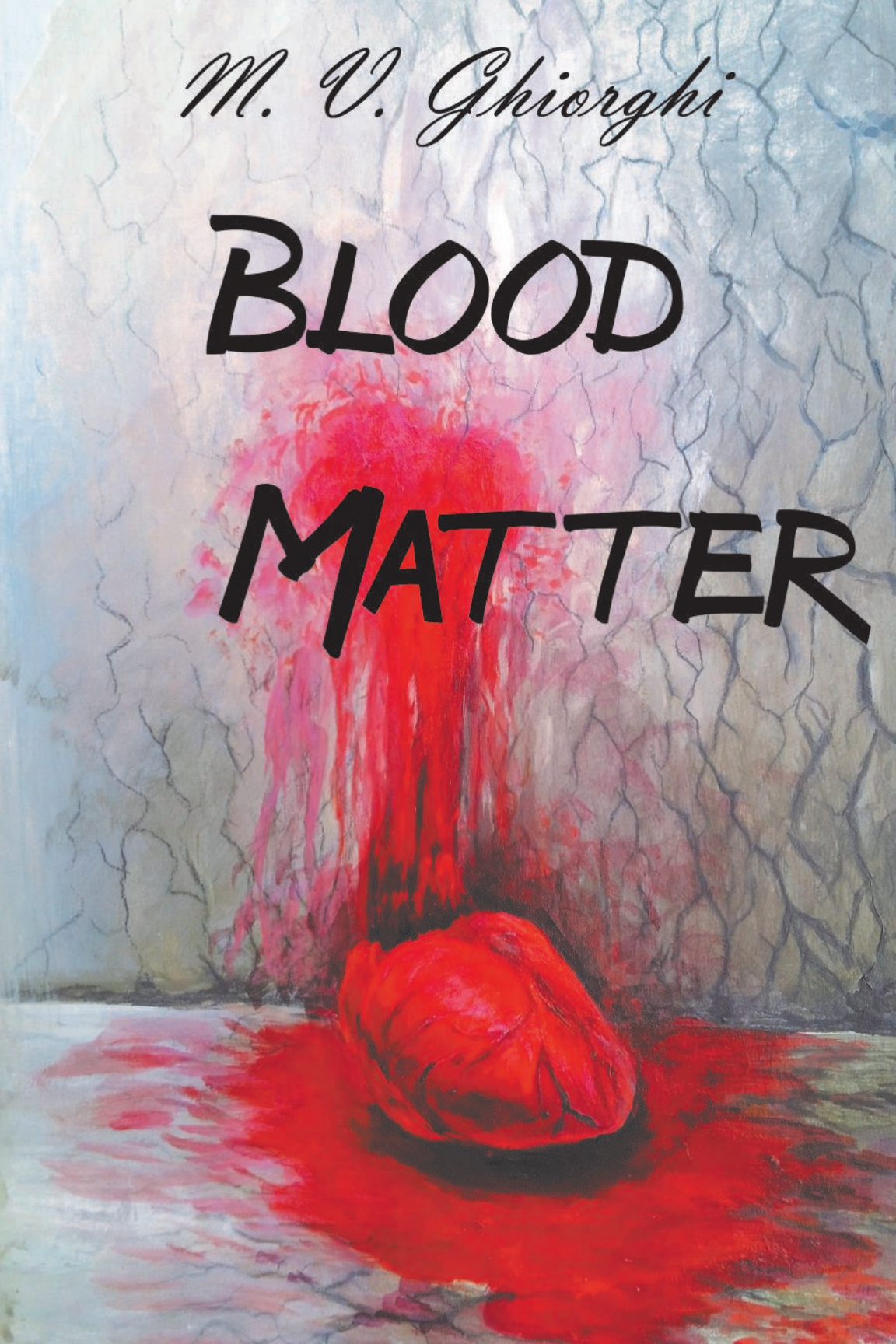


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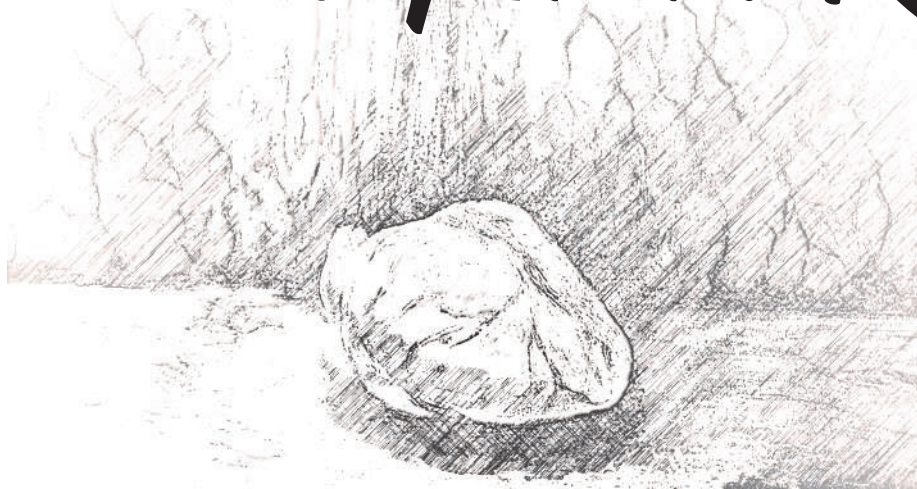
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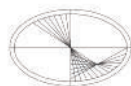


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BLOOD MATTER



M. V. Ghiorghi



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BLOOD MATTER

M. V. Ghiorghi

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Dedication

*This book, as any other I'll ever write, is dedicated to my beloved late parents,
Ghiorghi Svianaidze and Victoria Suchransky.*

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"Love us when we are dirty. Any fool can love us when we are clean."

Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls*

Prologue

Execution

It was the eve of his death, but the fiery hatred streaming through his veins filled him with savage life.

Outwardly, he was calm and cool. He chatted with the three guards docked on the bench across from his cell, telling stories suited to the occasion—like the one about Billy, his minor-offender, hapless acquaintance from the county jail where he had waited for his trial. And not just telling it, but role-playing it, different voices and all, with Billy as a high-strung, depressed country bumpkin.

“...So he climbs on the upper cot and tells me, ‘I’ll see you in haven!’ An’ I tell him, ‘I don’t know ‘bout that, Billy,’ sad kinda-like. An’ he says, ‘Don’t despair, Sammy, God will forgive us.’ And I just wait and watch ‘cause the rope is way too long. Sure enough, the moron jumps and screams his head off, ‘cause he broke both his legs. Spent all his time before the trial in the jail’s infirmary, cursing his luck.”

