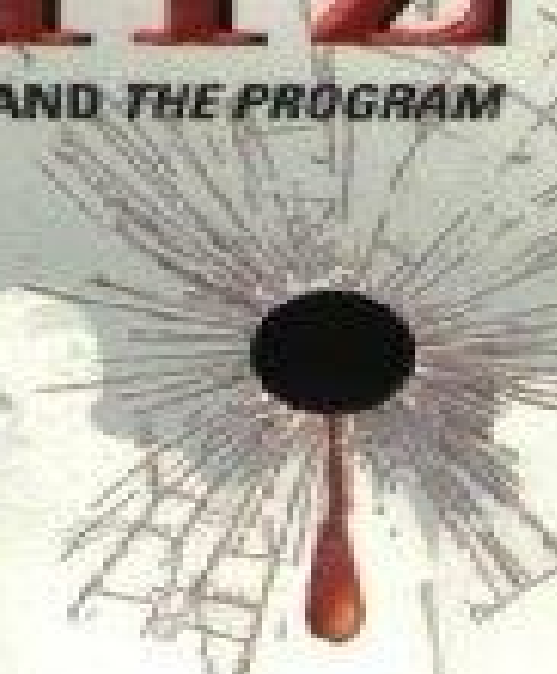
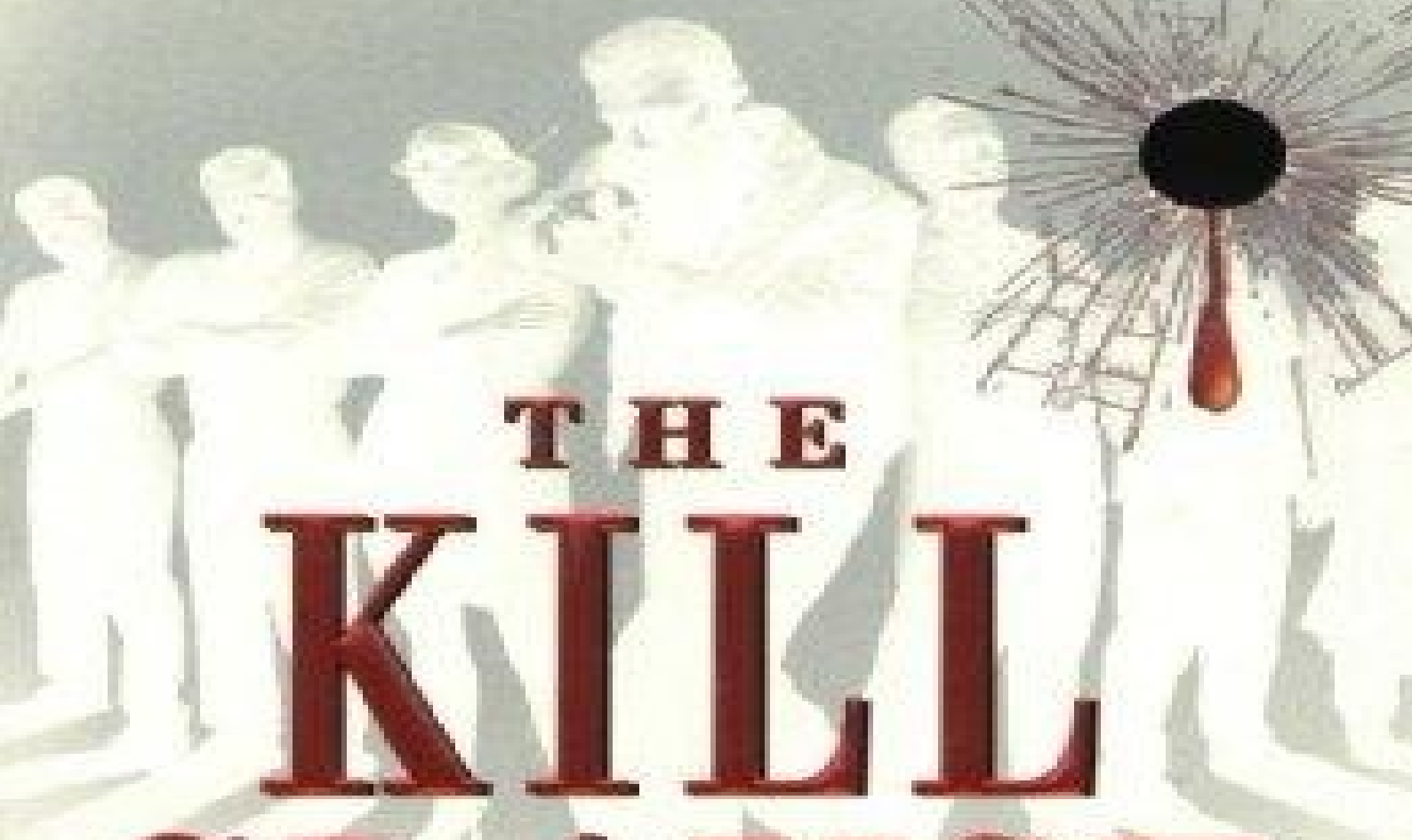


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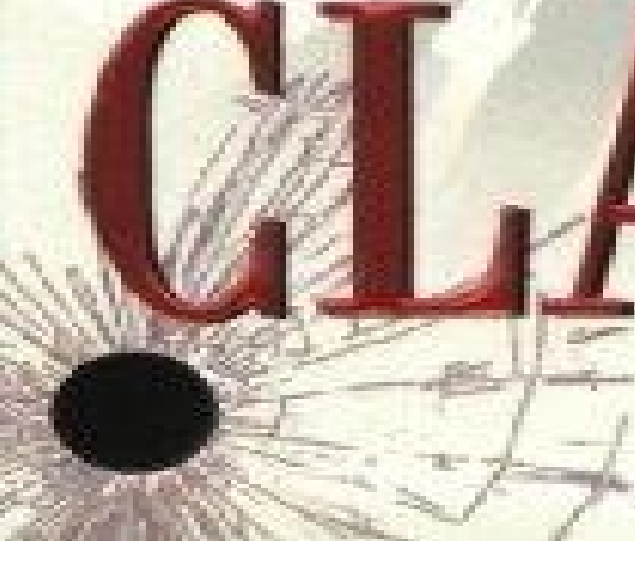
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *DO NO HARM* AND *THE PROGRAM*



THE

KILL

CLAUSE



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Kill Clause

SUMMARY: A riveting and explosive novel, *The Kill Clause* is a brilliantly inventive tour de force by a powerful new master of suspense. Tim Rackley is a dangerous man of honor, a deputy U.S. marshal who is very good at his job until everything he believes in is shattered by the brutal murder of his own daughter. Betrayed by an imperfect judicial system, Rackley watches helplessly as the killer walks free on a legal technicality. Devastated, furious, and burning with a righteous need for vengeance, he is suddenly forced to explore his own deadly options a quest that leads him into a shadowy no-man's-land between justice and the law . . . and into the welcoming fold of "the Commission." A vigilante group made up of people like him relentless streetwise operators who have each lost a loved one to violent crime the Commission confronts the failings of a system that sets predators loose to hunt again, cleaning up society's "mistakes" covertly, efficiently, and permanently. But as he is dragged deeper into a deadly morass of hidden agendas and murderous justice, Tim Rackley discovers that playing God is an excruciating and fearsome task. When his new secret life starts coming unwound at an alarming speed, he is suddenly caught in the most terrifying struggle he has ever faced a desperate battle to save his marriage, his career, his life, his soul . . . and everything left that's worth fighting for.

