by nose.

A minute later, Racine and a scrawny Latino fellow with balding hair and a pencil-thin mustache emerged from the corner office and strode in our direction. Douglass stood up behind his desk, so I did the same. Racine entered the room with his boss and introduced us. "Captain Ricardo Castellano...this is Officer Grace Kimble."

I extended my hand so it could be shook, but Castellano waved me off.

"Your wrists are hurt," he said, stepping sideways. "There's no need for pleasantries." He sauntered over to the windowed wall and leaned back against it. "Please, everyone—sit."

We all did. But he stayed standing.

"Officer Kimble," he said. "I had you brought in here this morning to see if you were willing to work with us. This suspect we're currently pursuing seems to have developed an interest in you, and I would like to take advantage of that. I know Mac has already gone over what it is we do in our hidden little corner of the force, but if hard work and a bit of danger doesn't scare you off, I would like to have you deployed over here under my personal purview."

I liked the guy at once. He was direct and to the point, unlike his two helper monkeys. Alas, a significant obstacle remained. "I'm on leave, sir. I cannot work inside the department in any fashion. I am not even sure I'm allowed to be here now, discussing an open case."

He smiled at me. "Your suspension we can get around. But I want to make sure you understand the risks. I'm asking you to play bait for a very nasty fellow. If you say no, I will understand. But I also need to remind you that Jessup will be following you either way. If you agree to do things our way, you will be far safer than if you don't."

"So, you're telling me I have no choice."

"You always have a choice. Didn't I say I would understand if you said no?"

I sat back and crossed my legs. It was a girlie power move, but an effective one. "Phrase it however you like," I said. "But I don't think I had a choice the second Douglass shared your crackpot vampire theory with me. Because I now know what's going around here, and can use it against you, despite the boilerplate waiver I just signed. I have the sinking feeling that means I'm stuck, and I have no choice in this matter whatsoever." I paused and took a sip of my coffee. "Sorry, sir. But that's just the way I see things."

"Told ya," Racine said to Castellano. "You didn't believe me. She's got one hell of a mouth on her."

The big boss shot him a look, one that told him to keep his own trap shut. He then returned his attention to me. "You are not stuck, Officer. But, I can see why you would interpret it in such a way. Is there anything I can do to reassure you—to make certain this alliance comes to fruition? I know you have aspirations. This assignment could be an excellent stepping stone for you. You succeed on a big task force, even a crackpot one, and you will make detective only that much faster."

I became as still as I could, digging in. "Look," I said. "I'm inclined to help out, but I've got no clue about what's really going on here. I've heard there's Fed involvement, and now I hear wild speculation about vampires running around the streets of LA, killing indiscriminately. Before I agree to anything, I needed to know a whole lot more."

Castellano gnawed on his lower lip, considering what I'd said. His counteroffer came swiftly. "I'll have a quiet space set up for you. You'll be given full access to our two latest cases, and the background on this one. Will that amount of information work for you?"

I nodded. "Yeah, that'll work fine."

NEED TO KNOW

Three case files were waiting for me in the bullpen conference room, collected in sienna brown folders, spread out side by side across the hard Formica table. I shuffled to my left and closed the blinds, which opened out into the bullpen proper, and took a seat behind my reading material. I started with the first folder, flipping it open and sliding the other two out of the way.

The case number was BG-0001301. It pertained to one James Parsons, a local slaughterhouse owner, and an apparent not-so upstanding member of the walking undead. The Detail, as it was referred to in the typewritten report, caught wind of his odiousness through a surprise admission during a balls-out Robbery-Homicide interrogation.

Detective Terrence Koi had been working a series of gangland disappearances, which everyone, including the families, naturally assumed were murders. During questioning, one of the prime suspects gave up his gang's latest body disposal method, along with his personal complicity in the killings. It seemed that sometime in the previous eighteen months word had gotten around that a certain slaughterhouse was willing to get rid of human remains at no charge, just as long as the bodies were fresh. The suspect's compatriots saw an opportunity, and went a little wild with the gangland retribution, taking out a sizable chunk of the opposition. The murderous twit Koi had in custody had become scared for his own safety, not because of his fellow gang members, but from the strange behavior of

the friendly-neighborhood slaughterhouse owner. According to the gang-banger, the man had threatening eyes and blood in his mouth. He was quite certain “this dude” had been eating the bodies they had brought to him.

Being a Saturday, a non-work day at the slaughterhouse, the wrath of the LAPD descended upon the Westside home of James Parsons. Surprised by the sudden appearance of the authorities, Mr. Parsons, a paunchy, balding bachelor, decided to burn his house down and make an escape through a tunnel he’d dug from his garage to a house three doors down which he also owned, under an assumed name. A swift call to the fire department kept the blaze from getting too out of hand, but by the time the investigating officers discovered the tunnel and the other house, Parsons was in the wind. The Detail got involved because of what was found in this other house—bedrooms filled with bodies, all in the process of being drained of their blood. These peculiarities were flagged, and the Detail was given jurisdiction over the case—although the report did not say who or what had determined this, only that a handoff had happened, without incident.

Bethany Ganna and Erik Brancawitz were the group detectives assigned. They worked cooperatively with Koi and his partner, staking out the slaughterhouse, which Parsons returned to like a moronic salmon seven days later. They cornered him in the basement of the building and he again attempted to set the location ablaze, this time to no avail. To subdue the super strong Parsons, Ganna and Brancawitz excused Koi’s team and utilized newly issued veterinary-style tranquilizing rifles, tagging the struggling man in the neck and the chest. It took four more direct hits to his torso to bring Parsons down. As he fought the sleep effects of the high-dosage narcotic, the suspect broke through several walls along the ground floor of his business.