The easily impressible Jimmy, who had always been kind to Sam, laughed.

Dan, the worthless turn-key cockroach, snickered. “Yeah, but who is lucky now, huh, Sam? The moron or the smart ass?”

The laughter died. The oldest of the three, a Russian guard named Michael, stared in front of himself, uncomfortable. Jimmy glared at Dan.

Sam leaned his back against the wall, eyes half-closed to dim the murderous fire in them, smiling a bit for the guards’ benefit as if he was not perturbed. Thus, resting, he went over every detail of his plan.

“It’s time, Samuel,” said a strained old voice.

Sam Horowitz, or ‘Sam the Slasher’ as he was known for most of his adult life, opened his eyes to see, on the other side of the bars, the somber lined face of Father John. Dan sprang up, weasel-like, to unlock the door.

Sam arched his back, yawned, and rubbed his knees. As he rose, they cracked loudly. “How ya feeling, Pop?” he asked the chaplain. “Nervous?”

Jimmy shook his head with a smile. The uncooked, sphinx-like face of Michael remained impassive. He never went further than what his job required. Him and Jimmy, they were okay.

"I'm fine." Father John stepped inside. He waited as the eager beaver Dan snapped handcuffs tightly on Sam's wrists. "Did you think about our talk?"

"I tell ya what," Sam said. "I've one wish left. If there's a God, he'll know what that is. And if he grants it, you can call me a Believer and save my soul, if you still care to."

Father John looked at him, puzzled, but Sam's intense, mocking stare discouraged further inquiry.

The guards ushered the condemned man into the corridor. The chaplain led the group, with Michael on Sam's right and Jimmy on the left, a step ahead due to the narrowness of the passage. Danny-boy followed with a spring in his step and, Sam imagined, a smirk on his face.

Earlier, Sam had asked Michael and Jimmy—beseeched them, as if the two were his last friends on Earth—to walk his final passage with him. "No offense, Daniel," Sam had said. "We weren't on good terms, so you be so kind as to walk behind."

The Russian and Jimmy, as Sam long observed, didn't care much for their partner and told Dan to honor Sam's last request.

Once they started walking, Sam waited a bit then casually moved his cuffed hands to the belt of his gray trousers. He pretended to scratch himself as he reached for a shank beneath. He had made it from a stolen fork, wrapping it in a ribbon torn from his sheet. He carefully shaped it over the course of three months preceding his execution, hiding it in his anus whenever his cell was searched.

Turning the corner...slowing down...

Sam spun around—and Dan walked straight onto the shank.

They fell together as Sam stabbed, twisting the blade again and again. In the brief stunned silence of the other three, Dan shrieked. His blood sprayed the walls, the floor, and Sam's clothes, turning the dull prison grays a vivid red and coloring the meager shreds of time that Sam had left in abandonment and truth.

Michael and Jimmy screamed and fell on him. They kicked him and slammed his head against the linoleum covered concrete, pulling him away from his enemy who was writhing his last. They pinned Sam down, their sweat dripping on his face, their knees crushing his chest. His ear pressed to the floor felt the pounding vibration even before the sound of the footfalls of more guards racing along the hallway reached him and his captors.

Sam twisted his head, and his eyes found Father John standing frozen as Lot's wife, the old terrified face salt-white above the white collar. "I believe!" Sam hissed, grimacing at the chaplain, "I believe!"

§ § §

They bundled him up and carried him like a rag doll to the death chamber, their hearts beating so wildly he could hear them. In the gray, cinder-block room where the witnesses and the execution team waited, they stood him up on his bound feet.

The executioner's assistant, a young guy with a shrewd face, attended the big oak and leather contraption, while the blank-faced executioner by the controls tried to appear as inconspicuous as part of the device. Two somber newspaper reporters, dressed in dark suits wrinkled from traveling in overnight cases, watched from the corner partitioned by a wooden barrier: the Witness Box.

Hiding behind them was a scarecrow of a man, the custodian of the orphanage where Sam grew up and the one witness he had requested. The old alcoholic was the single person from Sam's childhood that Sam remembered with some goodwill for sharing an occasional bottle of shine with a loner kid. The pasty-faced warden, the clean-shaven doctor, Father John and the guards made up the rest of the public.

"Howdy!" Sam said to all with a broad smile. "Sorry, can't wave." He looked at the custodian. "How are ya my good man? Glad to see ya. Hope ya have fun."

Sam's old acquaintance shrank even more, mum as a mouse. The puny guy had aged badly. Not that Sam cared. The old fart had one use, to watch and remember Sam's last show and blabber about it afterward to all those Sam hated. And Sam hated plenty. All those miserable foes of his inglorious bed-wetting childhood, his humiliating past. They would all know. All except for the orphanage director, his wife, and his two whiny little girls—Sam's first four victims.

Sam's feet and hands were untied and they propped him into the chair, where he sat like a king on a throne. Jimmy and Michael placed leather straps around his legs, arms and chest. The executioner's assistant shaved a patch on Sam's head, cut Sam's pants up to his left knee, and shaved his calf.

Throughout the process, Sam's hungry, feverish gaze wandered. He savored every breath of the stale antiseptic air, every crack on the walls. He took in the

grainy finish and noted the rough imprint right above the entrance, probably left by one of the builders—a palm in the cement, offering the doomed a high-five.

The doctor handed over sponges soaked in brine, which were placed on the shaven spots of Sam's body. Father John stood in the corner, eyes averted, lips moving in prayer.

"Samuel Horowitz," the warden said. "Do you have any last words?"

"Nah. Let's do it."

Michael stared hard at Sam, urging him to look at him, and Sam did. The Russian nodded slightly and, unnoticeable to the rest, gave the dead man a thumbs up—the one and only signal of approval Sam had received in his entire life. *Sailing off well, kiddo!*

Sam grinned at Michael as the black hood fell over his face. He felt the surprising weight of the helmet on his head and its straps being adjusted under his chin. At that moment, a bright thought struck him. If there is a sequel after death, he would come back as a glorious avenger, a hero at last! He would make a great spectacle of his time on the Earth and scratch the coarse hide of history so deep the scar would take centuries to heal—

The executioner threw the switch.

§ § §

That same night, an angry rain descended on a bleak town sprawled in the low hills a hundred miles west of the prison. At the town's train depot, the rain's dull melody mixed with agonizing moans coming from a desolate old boxcar rusting on the back tracks.