Chapter 1

WHEN BEAR CAME to tell him that Ginny's body had been found raped and dismembered in a creek six miles from his house, that her remains had required three biohazard bags to depart the scene that they were currently sprawled on a pathologist's slab awaiting further probing, Tim's first reaction was not what he would have expected of himself. He went ice cold. There was no grief--grief, he'd learn, takes perspective, recollection, time to unfurl. There was just the news slapping him, dense and jarring like face pain. And, inexplicably, there was embarrassment, though for whom or what, he was not sure. The heel of his hand lowered, searching out the butt of his Smith & Wesson, which of course he wasn't wearing at home at 6:37 in the evening.

To his right Dray fell to her knees, one hand clutching the door frame, fingers curling between the jamb and hinges as if seeking pain. Beneath the razor edge of blond hair, sweat sparkled on the band of her neck.

For an instant everything was frozen. Rain-heavy February air. The draft guttering the seven candles on the pink-and-white-frosted birthday cake that Judy Hartley held poised for revelation in the living room. Bear's boots, distressingly carrying the crime-scene mud, blotting the aggregate porch, the pebbles of which Tim had meticulously smoothed on his hands and knees last fall with a square trowel.

Bear said, "Maybe you want to sit down." His eyes held the same guilt and attempted empathy Tim himself had used in countless situations, and Tim hated him unjustly for it. The anger dissolved quickly, leaving behind a dizzying emptiness.

The small gathering in the living room, mirroring the dread emanating from the hushed doorway conversation, gave off a breath-held tension. One of the little girls resumed recounting Harry Potter Quid-ditch rules and was hushed violently. A mother leaned over and blew out the candles Dray had lit in eager anticipation after the knock on the front door.

"I thought you were her," Dray said. "I just finished frosting her..." Her voice wavered hard.

Hearing her, Tim registered an aching remorse that he'd pressed Bear so hard for details right here at the door. His only way to grasp the information had been to try to contain it in questions and facts, to muscle it into pieces small enough for him to digest. Now that he'd taken it in, he had too much of it. But he'd knocked on enough doors himself--as had Dray--to know that it would have been only a matter of time until they'd known it all anyway. Better to wade in fast and steady and brace against the cold, because the chill wasn't going to leave their bones anytime soon, or maybe ever.

"Andrea," he said. His trembling hand felt the air, searching for her shoulder and not finding it. He couldn't move, couldn't so much as turn his head.

Dray bent her head and started to weep. The sound was one Tim had never heard. Inside, one of Ginny's schoolmates matched her crying--confused, instinctive mimicry.

Bear crouched, both knees cracking, his form broad but huddled on the porch, his nylon raid jacket sweeping low like a cape. The yellow lettering, pale and faded, announced U.S. DEPUTY MARSHAL in case someone cared. "Darlin', hold on there," he said. "Hold on."

His immense hands encircled her biceps--no small feat--and drew her in so her face pressed against his chest. Her hands clawed the air, as if afraid to set down on something for fear of what they might do.

He raised his head sheepishly. "We're gonna need you to..."

Tim reached down, stroked his wife's head. "I'll go."

The three-foot tires of Bear's chipped-silver Dodge Ram hiccupped over seams on the roadway, shifting the broken-glass dread in Tim's gut.

Composed of twelve square miles of houses and tree-lined streets about fifty miles northwest of downtown L.A., Moorpark was renowned for little more than the fact that it housed the state's largest concentration of law-enforcement residents. It was a low-rent country club for the straight arrows, a post-shift refuge from the streets of the off-kilter city they probed and fought for most of their waking hours. Moorpark radiated an artificial fifties-TV-show feel--no tattoo parlors, no homeless people, no drive-bys. A Secret Service agent, two FBI families, and a postal inspector lived on Tim and Dray's cul-de-sac. Burglary, in Moorpark, was a zero-growth industry.

Bear stared dead ahead at the yellow reflectors lining the center of the road, each one materializing then floating downward in the darkness. He'd forgone his usual slouch, driving attentively, seeming grateful for something to do.

Tim sifted through the mound of remaining questions and tried to find one to serve as a starting point. "Why did you...why were you there? Not exactly a federal case."

"Sheriff's department took prints from her hand...."

From her hand. A separate entity. Not from her. Through his sickening horror, Tim wondered which of the three bags had carried away her hand, her arm, her torso. One of Bear's knuckles was smudged with dried mud.

"...the face was tough, I guess. Jesus, Rack, I'm sorry." Bear heaved a sigh that bounced off the dash and came back at Tim in the passenger seat. "Anyways, Bill Fowler was in the handling unit. He firmed the ID--" He stopped, catching himself, then reworded. "He recognized Ginny. Put in a call to me, since he knows how I am with you and Dray."

"Why didn't he do the advise next of kin? He was Dray's first partner out of the academy. He just a barbecue at our house last month." Tim's voice rose, grew accusatory. In its heightened pitch he recognized his desperate need to lay blame.

"Some people aren't cut out for telling parents that--" Bear laid off the rest of the sentence, evidently finding it as displeasing as Tim did.

The truck exited and hammered over bumps in the off-ramp, making them bounce in their seats.

Tim exhaled hard, trying to rid himself of the blackness that had filled his body, cruelly and methodically, somewhere between the porch and now. "I'm glad it was you that came." His voice sounded far away. It betrayed little of the chaos he was fighting to control, to categorize. "Leads?"

"Distinctive tire imprints heading out of the creek's slope. It was pretty muddy. The deputies are on it. I didn't really...that's not really where my head was at." Bear's stubble glimmered with dried sweat. His kind, too-wide features looked hopelessly weary.

Tim flashed on him setting Ginny up on his shoulders at Disneyland last June, hoisting her fifty-three pounds like a bag of feathers. Bear was orphaned young, never married. The Rackleys were, for all intents and purposes, his surrogate family.

Tim had investigated warrants with Bear for three years on the Escape Team out of the district office downtown, ever since Tim's eleven-year stint in the Army Rangers. They also served together on the Arrest Response Team, the Marshals' SWAT-like tactical strike force that kicked doors and hooked and hauled as many of the twenty-five hundred federal fugitives hidden in the sprawling L.A. metropolis as they could get cuffs on.

Though still fifteen years from the mandatory retirement age of fifty-seven, Bear had recently begun referring to the date grudgingly, as if it were imminent. To ensure he'd have some conflict in his life after retirement, Bear had completed night law school at the South West Los Angeles Legal Training Academy and, after failing the bar twice, had finally wrung a pass out of it last July. He'd had Chance Andrews--a judge he used to work court duty for regularly--swear him in at Federal downtown, and he, Dray, and Tim had celebrated in the lobby afterward, drinking Cook's out of Dixie cups. Bear's license sat in the bottom drawer of his office file cabinet, gathering dust, preventive medicine for future tedium. He had nine years on Tim, currently apparent in the lines etching his face. Tim, who'd gone enlisted at the age of nineteen, had had the benefit of opposing stress with youthfulness when learning to operate; he'd emerged from the Rangers seasoned but not weathered.