Following the description of the somewhat dramatic apprehension, the remainder of the case notes had been redacted with a black marker pen. The lines were fresh, too. The pages had a half-chemical, half-licorice smell about them, which only meant one thing—I was only allowed to know so

much, even though loose ends remained. What happened to Parsons after his detention? What did Robbery-Homicide know about the true nature of this man they'd begun to refer to as "The Bleeder"? I pondered the possibility of such crimes and associations existing, and yet somehow the Detail remained a relatively unknown organization. The chances of that happening seemed remote to me, but I had been in the dark until Jessup, so these people obviously knew how to cover their tracks. I went to the next file.

Case BG-0001304 had been a homegrown Detail extravaganza from the beginning. Douglass and Racine worked this one, prompted by an informant they referred to in their report as FANCYPANTS—always typed out in full capital letters. FANCYPANTS had called in from a Pasadena pay phone on March the twelfth and informed Racine of a rogue fellow night owl who had left the Underground and was trolling vulnerable high schools for blood. The name the informant gave them was Delilah Theressi, and she was operating in and around the city of Glendale, the last this person had heard. His description of her was red-headed, beautiful, and voluptuous. The informant then claimed he had his own people out looking for her, but she'd be hard to detect in the vicinity of a high school due to how young she looked herself—fifteen or sixteen was the best approximation he could give. Racine pressed him on this particular matter, insisting on knowing Theressi's actual age. FANCYPANTS did not know that for sure, but he had been aware of Theressi since the 20s, but had only become close to her in the last couple of decades. Racine made special note of this, suggesting that the informant might have an emotional attachment to the woman, and it'd be preferable if the Detail caught up with her first. That last bit ended up being wishful thinking on his part. It took six months before the Detail received any kind of hit on this young/old woman. From everything I read in the report, they'd pressed hard too, going as far as checking the backgrounds of student transfers from every valley high school. But Theressi was too sly for that. Why actually attend school when you could just pretend to?

Since she had left the Underground, Theressi had become friendly with a group of post-pubescent teenage boys. In exchange for daily doses

of bloodletting, which she couched as a hot and kinky fetish, Theressi would have intercourse with each of the eight friends until they'd worn themselves out. They came back often, and brought additional willing victims. This adorable little scam came to a screeching halt when a parent discovered a deep puncture mark on her son's neck and phoned the police, telling them that some young slut had been drinking her boy's blood like it was going out of style. The reported assault went straight to the Detail. Douglass and Racine met the boy in question, and when he could not remember the girl's exact address, he agreed to take them to the place he kept calling her parents' apartment. On their way to the location, and free of Mommy's influence, the boy explained to the detectives how sweet the girl was. All the boys liked her, a lot. She treated them as something special. "It was true love," he said. "Real love." I restrained my urge to vomit, and kept reading.

The detectives and the boy arrived and made the apartment right away—it was on the second story, two doors from the end. Racine got out to watch over the place while Douglass took the kid home. When he got back, a Tactical team was in place. They all agreed it was safest to move in immediately because school was still in session and Theressi would most likely be on her own. They went door to door and removed everyone from the surrounding apartments, just to be safe. The Tac team went in from the front.

The apartment was dark, and at first there was no sign of the suspect. But as they were moving to the first bedroom, a "stunningly attractive redhead" strolled out into the hall wearing only a pair of yellow panties. This distracted the officers just long enough for her to pounce, ping-ponging along the side of the wall and killing two of the men outright, and knocking another two unconscious. She raced into the living room where Racine and Douglass were waiting for her, their tranquilizer rifles in position to fire. She was quick according to their notations, the quickest of the subjects they'd ever encountered. She dodged every shot and bounced off the ceiling, coming down in a crouch on top of Douglass. She was about to tear into him when Racine came up from behind and shot her twice in the

back with the tranqs. She swung wildly and knocked him down, pulling out the needles and resetting her rage on him. Douglass took no chances, scrambling onto his haunches and pulling out his traditional sidearm. He gave her one last warning, and when she did not respond—and with his partner's life in danger—he pulled the trigger, shooting her in the temple. She fell over, DOA. Like before, this was the end of the report, the remainder of the pages blacked out. I was fine with it, though. I'd read enough.

In the third folder I found the Danny Ray Jessup file, up to date enough to include a few rough notes on his failed attempt to break in through my garage door. The initial tip-off about Jessup also sprang from the informant FANCYPANTS. He called in the same manner, but from an alternative Pasadena location. This time out, he came off as extremely concerned about Jessup, whom he described as the most “ancient” resident of the Underground and a giant man with one hell of a temper. Sometimes Jessup responded to young women, FANCYPANTS said, as a way to help subdue him. He liked blondes in particular. Despite what the informant calls a gentle southern drawl, no one in this Underground wanted anything to do with Jessup, primarily because of the way he took care of himself—which was not at all. The informant was convinced that the constant isolation is what pushed the guy over the edge, and that is something he had been warning Douglass and Racine about it. He said one more thing: “Sooner or later, we all lose it.” The statement struck me as important, although I couldn't have explained why. The rest of the information pertained to searches, all of which were useless until Angie and I stumbled across the murder of Kara Tia Manning. Reading her name felt like a blow from a sledgehammer. All the time I had spent thinking about her, this was the first time I had read or been given her actual name. I had been isolated from the case right off, so there is no way I could have known. According to the file, her identity still hadn't been released to the public.

I closed everything up. I knew what I was going to do. I'd known before I had asked to be allowed into the loop. But when you had the kind of leverage I had, it'd be stupid not to do some due diligence first.