Another bout of moans came and went. Then, a howl ended humanity's oldest song. But inside the boxcar there was a continuation, a newborn's mewling as it mourned its entrance into the world. The tiny baby squirmed between the legs of a young woman sprawled in the depth of the car, away from the twisted patterns of yellow, sickly light cast on the dirty floor by a security lantern outside.

Exhausted, the woman rose on her elbow to glare over her hiked-up hospital gown. Her offspring, covered with birthing muck, its genitals hidden by the bloody placenta, looked deformed and ugly. With an effort, the new mother hauled herself onto her knees. Without showing any curiosity about the child's gender or making any attempt to clean it, she scooped it into a filthy rug. Moments later, hair plastered with the rain, losing her soggy slippers every few steps, she waddled along the tracks. Without thinking, she cradled the child in

her arms just like any mother would. The baby, secure in the closeness and the feverish heat of her body, cooed.

"Shut up!" she said. "Don't you act cute on me, you devil's blood! You joinin' your damn father soon enough."

Approaching the depot, an incoming locomotive slowed in preparation to enter the depot's gates.

The woman hurried toward the rising sound.

Chugging through the depot's front gate, the locomotive released a mighty shriek in a burst of steam into the wet air.

The wail of a police siren answered it, as the black and white screeched to a stop on the other side of a row of resting boxcars. The woman gawked in the direction of the car and then peered eagerly into the red eye of the Cyclops coming her way.

A man's voice rang out. "Mary? Are you here?"

A great beam of light washed off the features of the woman's face. She dropped her bundle onto the vibrating tracks and fled over them and into the darkness away from the rising drone of the locomotive and the cop's voice.

§ § §

The sheriff, a grizzly man of fifty, climbed over the slick connecting platforms and jumped down. The engine was approaching, still going at a good speed, and in its glare he saw a figure sprinting away behind the curtain of the rain. He noticed a bundle on the tracks between him and the woman. At first, it looked like some rag she dropped. But then it wriggled.

The heavy man rushed, grabbed the bundle, fell, and rolled off. He huddled still on the wet gravel, his heart thumping, hot dangerous air rushing above dragged by the steel Goliath surging past with an earsplitting screech.

Chapter 1

Standoff

Los Angeles, end of September, 35 years later

Gun fire from the front was answered by two shots from the house. A short barrage followed, covering the sound of breaking glass as Joe smashed through the window. Steve and O'Neal's team were hard at work distracting Gonzales.

He reached for the latch and nearly lost his footing on the retractable ladder. His headache, the result of another ill-slept night, was back, and his Kevlar vest and helmet seemed hotter and heavier than usual. More blasts rang out while he pushed the frame open and climbed inside. The ratty, marital bedroom was in disarray, the mattress missing on the bed, a pile of beddings on the floor, a dresser overturned...

Joe drew his TRP and exited into the small landing. A quiet 'neh-neh' froze him in his tracks. *Alberto*, he thought, and his heart lurched with anxious, crazy hope before he remembered.

He listened. An outgoing gunshot from downstairs—and another lonely, kitten-like, muted 'neh-neh' from behind the closed door across the landing. Only this time, Joe's aware, ever-recalling ear discerned that the cry wasn't Alberto's. A similar baby sound, but not the same. Still, his perception longed to be tricked.

His legs carried him to the second door, and his hand turned the knob. He stepped into a child's bedroom, clean and unadorned except for a white ceramic cross entwined with pink roses above the empty crib. The queen mattress, dragged here from the parents' bedroom, leaned against the wall. He kneeled and peaked into the space formed behind it. The round eyes of a two or three month old baby stared back from the car seat packed with pillows, semi-safe from a stray shot. A pink knitted blanket... Joe thought about the agents with their rifles behind fruit trees and the sniper on the neighbor's roof.

"Hey," he whispered. She 'neh-nehed' at him, urgent. He found a milk bottle stuck in the seat's corner, gave it to her, and she started sucking on it right away. At the back of his mind, the clock ticked off its hurried seconds, but he watched her for a little while. At last, he got to his feet.

He thought about the unfair fate that would give such a beautiful child to such worthless parents. A shame came on the heels of this jealous bitterness. What did he know about them—and who was he to judge? *He's a good father*, Gonzales' teenage wife had said—the one sniveling at the back of the patrol car parked outside—and Joe thought her dim-witted at the time. She also said, when Joe had asked her what weapons her husband owned, *I never saw a gun in the house*.

Another shot came from downstairs where the said husband, twenty-five year old Manuel Gonzales, was holed up with his hostage, the SWAT Second Element's brand new leader, Marcus O'Neal. So, Joe reasoned, when O'Neal went in to try and talk Gonzales into giving up the child, Gonzales didn't have a gun... *They'll kill him. The stupid son of a bitch will run out of ammo, and they'll go in and shoot him.*

Joe Vasquez, or 'Hound' as they nicknamed him at the department, closed the door of the bedroom and started, on cat-paws, down the rickety stairwell.

§ § §

It occurred to him, right before he came into the open, that a bullet into his head would end it all—and it would be okay. If those Catholic tales he was fed from childhood contained some truth, he might even see Alberto again.

"Don't shoot," he called in Spanish raising his hands, the TRP in his right in plain sight. The son-of-a-bitch did shoot at him, shrieking, losing his footing, and sliding on his ass, forcing Joe to lurch under the insufficient cover of the stairwell. Another bullet hit the wall above Joe's head. "I'm not going to shoot back! Don't shoot!" Joe hollered.

There was a pause.

Joe came out, hands raised. The young, wild-faced Mexican man cowering by the front window stared at him from behind O'Neal's Sig quivering in his skinny hand. Out of the corner of his eye, Joe detected O'Neal's form underneath the small kitchen counter.

Joe said, in Spanish, "Don't destroy your life because of this asshole. I know he drove you to it." Then, in English, "Put the gun down! It'll be alright, I promise! I'll vouch for you! You're off your meds, Manuel. You're not all here!"

Their eyes probed each other—Gonzales' scared, Joe's insistent.

"The meds made me dead inside," Gonzales said, his face mournful, the Sig in his limp shaking hand pointing at Joe's midsection.

"They'll put you on the right meds. You' won't be locked up for long. You'll see your daughter."

"She'll see me in heaven," Gonzales quipped and brought the pistol to his temple.

Shit! An icy hand gripped within Joe's ribcage. The gun clicked, once, twice—empty. Gonzales threw it on the floor and closed his eyes. Poor bastard just wanted it to be over.