"Tire tracks," Tim said. "If the guy's that disorganized, something'll break."

"Yeah," Bear said. "Yeah, it will."

He slowed and pulled into a parking lot, easing past the squat sign reading VENTURA COUNTY MORGUE. He parked in a handicap spot up front, threw his marshal's placard on the dash. They sat in silence. Tim pressed his hands together, flat-palmed, and crushed them between his knees.

Bear reached across to the glove box and tugged out a pint of Wild Turkey. He took two gulps, sending air gurgling up through the bottle, then offered it to Tim. Tim took a half mouthful, feeling it wash smoky and burning down his throat before losing itself in the morass of his stomach. He screwed on the lid, then untwisted it and took another pull. He set it down on the dash, kicked open his door a little harder than necessary, and faced Bear across the uninterrupted stretch of the vinyl front seat.

Now--just now--grief was beginning to set in. Bear's eyelids were puffy and red-rimmed, and it occurred to Tim that he may have pulled over on his way to their house, sat in his rig, and cried a bit.

For a moment Tim thought he might come apart altogether, start screaming and never stop. He thought of the task before him--what awaited him behind the double glass doors--and wrestled a piece of strength from a place he didn't know he had inside him. His stomach roiled audibly, and he fought his lips still.

"You ready?" Bear asked.

"No."

Tim got out and Bear followed.

The fluorescent lighting was otherworldly harsh, shining off the polished floor tile and the stainless-steel cadaver drawers set into the walls. A broken lump lay inert beneath a hospital-blue sheet on the center embalming table, awaiting them.

The coroner, a short man with a horseshoe of hair and a stereotype-reinforcing pair of round spectacles, fussed nervously with the mask that dangled around his neck. Tim swayed on his feet, his eyes on the blue sheet. The draped form was distressingly small and unnaturally proportioned. The smell reached him quickly, something rank and earthy beneath the sharp tang of metal and disinfectant. The whiskey leapt and jumped in his stomach, as if trying to get out.

The coroner rubbed his hands like a solicitous and slightly apprehensive waiter. "Timothy Rackley, father of Virginia Rackley?"

"That's right."

"If you'd like, ah, you could go into the adjoining room and I could roll the table over before the window so you could, ah, ID her."

"I'd like to be alone with the body."

"Well, there's still, ah, forensic considerations, so I can't really--"

Tim flipped open his wallet and let his five-point marshal's star dangle. The coroner nodded weightily and left the room. Mourning, like most things, gets more deference with a little authority behind it.

Tim turned to Bear. "Okay, pal."

Bear studied Tim a few moments, eyes darting back and forth across his face. He must have trusted something he saw, because he backed up and exited, easing the door closed discreetly so the latch boomed only the slightest click.

Tim studied the form on the embalming table before drawing near. He wasn't sure which end of the sheet to peel back; he was accustomed to body bags. He didn't want to turn aside the wrong edge and see more than he absolutely had to. In his line of work he'd learned that some memories were impossible to purge.

He ventured that the coroner would have left Ginny with her head facing the door, and he pressed gently on the edge of the lump, discerning the bump of her nose, the sockets of her eyes. He wasn't sure if they'd cleaned up her face, nor was he sure he would prefer that, or whether he'd rather see it as it was left so he could feel closer to the horror she'd lived in her final moments.

He flipped back the sheet. His breath left him in a gut-punch gasp, but he didn't bend over, didn't flinch, didn't turn away. Anguish raged inside him, sharp-edged and bent on destruction; he watched her bloodless, broken face until it died down.

With a trembling hand he removed a pen from his pocket and used it to pull a wisp of Ginny's hair the same straight blond as Dray's--from the corner of her mouth. This one thing he wanted to set straight, despite all the damage and violation stamped on her face. Even if he'd wanted to, he wouldn't have touched her. She was evidence now.

He found a single ray of thankfulness, that Dray wouldn't have to carry the memory of this sight with her.

He pulled the sheet tenderly back over Ginny's face and walked out. Bear sprang up from the row of cheap, puke-green waiting chairs, and the coroner scurried over, sipping from a paper cone filled with water from the cooler.

Tim started to speak but had to stop. When he found his voice, he said, "That's her."

Chapter 2

THEY HEADED BACK to Dray in silence, the bottle sliding empty on the dash. Tim wiped his mouth, then wiped it again. "She was supposed to be just around the corner at Tess's. You know, the redhead--pigtailed? Two blocks away from school, right on Ginny's way home. Dray told her to go there after school, so we'd have a chance, you know, her other friends, the presents. To surprise her."

A sob swelled in his throat, and he swallowed it, swallowed it hard.

"Tess goes to private school. We have an arrangement, us and her mom. The kids can stop by for play dates unannounced. There was no one expecting Ginny, no one to miss her. This is Moorpark, Bear." His voice cracked. "It's Moorpark. You're not supposed to know your kid's not okay when she's four hundred yards away." Tim faded off into a space between agonizing thoughts, a momentary respite from the distinct pain of having failed--as a father, as a deputy U.S. marshal, as a man--to protect his sole child's existence.

Bear drove on and didn't talk, and Tim appreciated him greatly for it.

Bear's cell phone rang. He picked it up and spoke into it, a string of words and numbers that Tim barely registered. Bear flipped the unit shut and pulled to the curb. Tim didn't notice for several minutes that they were stopped, that Bear was studying him. When he looked over, Bear's eyes were startlingly severe.

Tim spoke through the sluggishness of his exhaustion. "What?"

"That was Fowler. They caught him."

Tim felt a rush of emotions, dark and hateful and intertwined. "Where?"

"Off Grimes Canyon. About a half mile from here."

"We're going."

"Ain't gonna be nothing to see but yellow tape and aftermath. We don't want to contaminate the arrest, fuck up the crime scene. I thought I'd take you to Dray--"

"We're going."

Bear picked up the empty bottle, jiggled it, then set it back on the dash. "I know."

They pulled down the long, isolated drive, gravel popping beneath the tires, winding their way into the heart of the small canyon. A converted stand-alone garage to a house that had long since burned down sat dark and slanted along a crescent of eucalyptus. The smudged side windows diffused a single spot of yellow interior light. Rain and wear had lifted the plywood from the walls, and the swing-down door was rotting in fat patches. To the side a rusting white pickup rose from the weeds, fresh mud caked in the tire treads and thrown up around the wheel wells.

A police vehicle sat diagonally across the overgrown concrete foundation of the extinct house, lights blinking. Like the other cars in the fleet, it was labeled MOORPARK POLICE, though all two-man crews were, like Dray, sheriff's deputies contracted from Ventura County. Parked beside it was an unmarked, lights flashing from the sun visor. Without the accompanying scream of the sirens, the strobe action was disorienting.

Fowler met them at the truck, his mouth pursed over a lipful of tobacco. He was breathing hard, his eyes sharp and gleaming, his face flushed with excitement. He unsnapped his holster, then snapped it again. The detectives were not in sight. No yellow tape, no perimeter, no crime-lab guys working up forensics.