I pushed my chair back and exited the conference room, leaving the files where they were. A middle-aged receptionist was positioned nearby, a pleasant woman who had escorted me in. I told her I was done with the files and she could retrieve them. I then asked her if Captain Castellano was in his office. She said that he was, so I thanked her and tromped my way over to his door. When I got there, I could see him through the glass. His head was buried in his computer screen, which meant I needed to knock first. He looked up when I did, and motioned me in.

"Not exactly light reading, was it?" he said as I made my way toward him.

I brought myself to a stop a few inches from the lip of his desk, clicking my heels and locking my hands behind my back. "Let me say this, sir. I'm still unconvinced that these people are vampires, not in any mythological sense. But they are dangerous, that's indisputable. And they need to be brought down. In the two cases I was privy to, I have to say, you people did a decent job doing that."

"Thank you," he said.

"I don't give praise easily."

"I wouldn't imagine that you would." His eyes squinted. "Do you have any other questions?"

"Several. Let's start with how long the Detail has been in operation?"

"Five years. I have been in command the entire time."

"And how long have the Feds been involved?"

"Sixteen months. They came to us and provided this building. Before that, we had a couple of smallish offices in Santa Monica." I was suspicious about any and all Federal involvement, and I think Castellano could tell because he attempted to cover right away. "I've been told they assist us only because we have a mutual interest. But that said, I don't hear much from Washington most of the time. We only have one liaison officer on site. His name is Special Agent Jerome Parker. If you stick around and help us out, I'm sure you'll be meeting him. He's pleasant enough." Castellano held out his hands and did a little half-shrug. "He hasn't pissed me off so far."

He was trying to win me over, and he kind of had.

"This question may seem strange," I said. "But are you aware of who I really am?"

"Yes. You are Grant McMartin's long-lost daughter. Special Agent Parker informed me of this fact a few hours ago. I was just scanning through a few of your father's many public exploits. My condolences on your loss, by the way."

"Thank you. But right now I'm more concerned about what the FBI thinks about my presence on this case. Before I came west, I was definitely persona non grata with my father and his minions."

Castellano leaned forward so nonchalantly, his limbs could have been made of rubber. "I personally I have heard no objection to your participation," he said. "And I wouldn't give a damn if I had. This is my team, and I pick my own players."

I could tell he believed what he was saying, but you cannot give the Feds an inch. And after accepting the building we were in, and whatever other fancy toys they'd provided, the Captain had already given up quite a bit.

"One last thing," I said. "If my assistance is significant in any way, I'd like to be kept on here full time."

"That shouldn't be a problem," Castellano said, tapping his finger energetically. "So, does that mean you're in?"

I could feel the pain in my wrist flare up, but that wasn't about to stop me. "You bet. I'm most definitely in."

ALONE

I spent the rest of the day sleeping on a couch.

I awoke sometime after five. Douglass was shaking me, gibbering on and on about how we needed to get our butts into gear before the sun went down. Forgoing the impulse to slap the shit out of him, I sat up, scratched the skin beneath my bra strap, and yawned.

“The van is waiting,” he said before helping me to my feet and escorting me out of whatever office I had been stashed into.

I knew exactly where we were headed, but I didn’t see the point. Jes-sup had already tried to get inside my condo, and he was stopped by the presence of the Detail’s goon squad. Even a dimwitted brute like him could figure out it was too risky to come back when there was a possibility someone would still be standing guard. But Castellano and company insisted. There was a process they went through on these things, and one of the first steps was to lull the subject into a feeling of self-satisfaction, whatever that means. I’d have thought just catching the freak was the most important thing, but apparently I was wrong. For a group like the Detail, secrecy was priority number one—first, last, and always.

While I was sleeping, a tech team had been busy transforming my home. Cameras and other devious forms of surveillance equipment had been situated in nearly every conceivable location. I didn’t learn about any of it until I was in the van, seconds from being let out, in the midst of Douglass’ final spiel. He was pummeling me with instruction after

instruction, reminding me of everything that needed to be taken into account over the course of the evening. The Detail itself was remaining close by. They'd appropriated the buildings on both sides of me, and two more at the front and back gates. Once I went inside, I was to go about my normal activities, as if nothing else was going on. A secondary phone system had been installed in the kitchen and in my bedroom. Douglass said I'd recognize the devices right away—they were both red and placed next to my generic store-bought phones. If I needed to contact anyone in our group, I was to use that line. Someone would always be on the other end for me. If there were any suspicious noises, I was to call in at once, no hesitations. According to Douglass, there was no such thing as a mistake or a false hit. I let him simmer for a moment after he was done, staring at him blankly to let him know his Mr. Cool act had no effect on me whatsoever.

"May I get out now," I said, pushing him aside with the back of my bandaged hand.

"Do you understand everything I've told you?"

Half out of the vehicle, I peered back at him. "Do you think I'm retarded or something?"

"No."

"Then I understand. Nothing you just said was that earth-shattering." I reached over and slammed the door on him. The van surged ahead, leaving me in front of the concrete path which wound up to my swanky new front door. The sun above me had just begun to dim. After all of Douglass' grouching, there had been no reason to hurry. We'd arrived in plenty of time.

I swept inside and locked the deadbolt behind me. Dragging myself to the kitchen, I found nothing out of place, no trace at all that workmen had turned the place into a virtual fortress. Even the television was still on, blasting out the news, just like I had left it.