O'Neal's scream lashed at them. "Shoot! Waste the wetback!"

Joe gritted his teeth. "You'll be alright," he said to Gonzales, picking up the Sig. "This is not the end of the world."

He went to O'Neal, took out his clip knife and cut the duct tape binding O'Neal's hands, knees and feet. He wasn't gentle. O'Neal rose, red-faced and cursing, and grabbed his gun from Joe. As Joe glanced around at the surprisingly orderly house, he heard O'Neal load a new magazine.

"If you care about procedure so much, Vasquez, I'll waste this fuck."

Joe turned and promptly stuck his Springfield in O'Neal's ear. O'Neal, pointing his Sig at Gonzales, froze.

"Stand down," Joe said.

The snake who had breathed down Joe's neck ever since coming fresh from Quantico to the L.A. office a year ago and had already curried favors from the Criminal Division's Senior Acting Commander, Don Cowell, obeyed. Joe lowered his gun as well. He could imagine the lashing he would get if he committed any of the many screw-ups that O'Neal had sailed through. Their old SAC must have felt nostalgic, seeing himself in the young, ladder-climbing asshole.

The designated golden boy sneered, "I almost forgot. You're the 'offenders defender,' aren't you, Vasquez? Especially of your own breed. Just like your daddy."

A blast of rage hit Joe, and before he knew it his Springfield was aimed at O'Neal's face, which started to melt and quiver. Then Joe dropped his arm and discharged the gun into the floor at the yelping O'Neal's feet. When he finished, his voice came out calm enough. "I serve the law. What do you serve, O'Neal? The Klu Klux Klan?"

"You fucking psycho!"

"What did you tell him? How'd you insult him?" Joe did his best to get his internal shaking under control.

"You think you're so high and mighty! Everybody in the department, all but your dumbass sidekick, hates you. Cowell can't stand you," O'Neal spat.

Now that O'Neal had lost it and turned to school-girl taunts, Joe regained

his grip. Funny how it worked. "How did this milk sucker get your gun? Enlighten me."

"He snuck up on me! Stuck his rifle into my back!"

"What rifle?" Joe glanced at Gonzales in disbelief.

O'Neal waved curtly at the corner. Joe went there. A toy pellet gun lay on the floor. "You've got some cojones, boy," he said to Gonzales.

O'Neal stared at Joe with hatred. "He assaulted me!"

"Shit your pants, Marcus?"

Gonzales laughed like a hyena.

§ § §

A squad car bearing Gonzales' baby daughter and her mother pulled away, en route to the grandparents' home. The cops packed Gonzales into another sedan, heading for the county jail.

Joe took off his helmet and slumped against the apple tree. Now that the pressure to keep things together released, he felt weak, his insides trembling like guitar strings. It was getting bad, he thought. He needed to get more sleep. He could make an appointment, ask for pills... Nah, he decided. They'd want to send him to a shrink, force him into evaluations and counseling, and might deem him unfit for duty. All while his work was the only thing keeping him on an even kilter. He'd have to do with something over the counter, like Benadryl.

Joe took a few deep breaths. The breeze dried his sweaty hair, and the mild October sun caressed his face. The gnarled limbs of the tree opened welcoming, and the tangy stench of rotting apples that spotted Gonzales' front yard crisped the air. It wasn't bad to be alive. Then Joe remembered the two who would never again enjoy the sun or smell the apples, and an immense, habitual guilt descended on him, shattering his one moment of contentment.

Steve Mallow walked over, a giant of a man, Joe's partner and second in command of his SWAT element. He put his broad arm across Joe's shoulder and gave him a brief squeeze. Others nodded or shook his hand as they made their way to the van. Joe, not wanting to drive with the rest of the team, waited for the cop who promised him a ride.

Steve leaned on the same tree. Joe was grateful that Steve could come along when they called him in to clean up O'Neal's mess. The men, both about to turn forty, looked strikingly different. A tall, broad-shouldered white guy and a medium-height, wiry Latino. The square-jawed Steve clung to his wheat-blond

buzz cut, while Joe's neglected visits to the barber let his wavy, streaked with premature grays black mane reach halfway to his shoulders.

"How are you holdin' up?" Steve asked when no one was around. Joe realized that the question didn't refer to the shootout.

"I'm alive."

Steve studied him. Whatever he saw apparently satisfied him, because he nodded. Joe sensed that Steve was gathering up for something. He waited, and Steve said, in a discomfited voice, "Cristie's making fish tacos tonight. Asked me to invite you."

"Is her friend coming too? I'm not up for extra company." By extra company he meant a pretty blond accountant Steve's wife had slipped into their tight little circle at Mallows' two weeks prior.

"Hey, I'm sorry. That girl, Sandi, asked for your number. I told her you are not...in the right place right now. Did she call you?"

"Yeah," Joe said. The girl called a couple times, playing the buddy card, trying to get him out of his shell with small, bubbly, annoying talk.

"She's a nice gal, smart, independent..." Steve said, clearly disgusted with himself.

"I'm sure she is."

"I'll tell Christie that you are busy." Steve sounded relieved, his marital obligation to support his wife's matchmaking effort fulfilled.

"Wanna grab a beer after work?"

"Sure."

They stood in a comfortable silence, their very vibes synchronized it seemed, the way it was always between them since the day they met years ago. Joe stared without seeing. The sunny yard and the smell of apples faded away. *Just like your daddy*, the bastard had said.

He expected that a couple people at the department would be privy to his family history, those who read the personnel files as a part of their job. And Steve, of course, who knew everything there was to know about Joe. Except that telling Steve a secret was the same as burying it. The fact that O'Neal knew about Joe's father was unsettling, but not that surprising. As Joe's mother always said, *What two people know, the pig knows too*.

One of the officers who handled Gonzales approached, motioning over his shoulder. "The shithead wants to talk to you."

Joe walked to the van as the driver lowered the back window. "I got something for you," Gonzales said in Spanish. He looked broken, though still wild-eyed. "Remember that black kid they found a few months ago?"

Joe did remember—the Blake Johnson case. A brutal killing handled by the East Side police with no progress so far.

“I delivered some rock back then to an apartment. This guy went to get his money, and I saw some kid with him on the couch—he looked like he was sleeping. A week or so later, I saw a kid that looked a lot like him on T.V., missing. In a few more weeks, they said somebody offed him bad.”

Gonzales glanced toward the driver and lowered his voice to a whisper. “I remember the place, but I won’t tell the cops or your mother fuckin’ feds—only you.”