Before Tim could get out of the truck, Fowler was talking. "Gutierrez and Harrison--they rolled from Homicide Bureau--they got a read off the tire tracks at the riverbank. I guess they're factory-issue radials for Toyotas '87 to '89 or some shit. Crime lab found a fingernail at the scene--"

Tim buckled, and Bear laid a supporting hand across the small of his back, out of Fowler's view.

"--chip of white paint under it. Automobile paint. Gutierrez what-the-fucked it, ran it through for a ten-mile radius, only got twenty-seven hits, if you can believe it. We split up the addresses. This was our third stop. There's hard-core evidence. The guy spilled in seconds. Cases just don't work out like this." He coughed out a single note of a laugh, then went pale. His hand dipped to his holster again, and he unsnapped and snapped the thumb break. "Jesus Christ, Rack, I'm sorry. I've just been...I should have come over myself, but I wanted to get my head down and help bust the piece of shit."

"Why isn't there a perimeter up?" Tim said.

"We, uh...we still have him. He's inside."

Tim's mouth went dry. His fury narrowed, gathering like a parachute pulled through a napkin ring; with focus it seemed less likely to bleed into sorrow. Bear slid up next to him like a revving car at a stoplight.

"What about CSU? Did you even call them?"

Fowler grew suddenly interested in the ground. "We called you." He toed a desiccated weed, which gave off a good crackle. "I know if my little girl--" He shook off the thought. "The boys and I just weren't gonna let this one fly." He unsnapped the thumb break again, slid his Beretta from the holster and held the pistol out to Tim, butt first. "For you and Dray."

The three men stared at the pistol. Bear made a noise deep in his throat that didn't quite shape itself into a judgment one way or the other. Fowler's face was still flushed and intense, a lightning bolt of a vein forking his forehead. Somewhere in his jumble of thoughts, Tim grasped why Fowler had contacted Bear on his cell phone, not the radio.

Bear shifted so he was close to Tim, beside him but facing opposite, his back to Fowler, his eyes staring out at the dark of the canyon. "What do you want here, Rack?" His fingers spread, then clenched into fists. "As a father? As a representative of the law?"

Tim took the pistol. He walked toward the garage, and neither Bear nor Fowler followed. He heard sounds issuing through the warped door. Murmuring voices.

He knocked twice, the ragged wood biting his knuckles.

"Hang on." The voice belonged to Mac, Fowler's partner and another of Dray's deputy colleagues. Some shuffling. "Stand back!"

The garage door swung up on screeching springs. With inadvertent theatricality, Mac moved his large frame out of Tim's way, revealing Gutierrez and Harrison standing on either side of a scrawny man on a torn couch. Tim recognized the detectives now--local boys. Dray had worked with them when they were still patrolmen out of Moorpark Station; Homicide had assigned them the area, no doubt, because of their familiarity with it.

Tim's eyes swept the interior, taking in a heap of blood-moist rags, a pair of little girl's fingerprint muddied cotton panties plugging a draft in the far wall, a bent hacksaw with the teeth worn down to nubs. He fought to get his mind around these objects, these inconceivabilities.

He stepped forward, his shoes slippery on the oil-stained concrete. The man was clean-shaven, his face razor-nicked at the jaw. He hunched over his legs, elbows tucked into his crotch, hands cuffed before him. His boots, like Bear's, were caked with mud. The two detectives stepped away as Tim approached, straightening their poly wool suits.

Mac's deep voice issued over Tim's shoulder. "Meet Roger Kindell."

"You see him, you puke?" Gutierrez said. "This is that little girl's father."

The man's eyes, focused on Tim, showed neither comprehension nor remorse.

"That this could happen in our fucking town," Harrison said, as if continuing some previous conversation. "The animals are drifting north. Invading."

Tim stepped forward again, until his shadow fell across Kindell's face, blocking the dim light from the bare lamp bulb. Kindell sucked his teeth, then bent his face into the bowl of his hands, his fingers massaging the line of his scalp. His voice was loose, vowel-heavy at the ends of his words, and a touch guttural.

"I already tole you I did it. Lee me alone."

Tim felt his heartbeat hammering in his temples, his throat. Controlled rage.

Kindell kept his face turned down into his hands. Black crescents stood out beneath his fingernails, dried blood.

Harrison uncrossed his arms, sweat shining on his ebony face. "Look at him. You look at him, son. Still no response. In a flash the detective was on top of Kindell, hands digging into his throat and cheeks, knee riding his gut, bending his head back and up so he faced Tim. Kindell's breathing flared, his nostrils; his eyes were sharply defiant.

Gutierrez turned to Tim. "I got a throw-down." Tim glanced at the proffered bulge at the detective's ankle beneath his pant leg, a crappy gun to be left on the scene clutched in Kindell's dead hand. Gutierrez nodded. "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil, my friend."

Harrison pulled himself off Kindell, shoved his head to the side, and nodded at Tim. "You do what you need to do."

Mac was playing lookout at the wide opening of the garage door, his head swiveling back and forth checking the darkness despite the fact that Bear and Fowler were less than twenty yards away with a clear line of sight to the main road.

Tim turned back to Kindell. "Leave me."

"You got it, brother," Gutierrez said. He paused beside Tim and slipped him the handcuff key. "We already frisked the piece of shit. Just don't leave any of the wrong kind of marks on him."

Mac squeezed Tim's shoulder, then followed the two detectives out. Tim reached up, grabbed the dangling rope handle on the garage door, and tugged. The door creaked again, gained momentum fast, and slammed shut. Kindell didn't so much as blink. Cool as a blade.

He took note of the Beretta in Tim's hand, pointed down at the floor, and turned his head to the wall as if expressing vague uninterest. His hair was cropped short, a grown-out buzz cut that resembled fur.

The question came out before Tim considered it. "Did you kill my daughter?"

The lightbulb in the lamp emitted an odd humming noise. The air wrapped around Tim, dank and tinted with the odor of paint thinner.

Kindell turned back to face him. His even features were set off by an unusually flat and elongated forehead. His hands rested together in his lap. He didn't look as though he planned to answer the question.

"Did you kill my daughter?" Tim asked again.

After a thoughtful pause, Kindell nodded slowly, once.

Tim waited for his breathing to even out. He felt his lips trembling, fought them still. "Why?"

Same sluggish cadence to the words, as though they'd been slowed down. "Cuz she was so beautiful."

Tim racked the Beretta's slide, chambering a round. Kindell emitted a muffled sob, his eyes starting to stream. The first sign of any emotion. He glared at Tim defiantly, even as snot ran from his nose and forded his upper lip.

Tim raised the pistol. His hands were shaking with rage, so it took a moment for him to line the sights on the tall target of Kindell's forehead.

Bear leaned against his truck, massive arms crossed, eyeing the other four men.

"You don't motherfuck around with a deputy's family," Gutierrez was saying. A deferential nod to Bear. "Or a marshal's."

Bear didn't nod back.

Fowler weighed in. "They don't give a shit anymore. No sense of anything."

"Amen to that," Gutierrez said.

"It's like that guy who walked the sarin nerve-gas bomb into the day-care center. Ezekiel or Jedediah or whatever." Harrison shook his head. "Nothing makes sense anymore. Nothing."

"How's Dray doing?" Mac asked. "She all right?"

"She's tough," Bear said.