My stomach growled, which reminded me to eat. I hadn't done so since Angie and I hit a drive-thru after we'd been suspended. I feared there wouldn't be much for me in the fridge, but when I opened it, I found just the opposite. The shelves were filled with fresh fruits and vegetables. A loaf of bread was stowed in there as well, the wheat kind I always bought

for myself—and stacks of sliced sandwich meat of every variety. Clearly, a couple of creepos had been digging through my trash to see what I liked. I didn't think about that for very long. I was too hungry to give a crap. I made myself a sandwich instead—a ham and turkey concoction—and wolfed it down standing at the counter. I finished swallowing and filled a glass of water from an inset dispenser on the fridge, and snagged a red apple for good measure. I turned off the lights and the television and went upstairs to shower and change.

Halfway up the steps, the phone rang. I wasn't sure if it was one of the new red ones or not, so I hustled into my room. The two phones were so close together on my nightstand, I wasn't positive which one was clamoring at me. But since the trilling was familiar, I figured it was my home line. I set down the apple and the water and picked up the receiver. The tan cord was twisted into knots and dragged the bottom half of the phone with it as I brought the damn thing to my face.

"Hello," I said as I attempted to stretch out the kinked-up cord.

"Gracie, it's me Angie." My partner's voice was hushed, unsure of herself. "Are you sleeping?"

"Not currently. I've been sleeping all day, though."

"Me, too," she said.

I finally gave up on the cord and let it do whatever it was going to do. I fell back onto my unmade bed. "What lazy bastards we are. It's not like something big happened to us last night or anything."

Angie tried to laugh, but she didn't sound that enthused. "Do you wanna do something tonight?"

I was forced to lie to her without a single second of preparation. "I can't. The evil stepmother and baby brother are in town, and I have been shanghaied into dinner. Sorry about that. I know it sucks being alone right now." Angie had only just broken up with her live-in girlfriend, which was all secret and hush-hush, so she was on her own in a way that she wasn't really used to. It made me hate myself for lying to her. She was a fucking great friend.

"Wait a minute," she said. "Did you just tell me you agreed to have

dinner with your stepmother? You hate her. Why would you do that?"

Good question, I thought. "She just showed up at my door with Grant Jr. and I couldn't say no, not to him."

"I bet you wish you could go back to being incognito again, huh? I think you liked living family-free."

"It was ideal while it lasted." On my dresser, directly across from me, I saw what looked like a rifle laid out in front of the mirror. I didn't tend to leave that sort of thing sitting around, so it sure wasn't mine. I kept on talking. "Nothing lasts forever, sadly. Sometimes your hand is forced, and you just have to be social."

"Do you want to get lunch tomorrow? I can pick you up."

"Sounds good." I sat up and slid off the front of the bed. "But I'll have to get back to you. I need to make sure Deanna hasn't made further plans." I approached the dresser. There was a note with the rifle. The cord was keeping me from getting close enough to read it.

"I'll call you in the morning to check in. You have yourself a good time tonight," Angie said with a snicker.

"Smart ass. I'll talk to you later." I pressed the bottom button on the receiver and tossed the phone back in the direction of the bed. I could hear it plop twice on top of the covers.

As I examined the rifle more closely, I could see that it was of the dart-firing variety. The note, written in block letters, read: THERE'S A HANDGUN VERSION IN THE KNIFE DRAWER IN THE KITCHEN. YOU NEVER KNOW. ONE OF THESE MIGHT COME IN HANDY. I picked up the long-necked firearm and checked it, making sure I understood how the darts were loaded. Once I got a handle on the piece, I put it back down.

I stood in front of the mirror and unfurled my bandages. One wrist was feeling fairly decent, but the bad one still ached. Ready to shower, I slipped my t-shirt over my head, only remembering the surveillance cameras as I was wadding the garment into a ball. I stared at the walls, searching for where the peepers might be looking in. I saw no sign of anything. Fortunately, I had never been that modest. I stripped down to my bare skin and

VIGIL

flipped the bird on both fingers, spinning around in a slow, 360° circle.
Then and only then did I make my way to the shower.

TOGETHER

We played the waiting game for four days, until by mutual acclimation to reality, the entire team decided to give up. Jessup wasn't going to show, not to my condo anyway. Nobody pointed fingers, but only an idiot wouldn't get that it was time to try something else. Annoyingly for moi, the something else the Detail came up with involved me in an evening gown, at a restaurant with one of my drooling male colleagues. Castellano let me choose between Racine and Douglass, and since not even a crazed vampire would believe I would date someone as tough to look at as Racine, his male model partner won the assignment. Douglass was grinning from ear to ear when I had to make my decision in front of everyone at the bullpen. That time I did slap him, but not very hard. I considered it fair warning.

For the new plan to fool anyone, though, we would have to make a genuine show of things. But we also had no idea where Jessup was or how much he was actually seeing. This meant, when the sun went down, everything had to be played for real. Douglass needed to pick me up at my place in whatever piece of crap he drove and show me the town. And I had to pretend to enjoy it.

At 3 p.m., I was escorted back to the condo and told to wait for a call informing me that Douglass was on his way. I assured everyone I had suitable clothing for what was now being called the 'Big Date.' I was a woman after all and sometimes needed such things. But nobody, including Castellano, would take my word for it. To refute everyone's biased opinion of me,

I led Beth Ganna upstairs to get her approval of the dress. When she saw it, she said it would work fine, and then burst out laughing.

"Douglass is a breast man," she said, sliding her fingers down the sheer fabric. "You'd better watch yourself."

I had to admit, the dress was pretty low-cut. But it was also the only fashionable one that I owned anymore.