Chapter 2

Pale Eyes

The murder of Blake Johnson didn't make many headlines or keep the public's attention for long. A 16-year old black student from the projects, he had disappeared a month before hikers discovered his head and leg in the forest near Wilmington in a shallow grave revealed by a strong rain. The following search recovered the remaining parts, some dragged away by animals, some buried.

Joe learned the facts of the case from the overworked detective, Ron Stout, who handled it. The autopsy report was unusual, and not because of the presence of cocaine in Blake's tissues; before being chopped with most likely a chain saw, the body was drained of blood. Also worth noting was Blake's canceled criminal record, an arrest for dealing drugs in his high school followed by a few weeks in a juvenile hall before the charges were dropped.

Testimonies of the boy's friends were of no help. No other witness came forward as Blake's mother couldn't offer a reward. As far as detective Stout was concerned, there was no hope to find the killer, and the case went stale.

Joe didn't anticipate any problems taking over if he gleaned any new leads with a search of the apartment where Gonzales claimed to have seen Blake last. And so, on the second afternoon since the stand-off, he and Steve paid the place a visit. They obtained a warrant but, out of caution, didn't contact the landlord.

The neighborhood was quiet and appeared unpopulated, most denizens being at work at this time of day mid-week. Cars in different stages of disrepair decorated the dry lawns of the seedy block. The apartment was in a one-level duplex, the entrance hidden from the street on the alley side of the building.

They donned disposable gloves and picked the easy lock, listening to freight cars passing by a quarter-mile away. Stepping inside the tiny living room, they closed the door and waited for the rumble to die off.

The furniture was sparse—a small table, a lawn chair, a crooked blind blocking the view from the window, a tattered couch, and an old refrigerator in the corner. The place looked rarely occupied. Joe was sure the tenant had another residence somewhere for his other, overt life. Nevertheless, it was prudent to stay on guard. Easy too—the walls were thin. If anyone approached

from the outside, they'd hear. And as long as they didn't make much noise, they wouldn't scare the returning tenant off.

Steve disappeared into the apartment's only bedroom. Joe checked the refrigerator first—empty and, according to the smell, not turned on for some time. From under the table, he pulled out a plastic garbage bag, full and tied up—seemingly containing mostly paper waste.

He went to the bathroom, put on a disposable mask, and sprayed the place liberally with a solution of Luminol. Then he turned off the light, shut the door and waited. There was no luminescence on the walls, floor, or the bathtub, meaning no traces of blood or recent treatment with bleach.

He took the mask off and went to the bedroom. "The shithouse is clean," he said to Steve.

His friend crouched by the queen-size bed that had a dirty mattress and no sheet, pulling out empty beer cans and crusty pizza boxes from beneath the metal frame. He used his flashlight one more time and got up. "Something's there..."

They pulled the bed away from the wall. A yellow baseball hat wedged behind the mattress fell. Steve fished it out and passed it to Joe. "Wasn't the kid wearing something like this when he disappeared?"

Joe kneeled, examining the spots on the mattress. He sniffed a few places.

"You do look like a hound, you know."

"Old semen," Joe said. "Seeped through the sheet, which he discarded."

"Didn't the report mention cotton fibers on the body?"

They flipped the mattress, and a mid-size manila envelope lay on the slats. Joe picked it up. The envelope wasn't sealed. He shook it, and three photographs fell out.

He and Steve examined the glossy images. In the first photo, an old patrician-looking man stood on the steps of a stately building addressing a large rally of some sort. The second photo depicted a country road by a corn field, with a barn in the background and a wooden post in the foreground. In the third, a close-up likely taken with a telephoto lens, the same man listened to a dark-haired, pale, willowy woman. Joe studied her. She looked to be in her mid-thirties. Even in the picture, the intensity of her eyes was striking.

"A looker," Steve said.

"Arresting," Joe agreed.

"Arrested you," Steve chuckled. He turned to the bed. "Got the stickies?"

Joe pulled a pad of sticky notes along with a Ziploc baggie out of his old

leather jacket's overburdened pocket; he always had a few of those baggies on him. Steve took them and went to work collecting the particulate.

Joe put the photos back into the envelope and walked out. He stopped in the living room and listened. The silence here was eerie. Not a sound came from the bedroom where Steve worked. A dismal pang of complete loneliness, in the drab apartment and in the world, struck Joe.

He shook the insidious sensation off, but the vague evil of the place persisted. He marched to the couch and removed the cushions to check the accumulated grit underneath, then went to the table, pulled the garbage bag from below, untied it, and dumped the contents on the table, some falling to the floor.

The first newspaper he lifted from the pile had a big square missing in the front page. A second had a hole also. Someone clipped the articles. The first rag, *The Daily Carrier*, hailed from Colorado; another, *The Standard Recorder*, from Arizona. Both were dated last year, a few months apart.

Joe sorted through the rest and found a piece of white, crumpled paper among the remaining whole newspapers pages. Joe flattened it. Letter-sized and printed on it in big bold script were the words, 'Back off or I'll lay you out.' It had all the appearance of a draft, a first take of a blackmail message he thought. He laid it aside and returned to the remainder of the pile.

Among the paper scraps and wrappers he fished out a photo. Someone attempted to rip it and half-succeeded. It must have been discarded because of the lousy resolution. At first, Joe couldn't quite make heads or tails of the elongated object, light in the dark background...And then it dawned on him and he drew his breath. He put the picture on top of the reviewed stack and became aware, without knowing how, of a hostile presence.

He stood still, facing the door, his 'Hound' senses sharpened. Outside, a twig snapped beneath weight...He pulled his Springfield from its strut holster. Sand grated underfoot...moving closer...Joe clenched his teeth and raised his gun. A key slid into the lock...

A floorboard squeaked behind. Joe turned and shook his head at Steve. His friend froze at the bedroom entrance. The key withdrew...

They stared at the door, the silence ringing in their ears. The realization dawned. Whoever tried to enter was stealing away. Joe tore for the door, threw it open, and jumped out into the narrow alley. Steve ran out after him. A tall wooden fence overgrown with elderberry blocked one of the alley's ends—two dented garbage containers in front, purple flowers stirring in the breeze. They ran to the other end, which opened into the street. Deserted as far as they

could see in both directions, it was, on the right, just two houses short of the block's end.

"I'll check the garbage cans," Steve called and hurried back.

Joe sprinted toward the corner, reached it, and eyed the crossing street. It was open and straight to his left, and to his right crooked and treed. He started moving when a gunshot whipped him into a one-hundred and eighty degree turn. "Steve?!" he yelled.