"Ain't that the fuckin' truth," Fowler said.

Gutierrez again--"She's gonna be better once Rack brings her back a little news."

"You know Tim well?" Bear asked.

The detective shifted his weight from one shoe to the other. "Know of him."

"Why don't you leave his nickname to those of us who do?"

"Hey, come on Jowalski," Mac said. "Tito don't mean no harm. We're on the same side, us out here."

"Are we?" Bear said.

They waited, glancing at the closed garage door, bracing themselves for a gunshot in the silence. The crickets were at it, filling the air with nervous chirping.

Mac wiped his brow with a forearm, though the night was cool. "Wonder what he's doing in there."

"He's not gonna kill him," Bear said.

The others' heads swiveled toward Bear, surprised. Fowler wore a shit-eating grin. "You don't think?"

Bear shifted uncomfortably, then crossed his arms as if to lock down his posture.

"Why wouldn't he?" Gutierrez said.

Bear regarded him with unadulterated disdain. "For one, he's not gonna want to be yoked to you jackasses for the rest of his life."

Gutierrez started to say something but took note of Bear's flexed forearms and closed his mouth. The crickets continued to shrill. They all did their best to avoid eye contact.

"Fuck this. I'm gonna get him." Bear drew himself up off his truck. Beside him even Mac looked small. Bear took a step toward the garage, then stopped abruptly. He lowered his head, eyes on the dirt, frozen between advance and retreat.

Tim kept the Beretta trained on Kindell's head, his body still and rigid, a shooter's outline cut from steel. After a moment his gun arm began to quake. His eyes moistened; two jerking breaths racked his shoulders. With a sudden, stunning certainty, he knew that he would not kill Kindell. His thoughts, absent the focus of the task, pulled back to his daughter. He was overtaken with a sadness so stark and selfish and crushing that it seemed to defy the limits of his heart. It came on fierce and full-powered, like nothing he'd ever confronted. He lowered the gun and bent, fists on thighs, as it throttled through him.

When he regained awareness that he was still drawing breath, he straightened as best he could. "Were you alone?"

The same roll of the head, up, down, up.

Unremitting cramps in Tim's chest kept him curled into an old man's arthritic hunch. His voice rasped, weak and uncomprehending, "You just decided...decided to kill her?"

Kindell blinked hard and drew his bound hands over his face like a squirrel grooming. "I wasn't supposed to kill her."

Tim's body snapped upright, his posture firming. "What does 'supposed to' mean?" No answer. "Was someone in on this with you?"

"He didn't--" Kindell stopped, closed his eyes.

"He who? He didn't what? Someone else helped you kill my girl?" His voice was shaking with fury and desperation. "Answer me, goddamnit. Answer me!"

Kindell remained still, impervious to Tim's questions, the smooth ovals of his closed eyelids like veined eggs.

The garage door flew up with a bang, spilling light across the weed-dense grounds. Kindell stumbled out, propelled by Tim's shove, his hands now cuffed behind him. Tim caught up to him quickly, fisting the chain between the cuffs and pulling it up so Kindell's arms locked straight behind him. Kindell grimaced but didn't cry out.

Bear and the others silently watched them approach. As Tim neared, Kindell tripped and went down on his knees and chest taking the shock of the ground. His grunt sounded like a bark.

Kindell struggled to stand up. He bore no bruises or signs of punishment. "You asshole. You uckin' asshole."

"Better watch your mouth," Tim said. "I'm your best friend right about now."

Bear exhaled in a low, cheek-puffing rumble.

Fowler glowered at Tim like a woman scorned. Gutierrez and Harrison looked equally displeased.

"Can we have a second here?" Fowler said, the skin tight around his jaw.

Tim nodded, then followed the three men a few paces away from Mac and Bear.

"He's a piece-of-shit motherfucker," Fowler hissed.

Tim said, "No argument here."

Fowler spit a brown stream into the brush. "You're gonna let pieces of shit like this run loose in our town?"

Tim looked at him with a steady gaze until he turned away.

"What the fuck, Rackley? We were doing you a favor here."

Gutierrez smoothed his mustache with a thumb and forefinger. "This guy just killed your daughter. How can you not want to cap his ass?"

"I'm not a jury."

"I bet Dray would have another opinion on the matter."

"You're probably right."

"Juries suck," Fowler said. "I don't trust the courts."

"Then move to Sierra Leone."

"Listen, Rackley--"

"No, you listen." Ten yards away Bear's and Mac's heads snapped to attention. "There's an ongoing investigation here that you may have just fucked up in your eagerness to tie things up neatly."

Harrison weighed in from above crossed arms. "It's an open-and-shut."

"He didn't kill her alone."

Gutierrez blew air out through clenched teeth. "What the fuck is this?"

"Someone else was in on it." Tim's hand was jiggling back and forth, thumb tapping his thigh.

"He didn't tell us that."

"Well, then, it looks like you've exhausted your bag of detective tricks."

Bear walked over, his boots creaking, leaving Mac with Kindell. He scowled at the others, standing protectively at Tim's side. "Everything all right?"

"Your boy here is looking to complicate matters that aren't complicated." Gutierrez glared at Tim. "You're being emotional."

"That's for sure."

"How do you know there was someone else involved?" Gutierrez jerked his head at Kindell, still lying prone on the ground. "What did he say?"

"He didn't say anything outright--"

"Nothing outright," Harrison said. "A hunch, huh?"

Bear's voice issued so low Tim felt it in his bones. "You'd better mind your fucking mouth after what he's been through tonight."

Harrison's smirk vanished instantly.

"This is precisely why we don't kill people without a trial." Tim regarded the three men. "Call CSU. Start your investigation. Gather evidence."

Fowler was shaking his head. "This is a fucking mess. Kindell heard us talking. Planning this out."

Gutierrez made a leveling gesture with his hands. "It's fine. We'll move forward with standard procedure. If the scumsuck wants to whine to the public defender, it'll be his word against ours." He glared at Tim and Bear. "All of ours."

Tim debated informing Gutierrez that the last thing he intended to expend energy on this night was Gutierrez's anxiety, but he didn't want to give anything up to him.

Behind them Mac helped Kindell to his feet.

"You were never here," Harrison said. "We stick together on this, no matter what."

Bear gave a cough of disgust. They walked back to the vehicles, their breath visible in the cold air.

"You're a lucky little motherfucker," Gutierrez said to Kindell, who'd finally found his feet. He poked him hard where his chest met his shoulder. "Did you hear me? I said you're a lucky motherfucker."

"Lee me alone."

Bear circled his truck, climbed in, and turned over the engine.

Mac cleared his throat. "Tim, man, I am so sorry about...everything. You send Dray my condolences. I'm really sorry."

"Thanks, Mac," Tim said. "I'll tell her."

He climbed into the truck and they drove off, leaving the four deputies and Kindell behind them, standing out from the night in carnival flashes of watery blue.

Chapter 3

BEAR PULLED UP to the curb, and Tim moved to get out, but Bear grabbed his shoulder. It had been a silent ride home. "I should have stopped you. Stepped in. You were in no shape to make that kind of decision." He squeezed the wheel.

"It wasn't your responsibility," Tim said.

"It's my responsibility to do more than stand around while my partner maybe kills some mutt in a moment of justifiable rage. You're a federal agent, not some yokel deputy."