Ganna and I had been spending a lot of time together, and she'd turned out to be an okay cop. Because she was Polynesian, she looked enough like Angie where she could pretend to be her in public, granting her the thankless job of escorting me back and forth from work. At the beginning, I suggested bringing Angie herself into the fold, but I was overruled on that one. Too many novices, they said. This forced me to keep lying to Angie. We still hadn't gotten together to hang out, and our hearing date was just a few days away. I felt like shit about all the subterfuge, but there wasn't much I could do.

Douglass' reservation was for eight. He arrived in a blue Camaro at a quarter till. I watched him through the peephole. He was wearing a smarter suit than usual, and I liked the color on him, charcoal gray. He rang the doorbell and I checked myself in the mirror I had hanging next to my door. Because my hair was already short, I kept it down. I'd also dabbed on a bit of eyeliner and painted my lips red, which I'd rarely done since I'd escaped the jet set world my father was so obsessed with. The infamous dress, now slung over me, was knee-length and black, and my tits were definitely on display. I opened the door so the gawking could begin.

But it never did. Douglass was a totally different guy, smiling and happy, and only looking me straight in the eyes. He said hello with a lilt to his voice and leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. Then, as he pulled away, he squeezed my arm. He smelled good, and I told him so as we walked arm and arm to his car, which he claimed to have rebuilt all on his own. Neither of us said much while we were en route. He didn't take the 10—that I did mention. He thought a scenic drive would be better, in case someone was following. I was annoyed at myself for not thinking of that. It was a good thing one of us was paying attention.

The old-world Italian restaurant he had chosen seated us at once. There was only one other couple in there that I could see. The place was smaller than I was expecting, but still very upscale—and not too far from my condo. The large front picture windows, which made the space easy to see into, were operationally advantageous as well. The spot was perfect, as far as I could tell.

Douglass held out the chair for me, and I sat down. He danced back around me and took a seat himself. The waiter tried to initiate some small talk, but Douglass cut him right off and ordered white wine for the both of us. Not long after, we were on our own and free to speak.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

My head tilted to one side, not sure what he meant by the compliment. “He can’t hear us, you know. Even if he’s out there spying, we can still talk normally. You don’t have to lay it on so thick.”

“I hear you. But am I allowed to say what I think?”

“You are allowed to say whatever the hell you want to say.”

“Then I say you’re beautiful.”

He crossed his arms, waiting for me to respond. I felt like I had no choice but to reciprocate. “Thank you. You don’t look so bad yourself.”

He smiled. “You realize that’s the nicest thing you have ever said to me.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean anything. We barely know each other. Give me some time. I usually warm up to the people I work with.”

“That’s not what I’ve heard.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. You have a notorious reputation. You must know that.”

“Not everyone appreciates a person who speaks the truth.” I glanced out the window, realizing that I had no clue where the Detail was watching us from. I was so caught up in the issues surrounding the damn dress, I didn’t ask any questions before I left the bullpen. I knew I wasn’t miked up, so I could only assume that Douglass was. And there had to be some sort of team watching us out there, or possibly one in the restaurant as well. The Detail had been impressively thorough so far in their other field

actions. Why wouldn't they be thorough in here as well? I was about to ask Douglass if this was a real establishment when the waiter returned with our drink order on a tray. I looked him over as he poured the wine into each of our glasses, but his square face was not the least bit familiar.

"Are you ready to order?" he asked, leaving the remainder of the bottle near Douglass and standing with the tray hanging at his side.

Douglass again did the honors for the both of us, telling the waiter we would like two Chicken Marsalas—my favorite dish. There was no way he could pull a bullseye like that without outside assistance.

"You seem to know a lot about me," I said once the waiter was out of earshot.

Douglass took a drink of his wine. "Is this really what we want to talk about?"

"Yeah, I think need to. Obviously someone has been giving up a few of my secrets. And since I'm only friendly with a couple of people on the force, I wonder who that could be? Burt Kendrick maybe?"

"I will not give up my sources." He set down his glass. "But this defensiveness is the kind of thing that people point out about you. You are not the least bit trusting and you domineer every situation you are placed into. One of your superiors even went as far as to say you are not a team player. Do you realize how damaging that is to a cop's reputation? The literal kiss of death."

It wasn't the first time I'd heard this crap, but I'd been the one who had pushed things, so I couldn't get too defensive.

"I neither condone or reject anything you've just regurgitated. But you've been working with me for a decent stretch now. What do you think of my ability to be a team player?"

"I can't say, not with any perspective. I think you're beautiful, remember? That kind of trumps everything else, at least in my mind."

I leaned back, instantly suspicious. "Was tonight your idea, Detective? Is all of this your lame way of getting close to me?"

"You don't seem to be having such a bad time."

"I never said that I was. But I might start to if I find out that tonight

has been one big scam.”

“It’s not a scam.”

“The Detail is watching us then?”

“They are. And listening to us.”

“And you don’t mind letting your feelings be known while everyone you work with is listening in?”

“Only Sam is listening in. And he knows precisely how I feel about you. He’s known since the moment we met at the murder scene.”

“Then maybe I should have picked him for this date,” I said, in an attempt to knock Douglass down a peg or two. “Racine would never use an important operation to try and get into my pants.”

“Give him half a chance he might. I’m surprised the whole department doesn’t hit on you. There are not many cops who look like you do.” His eyes widened and his head began to sway. “Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.”

His obsession with my looks irked me, so I glanced away. “I loathe compliments. You’re not going to seduce me that way.”

When I turned back a few seconds later, he was still staring at me.

“You’re lying,” he said. “You love it.”

“I’m many things, but I’m no liar. You, on the other hand, could be that or worse, and I’m starting to get concerned. I seem to have picked up two lunatic admirers. Tell me, Douglass, am I going to need special protection from *you* after all this is over?”

“Come on,” he said, his voice taking on a whine. “Can you just call me Mac from now on?”