No answer. The mute windows and deaf fences were silent. He ran back.

He burst into the alley and saw at once that one of the garbage cans was on its side, no longer concealing the gaping hole in the fence behind. He went for it and dived through. A gurgling sound came from a ditch between two rows of houses. A few feet ahead, Steve lay on his back, his quarry, whoever he was, nowhere in sight.

Joe knelt by his friend's side but didn't dare lift him. Unable to think, he pressed his hand over Steve's neck below the chin where the bullet entered, as if he could arrest the spurting blood. It quickly soaked the front of his shirt. Steve's eyes bore into his. The big guy was trying to say something.

"Shhh...", Joe said. "Lay still. It's gonna be alright." Tears streamed down his cheeks.

In Steve's last willful effort, words came. "Pale eyes...like silver fish..." Then the face of Joe's friend slackened, his eyes staring past Joe and absorbing the blue of the sky.

Chapter 3

Dante Gayle

Impressive," SAC Cowell said, leafing through Dante's transcripts. The head of the Criminal Division was the only eyesore in a model office sagging with catalog-perfect furniture; a fat bureaucrat with piggy eyes compensating for his unfortunate genetics with a forceful display of dominance and importance. "Your field counselor and class supervisor think highly of you. The key now is to pair you up with someone you can learn from. I suggest Marcus O'Neal."

"If you don't mind, sir, I would like to work with Agent Vasquez. I heard he just lost his partner," said the newly minted Fed standing in front of Cowell's desk. Young, black and super-sized, with the relaxed muscles of an intelligent face and heavy eyelids giving him a sleepy expression Cowell suspected to be misleading.

"Why Vasquez? I don't know what you were told, but I'll tell you, between us, he's a loner and inhospitable. With O'Neal you'll learn the ropes; he'll set you right. And he can certainly use someone like you. As your SAC, it's my duty to put you where your abilities are best utilized."

"If I can speak freely, sir?" Gayle's stare was respectful and his speech unhurried. "I heard Agent Vasquez has solved all the cases he's been given. They even call him 'Hound,' right? I gather he's not popular, but everybody agrees his work ethic is exceptional."

"Yeah, he spends a lot of extra hours on the job," Cowell said. "Although, to tell you the truth, none of his cases were much to speak of. The problem with him—he doesn't like anyone treading on his domain, which is not a good quality in an agent."

"They say he's an excellent SWAT leader, good at negotiations, and treats minorities with respect. Plus, he has 12-years of experience."

"So you like how he treats minorities?" Cowell's sarcastic stare measured Dante's hulk. "Have it your way, then. His partner's death is still under investigation. But if you want to take the dead guy's place, so be it. Maybe you'll be luckier."

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"The murder of a federal agent is not a local matter."

"I didn't say the case shouldn't belong to us. I'm saying *you* shouldn't handle it. You've been running amok," Cowell said. "Get some rest. You are overdue for a nice long vacation, Vasquez. When you're back, work on some routine stuff; nothing to overheat the old apparatus." Cowell tapped his forehead with his finger. "I'm sorry about Steve. But we don't need any more screw ups. The time of the lone cowboy is long over."

"There won't be any screw-ups," Joe said. "I give you my word." He stared darkly at his boss. "If you don't give me this case, I'll resign."

Cowell leaned back in his chair, appraising Joe. Joe didn't care what the SAC saw. He avoided mirrors lately. The haggard, aged man reflected in them was unfamiliar to him.

"Well..." Cowell gazed around in pretend thoughtfulness.

Joe tried to quiet his internal tremble.

"Have at it then," the magnanimous blowhard expounded. "I expect you to keep your promise. Also, we've got a new guy, a new grad, recently finished SWAT training too. He needs a mentor."

That was just great. Just what he needed—a babysitting gig. Joe nodded curtly and headed to the door.

The SAC spoke to his back, as if in afterthought. "By the way, Hound."

Joe turned, his hand on the knob.

"The A.D.C. considers the last operation successful and your conduct commendable. The correction's shrink says Gonzales had a paranoid episode. He wouldn't be much of a loss, but the press would have a field day if he was shot. We got a nifty article instead. Check the L.A. Times today."

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His work was his crutch and his salvation. His knack for it ensured his addiction from the time when, as a little kid, he would recover household items misplaced by his mother, or help their neighbor to retrace steps to find the twenty dollar bill the old guy dropped.

Since the day after Steve's death, Joe holed up in his tiny office. He slept in the recliner across from his desk piled with papers. There were also piles on the floor. The computer screen hurt Joe's tired eyes, so he read print-outs. The

papers multiplied and spread to his recliner, turning his office into a messy nest no one else could navigate.

Mallow was not just Joe's best friend, but also the only one who broke into the prideful, shabby castle of solitude Joe had lived in since childhood. They both hailed from fatherless families and met in the navy where they earned their college scholarships. They struggled through their studies together and together applied to the FBI. Unlike Joe, Steve had other friends, but Joe was by far his closest. From the get-go, they were tighter than most brothers.

By the second day after Steve's funeral, and the first day of the Blake Johnson case being officially assigned to him, Joe had learned a few things. The discarded Polaroid from the apartment on Garden Lane pictured a human thigh matching in proportions and general appearance the right thigh of Blake Johnson found near Wilmington. Of course, a smart-ass defense lawyer would say it could be a picture of any thigh, or something made to look like a thigh. The picture, as well as Blake's hat, could have been placed in the apartment by the real killer, a good lawyer would point out—perhaps Gonzales himself. It didn't matter that Gonzales had no faculties to pull off such a killing and a cover-up; he was still an imbalanced and violent offender. And the murder of Steve, the smart-ass lawyer would argue, was likely self-defense considering that, while in hot pursuit, Mallow likely had failed to demonstrate to the perp that he was a federal agent.

But for now, Joe didn't care what the lawyer could say. What mattered was Joe's belief that the Polaroid was a picture of Blake's thigh, that more pictures of murdered Blake made it into a blackmail package of some sort, accompanied by a warning along the lines of the crumpled note, *Back off or I'll lay you out*, and that the killer of Blake and Steve sent the package to one or both of the people in the photos found under the mattress. Joe searched for recent crimes involving dismemberment in the NIB Reporting System database. After he came up empty-handed, he called Ron Stout to see if the detective unearthed anything through other means.