"The boys just got a little fired up."

Bear struck the steering wheel hard with the heels of his hands, a rare display of anger. "Stupid pricks." His cheeks were wet. "Stupid, stupid pricks. They shouldn't have dragged you into it. They shouldn't have jeopardized the investigation."

Tim knew Bear was turning his grief to anger and throwing it at the nearest target, but he also knew he was right. Tim spoke to the words, because he knew if he touched the grief right now, he'd come apart. "Nothing happened."

"It's not done happening yet." Bear wiped his cheeks roughly. "And we don't know what those idiots did before we got there, how well they secured the scene. They weren't looking for accomplices. They weren't looking to build a case. It's not like they were dotting their i's and crossing their t's for the DA. It's not like they were expecting a trial."

"They're gonna have to be aboveboard now. After we've been there."

"Great. So in addition to the case being tied to their competence or tremendous lack thereof, we are too." Bear shuddered hard, like a dog shaking off water. "Sorry, I'm sorry. You got enough on your plate."

Tim managed a faint smile. "I better go check on my yokel-deputy wife."

"Shit, I didn't mean that."

Tim laughed, and then Bear joined him, both of them still wiping their cheeks.

"Do you want me to...Can I come in?"

"No," Tim said. "Not yet."

Bear was still idling at the curb when Tim closed the front door behind him. The house was dark and empty. Two holes had been kicked through the living room wall, leaving jagged edges in the drywall. Though Tim had left Dray with two of her friends who'd come over to help with Ginny's party, he was not surprised to find the house silent. When Dray was upset, she handled it alone. Another trait she'd learned from four older brothers and six years and counting on the job.

He passed through the small living room into the kitchen. The simple interior had been improved upon over the years by Tim's meticulous attention. He'd torn up the floors and laid down hardwood in the halls and bedrooms and replaced the brass-plated and faux-crystal chandeliers with recessed lighting.

On the counter sat Ginny's cake, uncut, the top puddled with wax. Dray had insisted on baking it herself despite her lack of prowess in the kitchen. It was uneven, sloping left, and the frosting had been applied and reapplied in a failed attempt at smoothness. Judy Hartley, their next-door neighbor and a recent empty-nester, had offered to assume baking duties, but Dray had refused. As she did each year on Ginny's birthday, she'd taken the day off work to pore over borrowed cookbooks, determined and stubborn, pulling cake after cake out of the oven until she'd produced one she deemed acceptable.

Dray wasn't there, though the cabinet where they kept the liquor stood open. The handle of store-brand vodka was missing.

Tim walked quietly down the hall to their bedroom. The bed, neatly made, stared back at him. He checked the bathroom--also no luck. He tried Ginny's room next, across the hall. Dray was sitting in the darkness, the half-gallon bottle between her legs, the glow of a Pocahontas night-light discoloring one side of her face. On the carpet before her sat the cordless phone and her PalmPilot, the backlight still glowing.

Her face was gaunt, drawn in by grief. Three years ago she'd red-handed a fifteen-year-old kid fleeing a Ventura office building with an armload of laptops. He'd tried to throw down with a nickel-plated .22, and she'd double-tapped him; when she got home, her face looked not quite so bad as it did now. Her head was bowed slightly, in thought or drunkenness.

Tim closed the door behind him, crossed the room, and slid down the wall beside her. He took her hand; it was sweaty and feverish. She didn't look up, but she squeezed his fingers as if she'd been barely holding on for his touch.

He stared at Ginny's twin bed. The wallpaper, unrestrained yellow and pink flowers now muted by the darkness, had been perfectly aligned so it didn't mess up the repeat at the room's corners.

Tim thought about Ginny's last few minutes of life, then about where he might have been at the corresponding times. Putting his weapon away in the gun safe when she was snatched from the street. Driving to the store for pink candles when the dismemberment began.

That he couldn't give Kindell's partner a face was an added torment, another mockery of his imagined control over his world. The notion of kinship to this end was beyond sickening--two men bent on the destruction of a child, two men joined in ripping apart a young body. He pictured Kindell's dopey face and wondered if there was a special place in hell for child-killers. He indulged himself in imagined tortures. He had never been a religious man, but the thoughts found their way out from the darker recesses of his mind, the shadowed corners hidden from the light of reason.

Dray's voice, calm, but hoarse from crying, forced him from his thoughts. "I was here alone tonight this night, sitting with Trina and Joan and Judy fucking Hartley, getting the other kids off home, waiting to hear about the positive ID, calling our relatives so they wouldn't have to hear it from...or read about it in..." She raised her head sluggishly, bangs sweeping over her eyes. She took another slug from the bottle. "Fowler called."

"Dray--"

"Why didn't you come to me?"

He wouldn't have thought his grief would have left room for shame, but there it was, undiminished

"I'm sorry."

The distance between them he registered as an aching in his stomach. He remembered how they'd fallen in love, hard and terrifyingly fast. Neither of them had ever learned to need as adults--both had endured childhoods that had disappointed them, punishingly, for relying on anyone--yet there they were, fixed on each other with an unyielding, constant focus, staying up all hours talking and pressing against each other in the flickering blue glow of the muted TV, driving across town to meet for lunch because they couldn't make it from morning to evening without each other's touch. Every detail of the first months shone with clarity--how he'd steer and shift with his left hand so he wouldn't have to let go of hers with his right in the car after dinner, a movie, a night walk on the beach; the soft noise she made when she smiled, just short of a laugh; the way her face hurt when she blushed after a compliment--pins and needles, she claimed--and she'd have to massage out the bunched cheeks above the grin with her fingertips until he finally started doing it for her. Just last week he'd pulled her in for a slow dance when Elvis came crooning on late-night reruns; Ginny had alleged nausea and retreated to her bedroom.

And now he was in the same room with his wife but could barely sense her through the darkness, which had grown soupy, infused with hurt and foulness and stopped-up grief.

He struggled to find words, to reconnect. "I got the call. We were three miles away. I had to go, to see."

"Okay. So you went."

He took a deep breath. "And he confessed."

She was trying to soften her voice, but he could hear the frustration in it. "Tim, you're the father of the victim. You were illegally called to the crime scene to commit a vengeance killing. Explain to me how him confessing to you is the least bit useful." She lowered the bottle to the floor with a thunk. "That man took our daughter and violated her. Took her apart. And you went to him, you risked the crime scene and the arrest, and then you let him walk away."

"I think he had an accomplice."

Her eyebrows rose and spread. "Fowler didn't mention that."

"Kindell said he wasn't supposed to kill her, as if there had been some previous understanding between him and someone else."

"He could have just been saying he didn't mean to kill her. Or that he knew it was illegal."

"Maybe. But then he started to refer to someone else--a he--but he caught himself."

"So why aren't Gutierrez and Harrison looking into that?"

"They weren't aware of it, obviously."

"Are they looking into it now?"

"They'd better be."

Ginny's bedside clock emitted a soft chime, announcing the hour; the sound struck Tim sharp and

unexpected, a stab to the heart. Dray's face seemed to crumble. She quickly took another pull off the bottle. For a moment they'd indulged the illusion that they'd set aside the personal, that they'd been two cops talking.