“Why? Is that important to you?”

“Yeah, it is. You always refer to me by my last name, and I’d rather you didn’t. My friends call me Mac. My partner calls me Mac. There’s no reason you can’t call me that as well. It’s what everyone at work calls me.”

He had a point. “Mac is short for what...MacArthur?”

“Mackenzie.”

I made a sickened face, my nostrils flaring. “Isn’t that a girl’s name?”

“It can be used either way. But that’s why I prefer to be called Mac. That and the fact that my last name is also a first name. All I can say is my

parents weren't thinking straight when they named me."

"Oh, don't sell them short. Maybe they realized something you still haven't."

The kitchen door swung open and the smell of sautéed mushrooms wafted inward. I was hungrier than I thought, and the food was taking forever, like it always does in the swankier establishments. I began to eye my glass of wine. I'd become incredibly relaxed and wanted to partake, but I knew I needed my wits about me, for any number of reasons. It was best to wait. The most I could allow myself was a few swallows with dinner, and that was it.

Before our chitchat could continue, the waiter zoomed up behind me with a hand-pushed dinner cart. I told him I had the Marsala, but neither he nor my 'date' laughed. I thought it was a fairly decent joke, but I seemed to be in the minority on that one. The waiter gave us both our meals and made himself scarce, declaring that he would be back in a moment, in case there was something else we needed.

I dug right in. So did Mac. The name conversation was dropped, and I attempted to give the guy the benefit of the doubt. This wasn't the strangest way a man had ever tried to tell me he was attracted to me. The truth was, most men were too afraid of me to even broach the subject. Mac may not have been thinking things through, but he did have some balls on him, which I counted as one of his better qualities. I also liked that his light blue eyes glistened every time he looked at me, and that his smile seemed so genuine. The guy was just incredibly fucking handsome, but I was not about to say that out loud.

We finished our meals, doing next to no talking in the process. I think both our minds were elsewhere. He paid the bill and asked me what I wanted to do next. I suggested we go back to my place and make it look like someone was getting lucky. He didn't argue. While we were in his car, I looked around for a radio so I could call in for an update. He said there wasn't one. Updates would have to wait until we were safely inside the house.

We pulled in front of my condo. He got out, opened my door, and held

my hand as we strolled up the walkway.

"You do realize," I said. "There is absolutely no chance that I'm going to fuck you. I'm only taking this act so far."

"And I wouldn't want you to. Not yet. Not with all those cameras in your place." He leaned in super close to me, pressing his waist against mine. "But I don't want this to be the only time we go out." After a long and mutual gaze, he kissed me, his fingers grazing the small of my back and sliding downward until he had completely cupped my ass. You can say what you will about my professionalism, but the guy had my head spinning. It had been months, and apparently, I was more hard up than I realized.

"I need you to unlock the door," he whispered. "We only have to give him so much of a show. Unless, of course, you *like* putting on a show."

I dug out my house key from my purse and slipped it into the upper lock. I went through the doorway first, his hand still grasping at my hip. It must have been the whole 'on the job' thing. Because right there and then, I'd never wanted a man more in my life.

ON PATROL

We had dinner again the next night, and went to see a movie the night after that. Each of the operations went smoothly, with no trouble, no sex, and absolutely no sign of Jessup.

Getting me back into a squad car, phase three of our ever-evolving plan, was moved up with little fanfare to night eight. Beth Ganna would continue to play my partner, outfitting herself into an actual uniform for the first time in years. Personally, I was feeling loads better. My bad wrist was actually usable again. A twinge of pain remained, but it was nothing I couldn't manage.

When I arrived at the building early that afternoon, my old squad car appeared to be waiting for me in a front parking spot. I wandered over to check the clunker out. Upon closer inspection, I figured out that it wasn't the same vehicle. The license plate matched, but there were no dents on the driver's side door or chips in the front windshield. It couldn't be the one Angie and I normally used, not with how slow Maintenance was about fixing things. A squad car was still a squad car, however—and it would certainly fool the general public.

We endured a full rundown of the evening's planned events in the conference room, and then Beth and I left the building in our stand-in black and white and headed north toward my old beat. We were to remain on major thoroughfares until told differently. Three follow cars would have us in their sights at all times. These assigned teams were good at remaining

invisible, too. I never saw a single trace of their presence the entire night.

Before we left, I brought up the possibility of running into unrelated trouble. We were going to be in a police vehicle after all—and people in need tended to approach patrolmen when they encountered them on the streets. No one believed that such a chance existed, since we were only taking staged calls. Yet a half hour into our patrolling, an elderly woman flagged us down outside of her squat little home. I rolled my window down and greeted her. The woman approached the vehicle and told me she smelled gas and wanted one of us to go inside the home to see if we could smell it too. I couldn't do it myself because I was still officially suspended, according to Castellano's latest proclamation—although I did have special dispensation to be assisting the Detail. Assisting the public was another matter altogether. I suggested Beth go in and do it as rapidly as possible, but she did not feel good about leaving me alone, so she radioed for assistance. As we waited for said assistance to arrive, the old woman grew more and more impatient. Her pets were inside and she needed our help—wasn't that what police people were supposed to do? Unable to leave the vehicle, I felt helpless, primarily because the woman was not wrong in her assessment. Three minutes after the call went in, Mac and Racine pulled up behind our squad car, and waved us onward. We wished the lady luck and pulled back into traffic. The woman gave no acknowledgment. She was too wrapped up in the explanation of her plight to her handsome new savior.

"You see. I told them we would run into some kind of trouble," I said. "But did they listen to me?"