Stout bristled at the implication of being expected to perform such a search. His resources were limited, he told Joe. At the moment, he was busy looking for a guy who raped a student at a local community college. Joe guessed Stout was demoted to handling rapes after failing a murder case and wasn't happy to talk to the Fed who took over the latter.

Too tired for diplomacy, Joe hung up on Stout. The student, a white middle class girl, apparently deserved more effort. Joe got a feeling that some of the interviews Stout had conducted would need to be redone.

The lack of valuable fingerprints presented another challenge. Joe went back to the apartment with a couple of forensic technicians the day before Steve's funeral. They combed through the place and picked up enough prints, too many and mostly of bad quality, to keep the lab busy for a while. The manila envelope was clean and so was the Polaroid, the newspapers, the other paper waste from the garbage bag, and the bag itself. The only prints were on the photos and belonged to a technician from a busy photo-processing place close to the duplex, which Joe located simply by using his GPS. The killer wasn't taking any chances. The absence of food, linens, or even scissors at the apartment confirmed that he occupied it on an as-needed basis.

The photo lab technician remembered that the photos of the woman and the grey-haired man, as well as of the barn, came from a larger collection, but he didn't remember what was on the rest of the pictures, nor who brought them in for development.

The 80-year old landlord of the duplex, Mr. Crabber, lived with his son's family and rarely visited his property. The rental agreement between him and his tenant was arranged by phone about a year ago. The renter, who called himself Will Brown, was punctual in his month-to-month cash payments. The social security number he provided to Mr. Crabber belonged to a retired geezer who had no idea his identity had been stolen. In his rat-nest of hoarded receipts, Mr. Crabber managed to find the phone number the tenant supplied. It dialed a phone booth at LAX.

The editors of the two newspapers found in the garbage bag emailed Joe the missing articles. Upon his follow-up requests, both local correctional facilities faxed to him the related case pages the articles mentioned. Joe lifted a mug shot of an ugly, burly man from his desk. James McKee, nicknamed "The Strangler," incarcerated in ADX right before his untimely demise last November. He picked up the next print, an image of McKee stretched dead on his cot in a puddle of blood. Next, a close-up of McKee's face, a good deal uglier than in life, with a noose cutting deep into his neck. The killer, who the article said was never seen by anyone, penetrated McKee's cell, strangled him, and evaporated into the night. The body was found during morning roll call.

Joe believed that McKee deserved the isolation and misery of the Florence Maximum Security prison. But there was a particular brutality about the pay-back inflicted on someone already living in a close approximation of hell on earth. One would think they'd have the best security in a Super Max.

Joe read on. The execution almost matched the Strangler's own method of killing. Almost. McKee didn't cut his victims, and the primary cause of his

demise was hanging. But the coroner's report mentioned a few cuts on McKee's wrists, behind the knees and groin matching the pattern of the cuts found on Blake's body. The cuts were done while he was still alive, hence a good deal of blood on the mattress.

Joe laid the mug shot back on his desk and lifted another. The victim presented on it was the subject of the second missing newspaper article. Conrad Bacholski of Arizona was ash-haired with close-set eyes in a bony face. According to his case papers, Bacholski and an accomplice would invite seasonal workers over for a drink on pay-day, drug and bind them, then drown them in Bacholski's bathtub.

Joe picked up another photo. Conrad again, but this time face down in the prison's gutter. 'Bacholski drowned in the sewer during what appeared to be an escape attempt,' the article said. Describing Bacholski's injuries, the Arizona coroner reported some deep forearms gashes, their presence attributed to the escapee squeezing through the narrow rusted sewer grate. Joe found the stipulation lame. There was no mention of the grate's material analysis to confirm the examiner's theory. Joe studied the photo of the cuts in the coroner's report. He wasn't a forensic pathologist but, to him, while their jagged appearance could result from an accidental laceration, it could also be inflicted by a killer or killers pressed for time. The blood loss from those cuts wasn't significant enough to warrant a special mention in the report. Still, he or they went through the trouble of executing Bacholski by drowning instead of simply killing him in some other, more convenient way. Joe's gut insisted—since he, unlike the Arizona's investigators, also knew about McKee's execution as well as Blake's murder—that those weird cuts were purposeful and possibly a hurried attempt of bloodletting.

No other injuries were found on Bacholski's body, except for some minor bruising. The relative ease with which Bacholski drowned could be explained by traces of chloroform in his clothing, although the evidence of the chloroform presence was deemed inconclusive.

It seemed likely the original blackmail package contained the two clipped-out articles, along with some photographs developed at the lab near the apartment and the pictures of Blake's body. The nature and timing linked the two prison executions, as did the fact the blackmailer and presumed Blake's killer collected the newspaper articles describing them. But was there a link between the body cuts present in those executions and Blake's murder? Could all three crimes be committed by the same individual or individuals? Joe imagined that a psychopathic bastard nervy enough to shoot Steve, a highly trained agent and ex-Navy

Seal, and twisted enough to kill a teenage boy by draining his blood and butchering the body, was equal to the task of dispatching two incarcerated serial killers in a manner matching their own *modus operandi* while bleeding them a little first. For the perv, the bleeding could have a symbolic meaning of some sort. Or he simply enjoyed the procedure. So, for now, Joe decided to assume that the killer of Blake was also the killer of the inmates. Besides the bleeding, the incarceration appeared to be the other common feature of all three murders—after all, Blake did spend a brief time in juvie.

So, how did the man and the woman from the photos fit into all of this?

Joe emailed copies of the photos to D.C. a few days ago, to the attention of Mike Berryhill, Steve's first mentor and partner in Washington when Steve and Joe graduated from Quantico and worked for a while under different bosses. After they finished their stunt in D.C., they both returned to L.A. Berryhill moved on to bigger and better things, but he and Steve stayed in touch. Joe knew he could rely on Mike's help if he needed to fast-track things or avoid official channels to get information, especially if any such help contributed to finding Steve's killer.

Still, he didn't expect for Berryhill to come through so fast. Hearing the familiar whistling of the fax, he got up, expecting more of the Arizona or Colorado case papers. But when he picked up the sheet and saw his mistake, he understood why it took Mike only two days to fish this one out.

An enlarged print of an official White House I.D was airbrushed and taken some years ago, but he recognized the thick mane of silver hair and the patrician composure of the face right away; he saw too much of it lately while staring at the woman's face alongside it. The old guy from the photographs was Texas Independent Senator Damien Sheppard.

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Joe was clearing space in the middle of his desk to build a new pile designated for the important person of politics connected to his case when someone knocked on the door. "Come in," he called, in a voice devoid of any welcome.