Dray wiped tears from her cheeks with her sweatshirt cuff, which she'd pulled over her hand like a girl. "So the crime scene is muddled up, and now there's a possibility that the killer isn't the only killer."

"That's about right, unfortunately."

"You're not even angry."

"I am. But anger is useless."

"What isn't?"

"I'm trying to figure that out." He wasn't looking at her, but he heard her take another gulp from the bottle.

"All your training--Spec Ops and Combat Engineering and FLETC--you should have known to prioritize under pressure. You should've known not to go there, Timmy."

"Don't call me Timmy." He stood and wiped his palms on his pants. "Look, Dray, we're both wrecked right now. If we keep this up, it's not gonna go anywhere we want it to."

Tim opened the door and stepped out. Dray's voice followed him out into the cool hall. "How can you be so calm right now? Like she's just another victim, someone you never knew."

Tim halted in the hall and stood, his back to the open door. He turned and walked back in. Dray's hand was over her mouth.

He ran his tongue across the points of his teeth and back, waiting for his breath to stop hitching in his chest. When he spoke, his voice was so quiet it was barely audible. "I understand how upset--how destroyed you are. I am, too. But don't ever fucking say that."

She lowered her hand. Her eyes were shell-shocked. "I'm sorry," she said.

He nodded and withdrew gently from the room.

In the bedroom Tim spun the dial on his gun safe, then removed a Spec Ops-issue p226 nine mil, his favored .357 Smith & Wesson, a hefty Ruger .44 mag, and two fifty-round boxes of nine-mil and .44. He kept a broader ammo range on hand for his .357, as it was his duty weapon; he opted for the wad cutters over the copper-jacketed rounds and the duty 110-grain hollow-points. The service issued the S&Ws with three-inch barrels, as they were often carried concealed.

When he entered Ginny's room, Dray still had not moved. "I'm so sorry," she said again. "What a fucking thing to say."

He knelt, placed his hands on her knees, and kissed her on the forehead. It was damp. The sharp smell of alcohol lingered about her face. "It's okay. What's that they say about rocks and glass houses?"

Her lips pursed, not quite a smile. "Don't throw glass houses if you live in a rock."

"Something like that."

"You need to go shoot." She wasn't asking; she was offering.

He nodded. "Come with me?"

"I need to sit here for a while and look at nothing."

He moved to kiss her forehead again, but she tilted back her head and caught his lips with hers. The kiss was hot and dry and edged with vodka. If he could have crawled into it and lived there, he would have.

The garage housed Tim's silver M3 BMW--a car confiscated by the service under the National Asset Seizure and Forfeiture Program--and his workbench. Tim threw his ordnance in the trunk and backed out, careful to dodge Dray's Blazer, parked in the driveway. He drove to the outskirts of town then turned onto a dirt road and followed it up a few hundred yards.

He pulled the car onto a flat dirt apron and left it running, angling the high beams downrange, where a cable stretched between two stakes, about five feet off the ground. Tim removed a stack of targets, a mix of color-coded Transtars and old B-27s, and strung them along the cable. Then he sat in the dirt, jammed the Sig mags, and readied the speedloaders for the wheel guns. Six bullets locked into the cylindrical base of each speedloader, tips sticking up like fangs, spaced to correspond with the caliber holes in the wheel.

He was left-eye dominant but right-handed, so he drew from a high-ride right-hip holster. Shoulder holsters were discouraged by the service because the cross-draw presented a hazard on the firing line, but Tim preferred the up-and-out anyway, not liking the time given up on a cross-draw. They didn't call shoulder holsters widow-makers for nothing. He started with the Sig, doing some quick-draw plinking at three yards to warm up his reactive shooting. Then he moved to seven yards. Then ten.

His shooting was remarkably precise, having been learned in urban-warfare courses and perfected at Malibu's Maze at Glynco. The aptly named shooting course features pop-up and swinging targets that prospective deputies attack with live ammo through a confusion of strobing lights, blaring music, and amplified screams. The vibe is so invasive, the surroundings so surreal, that grown men have emerged weeping. Once outside, deputies subdue actors playing felons; a Juilliard dropout had once gotten a little too method with Tim, jawing off and sinking his teeth into Tim's forearm, and Tim had knocked him cold.

His breath misting in the sharp February cold of the higher altitude, Tim shot and shot. When he'd burned through the nine-mil ammo, he switched to his .357 and toed the concrete ledge at twenty-five yards.

He struck a modified Weaver, a forward-leaning fighting stance, his feet shoulder width with his left leg forward. The landscape reflected his mood--the barren stretch of dirt and rocks, the twinning cones of the headlights boring through the night, brief throws of light in a vast, dismal universe. The paper targets alone picked up the glow, floating rectangles of white, bobbing like fruit on a tree. The emptiness of the dark opened him up like a gutted beast, and he stared into the void. All that stared back was a row of eyeless, two-dimensional combat silhouettes, fluttering on the cable.

His right hand shot down, breaking his perfect stillness, and grabbed the pistol. As soon as the barrel cleared leather, he rotated it, punching it forward, his left hand already coming, grabbing his right at its junction with the butt. He lined the sights even as his arms were extending. His right arm locked, his left staying slightly canted. The trigger split the precise middle of the pad of his right index finger so he wouldn't group high and right or low and left, and he applied quick, steady pressure through the double action, not anticipating recoil, not flexing too hard. The gun barked and a hole punched through the thoracic region of the Transtar, center mass. He fired five more times in rapid succession, regaining front sight focus between each shot almost instantly. The cordite still rising, he thumbed the left-side lever forward, releasing the well-lubed wheel. His left hand dug for the speedloader in his belt pouch as he tilted the gun back, the casings spinning to the dirt like brass hail. In a single smooth gesture, he angled the gun down and filled the wheel, the six new bullets sliding neatly into place. He got off six more rounds, Swiss-cheesing the five-ring of the Transtar before the empty speedloader hit dirt.

The wad cutters, ideal for paper punching, left behind satisfying gashes.

Mindlessly he repeated the routine, losing himself in it, distilling his rage into concise bursts of bullets and sending it outward. The anger departed slowly, like water leaving a tub; when it was gone he tried to shape and fire away the residual sorrow in similar fashion but found he could not. He alternated static shooting with lateral-movement drills, firing until his wrists were aching, until the pads of his hands were chaffed from recoil.

Then he loaded the Ruger with long, slender .44s and shot it until his thumb webbing bled.

He came home a little after midnight to an empty house. The handle of vodka sitting on Ginny's floor, significantly depleted, was the only trace of Dray. Her Blazer was still parked in the driveway, the hood cool.

Tim drove the six blocks to McLane's, the semiauthentic Irish pub owned by Mac's father, and parked among the Crown Vics and Buicks in the lot. The heavy oak door gave with a shove. Aside from a few hangers-on and the cluster of deputies and detectives in the back by the pool tables, the place was empty. Myriad mustaches. Antique police light bar mounted above the shelves of booze. Typical cop hangout. The bartender, a dandy with cuffed sleeves and a bristling Tom Selleck, looked up from drying glasses. "Sorry, pal, we're closed."