Beth slid into the left turn lane at the intersection. The light was going from yellow to red as she said, "The bigwigs assume the world operates only in the manner they wish it to. They do not care about such things as reality. Life is only about what they want or need. And let's not forget, it's been a long time since any of them have been out on patrol. The chances of a decent sense of recall from that group of lightweights is way, way out of the realm of possibility."

I grinned. I couldn't have said it better myself.

The light shifted to green and Beth turned southbound.

“Mac sure was looking good today,” she said.

“Was he? I didn’t really notice. I could only see him out of the corner of my eye.”

“I hate to pry, but what’s going on with the two of you? You’ve thrown the whole office into a tizzy. Our usually tough-minded co-workers have transformed into these gossiping little teenagers.”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know it had become such a big thing. “He’s a good looking guy, I guess. And he’s made it clear he’s got feelings for me. I’m just not sure if it’s mutual. I’m not one of those sickening kind of girls whose life revolves around finding a husband. The idea of that bores me. I just want to do the job.”

I could tell that Beth was as caught up in the soap opera of it all as much as anyone else. When she talked about Mac and me, her eyes went all dreamy.

“I always thought Mac looked like that movie star. I can’t think of the guy’s name he reminds me of.” She patted the wheel and twisted in her seat as she tried to force herself to recall.

“Greg Tonell,” I said. “We went to see one of his movies last night. It was incredibly stupid. But Mac likes the guy, probably because he resembles him so much.”

Beth’s head bounced up and down. “That’s it...*yeah*. That’s who I was thinking of. He looks almost exactly like Greg Tonell.”

He did, particularly if you squinted. But I could have cared less.

“You’re gorgeous like that, too,” she said, unprompted. “Not that you look like someone. But you do have that movie star quality about you. People just don’t look like you in real life. You glow. Guys must be chasing after you all the time.”

I stared out my window. “Yeah, all the time.”

Mercifully, the conversation drifted away from my incandescent attractiveness and we returned to the patrol patterns we had sketched out back at the bullpen—around and around ten square blocks, making ourselves as visible as was humanly possible. Our first staged emergency call

was at a strip mall where we had to go to the back room of a grocery store to arrest a 'shoplifter.' While we were there we shared some coffee with two of the guys from the Detail. After an appropriate amount of time had passed, we put one of the guys, the one who was playing the shoplifter, into cuffs and frog-marched him out to the car which was parked out in front of the busy storefront. A couple of streets down, we handed him off to two more of our team in front of the station—my old station. I had to be careful not to be seen, so the exchange was done in a side parking lot. It was completely against procedure—but unless Jessup was a cop in a former life—he'd never be able to tell the difference.

Our next handful of calls were staged domestics, loaded up with people from the Detail I had yet to meet. All four 'incidents' went down as expected, and then Beth and I went back to patrolling. This time out, we were given free rein to swing through as many dark and unsavory neighborhoods as we could before the sun came up. The hope was to draw some kind of visual on Jessup. Once we got back to the bullpen, we found out that we had done just that. The suspect had been spotted three times, observing from assorted rooftops, and up high on an overhanging tree branch.

Our patience had paid off, which set up the next night perfectly.

THE OLD STOMPING GROUNDS

It may not have ended that way, but as of sunset, April the fifteenth felt like the previous night all over again. Such was the monotonous truth of modern, street-level police work.

Beth and I left the bullpen following another extended briefing, and restarted our patrol. We put some workman-like effort into varying our path through our tiny quadrant of Los Angeles, yet in general terms, we went how we went before. We did not get stopped by any citizens, and we did not take any faked calls. There was only one task for the evening, and if all went well, this would be the last night of carnal carousing for one Danny Ray Jessup.

The Detail's choice for an ensnarement site had my full support. In fact, I was the one who had first suggested it. The Las Rosas townhouse complex made for an ideal location, for no other reason than Jessup might feel safe there. He'd gotten away with killing someone in that particular venue before—and putting ourselves into his mind—he could probably get away with it again. It was all guesswork, but it made a lot of sense. I also liked the idea of getting another shot at him in the complex where I missed snapping the cuffs on the last time out.

At six minutes after eleven, we received a call on the radio. I didn't recognize the voice, but we were told to mount up and head to Las Rosas. The operation was already in progress.

The Detail had emptied the complex out over the course of the day

and taken over the site in its entirety. I don't know how they convinced the occupants to leave without a fuss, but they'd been pulling off similar feats over the course of the week I'd been working for them. Clearing a whole townhouse complex was just the restaurant and the grocery store on a greater scale.

The plan as written called for seventy-five Detail members in the housing units themselves—all with a second story, bird's-eye view of the door Beth and I were about to knock on. Mac would be positioned somewhere among the masses, so would Racine—and even Castellano was deigning to show his face. Snipers would be on the surrounding buildings, ten of them at last count. A helicopter was also at the ready, as well as a fleet of twenty-four vehicles to block every way in or out. We were as safe as you can be in an urban environment, and I genuinely thought we were ready.

We pulled into the front entrance and I pointed out the spot Angie and I had parked in a week before. Beth thought we should take that one for no other reason than we could. We climbed out of the vehicle and snapped on our caps.

"It was raining before," I said as we walked the pathway between buildings.

"Well, that's one thing even Castellano couldn't recreate."

Beth had her hand on her weapon. We were both armed with tranquilizer handguns, and mine was shifting strangely on my hip—a bad fit in the holster. The tranqs were all we were supposed to be carrying, but Beth advocated that we both wear .22s on our ankles to be safe. The mini-gun down there gave me more comfort than I cared to admit. Firearms were a calming adornment for me, and they always would be.

As we entered the courtyard, lights were on in several of the upstairs windows. We cut through the damp grass, on a swift approach to unit 2133. For a brief second, I wondered which house Mac was in, but then cleared my head of such brain-dead stupidity. Beth and I strolled up shoulder to shoulder and knocked on the double door twice, just as we were instructed. The porch light to my right made the entryway as bright as day, and blinded my peripheral vision. Loud music was playing inside

the house, some sort of bouncy pop song which sounded like I must have heard it before, but probably never had. We stood there a full minute without an answer. This was also planned. But when the lag dragged on a minute beyond that, Beth and I looked at one another. I heard a female scream soar above the music and my back went up. I went to pull out my gun, but Beth stopped me, placing her hand on my bent forearm.

"Wait," she said.

I gritted my teeth. "Jeez, what the fuck are they trying to prove in there? We're on a goddamned timetable, aren't we?"

"We are."

Beth seemed as confused as I was, but that wasn't going to make the door open. And the music was only getting louder. She snagged hold of the portable radio on her belt and began to ask questions in a perturbed and angry voice.

I turned to get a better look at what was going on behind us, taking a step away from the glare of the porch light. The pool in the courtyard of the complex was to my direct south, and it was glowing blue. All of a sudden, one of the upstairs lights on the frontmost building went out. In succession, all the others blinked out as well, one by one. Lodged in a now deeper darkness, the pool glowed bluer. Then, Beth stopped talking in mid-sentence and the porch light went dead. So did the music.

I spun around, but Beth was no longer there.

I raced back to the door and wetness fell down on top of me. At first I thought it was raining again, but what was coming down was too thick to be precipitation. I craned upward and saw a darkened figure on the roof holding a smaller figure by the neck. It was Jessup—and he was cackling.

I pulled out my tranq gun and shot him in the leg. It startled him and he dropped what he'd been holding. Beth plummeted downward into the rose bushes, compressing their size in half. Her arms dangled amidst the branches, but she wasn't moving. I continued backing up, hoping my first shot had had some kind of effect on Jessup. He held tight on the roof, his coat flapping in the breeze.

I called for help, my eyes searching for any kind of cover.

Jessup leapt, plowing down on top of me feet first. I crumpled into the grass and lost hold of my weapon. I remained flat out, gasping for breath and unable to think. He began to parade around me, watching my every move tantalizingly. After a while, I attempted to crawl away, in hopes of reaching my .22. But whenever I could create any distance between the two of us, Jessup would grab whatever appendage of mine was closest and drag me back to the spot where he had knocked me down. This went on for several minutes. I screamed and screamed, yet no one came out to help me. My predicament became crystal clear. If I was to survive, it was going to be on my own.

“Do you want me?” I said, my attempt at speech was strained and garbled. “You can have me if you want. Just come closer. I want you, too.”

“Not stupid,” he said in his creepy drawl. “You’ll get me if I get too close.”

I planned to *get* him either way. The .22 was my secret, my lifeline. Whether he ever got close or not, I *could* wound him. That would at least give me a chance to run.

“Tying ya up would do no good,” he said. “Gonna need to break ya.”

I had no idea what that even meant, but I couldn’t wait any longer. I reached down for my ankle, except he was reaching for it at the same time—and he was a lot quicker than I was. In a single twist of his wrist, he flipped me over and brought his fist down on the base of my spine. The blow was hard and solid, and I felt nothing below the waist afterward. Maybe I yelled out in pain, maybe I didn’t. But how could I have not? Breathing heavily, he lifted me up by the scruff of my neck and struck me in the back again, this time dead center between the shoulder blades. I could no longer feel my arms or my neck. When he set my paralyzed body back down in the grass, he did so gently. I don’t know how I stayed conscious, but I did.

He left me where I was and returned to the rose bushes where Beth’s body had fallen. He began gathering up flowers, and did not stop until his arms were full. I watched him, and all I could think about was the prospect of him eating me. I knew that was what he was going to do. I’d have done

anything for that gun around my ankle. If I could still move, I'd have put it right into my mouth and just pulled the trigger.

He returned with his arm full of flowers and let them fall around me. He appeared to be unhappy with the inadvertent arrangement, so he spread them out more carefully, making sure most of the bunch were surrounding my head in a halo pattern.

"Mine," he said. "You're mine."

I did belong to him—he was right. Vampires were real, and I was seconds away from being devoured. I'd never been a crier by nature, not in the slightest, but I was sure I'd been doing exactly that since I had been knocked down. My cheeks felt wet and my eyes were burning.

Jessup squatted down above me and nudged my arms away from my body with his knees. Straddling my torso, he started to dig around in the pockets of his overcoat until he had found what he had been searching for—a hunting knife, about six inches in length. I thought the exposed blade was for me, but he slipped off his duster and used it on himself, cutting a foot-long gash from his wrist to the crook of his forearm. Blood began to gush outward. He tilted my head back and forced open my mouth. I tried to bite down on him, but his grip was unbelievably powerful. Whispering sweet nothings into my ear, he maneuvered his opened arm over my face and allowed the blood to drain into me. I choked as the hot liquid drizzled down my gullet. Once my mouth had been filled, he jammed my jaw closed and leaned in and kissed my reddened lips. I was just about to black out when I swallowed. I didn't want to, but I did. He grunted his pleasure at my ingestion and snaked both hands around my neck and squeezed, crushing my airway as if I were nothing.

I died there on my back. I died there utterly alone.

When tragedy occurs, people tend to feel the need to ask why. Not me. It's a waste of time. Bad things happen, that's just the way of the world. Sometimes you die, sometimes you live forever. Wanna guess which way it worked out for me?