Tim ignored him, walking the length of the bar toward the circle of men in the back. Mac, Fowler, Gutierrez, Harrison, and about five others. Dray was standing over them, bent at the waist, forearm cocked back ending in the accusatory point of her finger. For some reason she'd put on her uniform, even though policy was not to drink in the monkey suit. Enhanced with alcohol, voices were carrying

"--dare you put my husband into that situation. Or at least you could have given me--your colleague--the courtesy of a phone call."

"We thought he'd be able to handle it," Fowler said.

"Because he's a male?"

"No, because of, you know, the military stuff."

"Military stuff, right. So he's got no feelings." She pivoted to face the detectives, swaying

drunkenly. "What'd you find on the accomplice lead?"

Gutierrez, the front man, addressed her like a politician--hands spread and calming, condescension masquerading as avuncular reassurance. "We're looking into it. But we don't think it's as strong an angle as your husband does."

"The conspiracy theorist," someone muttered.

Fowler took note of Tim's approach first, and then the others turned as well, everyone except Dray. "Let me tell you something." Dray was slurring now. "You can throw shit at me all you want. But you say one more thing about my husband, I'll knock your teeth down your goddamn throat."

The bartender was out from behind the bar, following Tim, but Mac waved him off. "It's okay, Danny. He's with us."

"Is he?" Gutierrez said quietly. Two of the deputies eyed Tim and whispered something back and forth.

Tim addressed only his wife. "C'mon, Dray. Let's get you home."

Finally noticing him, Dray took a step and, losing her balance, sat down abruptly. Mac put an arm across her back to stabilize her, his hand resting on her shoulder. The others flanked her in their chairs protectively.

Mac's free hand fluttered in a calming gesture. "Hey, Tim. No offense, huh? We thought it would be good for her to be out right now, given--"

"Shut up, Mac." Tim's eyes didn't leave Dray. Her head was tilting. The others looked not many drinks behind her. Her eyes closed, she tilted her head into the cup of her hand. Tim bit down, the corners of his jaw flexing. "Andrea. Please let's go."

She moved to rise but only got so far as to lean heavily on the table.

Fowler picked up an empty shot glass, held it up like a scope, and eyed Tim through it. "Next time someone goes out on a limb for you, you might want to respect that," he said, slurring slightly. "Me and Tito went out for you, man."

Mac removed his arm from around Dray and stood up. Mac possessed effortless good looks, his hair tousled just so, day-old stubble touching his cheeks--Tim was all exertion and discipline by comparison.

"Listen guys, we've all had a long night here," Mac said. "Let's just take it easy."

"Yeah, let's go easy on the Medal of Valor winner," Harrison said.

Gutierrez snickered. Tim's eyes shot over in his direction. Steeled by the others' expectations and the row of empties on the table before him, Gutierrez stared back. "Take a hint, pal. Your wife's fine here. We take care of our own."

Dray mumbled something angrily.

Tim turned and headed for the door. Behind him he heard a chorus of murmurs.

--good at walking away--"

--better keep moving--"

Tim reached the door and threw the dead bolt, which gave off a metallic clank. The bar fell silent. He walked back down the length of the bar, the few remaining drunks watching him from their stools.

He reached the cluster of deputies and turned to the bar, facing away from them. He removed his Smith & Wesson, still encased in its belt holster, and set it on the bar. His badge-heavy wallet followed. His jacket he hung neatly on a high-backed stool. He cuffed his sleeves neatly, two folds each.

When he turned, the deputies had sobered a few notches. He walked over to Gutierrez. "Stand up."

Gutierrez shifted in his chair, leaning back, trying to look tough and unworried, and not succeeding at either. Tim waited. No one spoke. Another deputy took a sip of beer, set his bottle down on the table with a soft thud. Gutierrez finally looked away.

Tim put his jacket back on, grabbed his gun and badge. He stepped around the table, but Dray was already rising to meet him. She leaned heavily on him, 135 pounds of muscle and gear.

He hooked an arm around her waist and navigated her to the door.

He undressed her like a child, crouching to pull off her boots while she leaned on his shoulders. When he tucked her in, she threw the sheets back, sweating. He kissed her on her moist forehead.

She looked up at him, her face unlined and youthful in the dark. Her voice quavered. "What did he look like?"

Tim told her.

He wiped her tears, one cheek with one thumb, then the other.

"Tell me what happened. In the shack. Every detail."

He told her, fighting back his own tears at times, wiping hers throughout.

"I wish you'd killed him," she said.

"Then we would have lost our chance at the truth."

"But he'd be dead. Gone from this planet. Eradicated." More tears than Tim could keep up with. She took his hand, squeezing it in both of hers, letting her tears streak down her temples to the pillow. "I'm angry. So angry. At everything. Everyone."

His throat was closing, so he cleared it once, hard.

"Are you gonna go to sleep?" she asked.

"I don't think so."

She drifted off for a moment, then opened her eyes. "Me neither." She smiled sleepily.

"I'm gonna go watch a little TV. I don't want to thrash around and keep you up." He smoothed the hair gently out of her eyes. "At least one of us should get some sleep."

She nodded. "Okay."

He lay on the living room couch as if in a coffin, fully dressed, hands laced across his chest. He stared at the ceiling, trying to grasp the new realities of his life. He couldn't get his mind around the monumentality of his loss. He was falling into darkness, with no idea of its depth. Canned laughter emanated from Nick at Nite at hypnotic intervals. He tuned out everything but its sound. Laughter still exists, he thought. If I need to remember that, I can turn on the little box and there it is.

Sometime around 3:00 A.M. Dray awakened him, trudging to the couch, trailing the comforter. She crawled on top of him and burrowed into his neck.

"Timothy Rackley," she said, her voice soft and sleep-heavy.

He stroked her hair gently, then pulled it up and rubbed the soft nape of her neck. They slept entwined in a restless embrace.

Chapter 4

TIM OPENED HIS eyes and felt dread descend on him before he could even put a name to it. He swung his legs off the couch and set his feet on the floor. Dray was in the kitchen, rustling.

He didn't just remember his grief, he relearned it. For several minutes he sat on the couch, slumped forward, arms angled out in anticipation of his rise. Paralyzed with sorrow. Unable to bear a single movement. He focused on his breathing. If he could draw three breaths, then he'd be able to draw three more, and life could go on as such, in three-breath increments.

Finally he mustered the strength to stand. Walking back to the shower, he tried not to think about his daughter's theatrical heaviness when he carried her along this same path from TV to bedroom at night. Her head tilted back, eyes squeezed shut, tongue stuck out the side of her mouth like a drunk cartoon character's. Trying to steal a few extra minutes of tube time by feigning sleep.

In daylight her death had taken on a reality. It lived in the house with them, in the dust on the floor, the blankness of the ceilings, the soft, unanswered noises of his movement past her room.

After a scorching shower, he dressed and walked back to the kitchen.

Dray sat at the table, sipping coffee, her eyes swollen, her hair flat on one side. The cordless phone sat on the table beside her. "Well," she said, "I just got off the phone with the DA. It looks like you guys didn't screw up the case against Kindell."

"Good. That's good."

They studied each other for a moment. She held her arms out like a child wanting to be hugged, and Tim walked into her embrace. She buried her head in his stomach, and he scrunched her hair in the back. She groaned.

He slid down into the chair next to her.

Black half-moons stood out beneath her eyes. "Motherfucking asshole prick cocksucking

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