The man who entered was young, large and black. "Dante Gayle," he said in a rich baritone, "reporting for duty."

Joe examined his new partner morosely. Gayle's heavy-lidded eyes gazed back at him from an unperturbed, smooth-as-an-egg face. As tall as Mallow, but where Mallow was muscled, broad-shouldered and brusque, Joe's new partner was meaty and loose with male-boobs and sloping shoulders. The kid looked

about twenty-five. Must have gone straight to college and then moved directly to the FBI.

In spite of the lack of actual likeness, Gayle's face reminded Joe of Bob Marley. Joe had nothing against Bob Marley—he even had an old Marley CD shuffling somewhere in the obscure bowels of his car. He just didn't want Bob Marley for a partner. For that matter, he didn't want any partner. He missed and needed Steve—loyal, even-minded, sharp Steve. Since Steve was no more, Joe needed no one.

The big boy's curious eyes, followed by Joe's jealous ones, went to the piles on the floor. "I think I can be useful," he said.

Like a small pox blanket, Joe thought.

To discourage visitors, he had removed all but one office chair. Dante's eyes stopped on the recliner hosting a pile of papers. With more nimbleness than his body shape suggested, he moved to the only chair behind Joe's desk and pegged his behind into it. He looked around for some means to break the ice and found none. That didn't deter him.

"I hear you're from Guatemala," he said with a big smile. "I've gone there a couple of times with my cousins, backpacking and such. Great country." Dante's expression grew startled at the sight of Joe's changing for the worst.

Joe gritted his teeth. He never talked about his origins and never visited his fatherland where his parents' families still lived, not even when he had traveled in Latin America with his now estranged wife. But the damn kid didn't know his reasons, he reminded himself. Joe picked up the folder with the collection of the case paperwork from his desk, slapped the Damien Sheppard ID picture Berryhill faxed to him to the top, and dropped the whole thing in Dante's lap.

"Why don't you redirect your curiosity," he said. "Make your own copies of everything and try to make sense of it, free style. Don't come back until you get somewhere."

He sat on the edge of his desk and folded his arms, short of saying, *Chop-chop, big slug; hope not to see you for a while*. His tension lessened as his new partner eased out of his small domain. And so ended Joe's first meeting with Dante.

Chapter 4

A Night at Home

Joe stepped inside the room and quietly closed the door. He waited until he heard only his own breathing. His eyes acclimated and made out the outlines of the crib. For a few moments, he thought he could feel his boy's presence.

Then a beam of light from a passing car broke through the sheer curtains. In one devastating moment, it illuminated the smoothness of the baby blanket inside. A cold hand in Joe's chest woke up and squeezed. His son was gone for eight months, his tiny body rotted in the bleak dirt hole next to the four year old grave of Joe's mother. Alberto would have been walking by now, talking a little, calling his father something silly. Joe's imagination rehearsed these over and over, without mercy.

The room was a mausoleum to Joe's fatherhood. He wouldn't let Lana, Alberto's mother and Joe's soon-to-be ex-wife, touch anything here. The baby clothes still filled the drawers, the tricycle Alberto never grew up enough to ride still stood in the corner, and his baby toys still overflowed the big basket next to it. Soon after their son's funeral, Lana wanted to donate all his things to her church. Joe would not let her. The toys, the clothes, and the crib remained. Lana, on the other hand, had moved out, and the arrangement sat well with him.

It had been almost five months since she left. She said she couldn't stay in the house or with Joe the way he was now. They didn't talk. A few days before she left, she dragged Joe out on a date and suggested they should try to get pregnant again. He used to appreciate his wife's even-tempered, habitual sweetness. Now, he found it to have the unwholesome aftertaste of confectioners' sugar and saw it for what it was—the incapacity for real love, real grief. After moving out, she emailed him demanding that he go through grief counseling as a condition for her return. Joe didn't answer the email. Instead, he filed for divorce.

For eight months, he immersed himself in his cases, however mundane and unrewarding they typically were. That's all he had—his work and Steve, whom he saw mostly at work too. Steve got married over a year ago, was expecting, and tried to spend more time home with Christie. Now she decided to stay with her parents in Bloomington until the birth. Taking her to the airport was on Joe's to-do list tomorrow.

He left Alberto's room and walked down the semi-dark hallway. This was his first visit home since his recent near-relocation to his office at Wilshire. He needed a little more comfort, a real bed for a change, and a hot shower in the morning. Much footwork waited.

He bought the house, the first he and his mother ever owned, a year after he started working at the bureau. It was old, and he put some good work into it. The hallway's entire length was lined with shelves he'd built before Isabel got sick to store all the books they collected: the mysteries and detective stories he favored, and the novels his mother devoured by Márquez, Benedetti, Rulfo, Casares, and other South American classics, almost all of them in Spanish. He hadn't bought any new ones in a long time. And the last volume, which he never finished, gathered dust in the guest bathroom, his customary reading room.

He didn't go to the master bedroom; it no longer felt right or good to sleep there, in his old marital bed, under the puffy, overly-warm comforter. Instead, he headed to his study. Converted from his mother's bedroom and located at the end of the hall, it greeted him with the permanently-open futon, the sheets which needed changing, and many months' worth of clutter on Isabel's old writing desk. He opened the window wide and deeply inhaled fresh air, the rain droplets spraying his face. When his chest was soaked, he turned on the ceiling fan. As of late, it became hard for him to cool at night; his body seemed to require freezing to help him fall asleep.

A desire to smoke came from nowhere—strong; not just a passing wonder about the almost forgotten taste in his mouth, but a craving, no longer tinged with a memory of nausea the very first inhale would likely bring.

He smoked his last cigarette at thirteen—or, to stand corrected, his last pack and half. It was the day his mother caught him in the bushes behind their old apartment building lighting up, not knowing what he was doing yet but trying. His whole experience up to that point came down to about five smokes, and he had quite a bit remaining, the wage a chain-smoking ex-military neighbor dude paid him for mowing his yard. Smoking seemed fun. It might help him fit in more, give him something to do during the breaks in school, and make his loneliness less noticeable; plus, he started to like the taste.

He thought the cigarettes he earned would last him a while, but found he was wrong when his mother caught him red-bogeyed. She didn't get mad, although her coolness scared him so he did what she told him. *It's okay, son, suck it in. Go on, don't stop!* He finished the cigarette up in one uninterrupted gulp. *Take another one. Here, I'll light it for you.* He smoked the next, and the next, fast, her quiet voice urging him on, her dark eyes never leaving his. He

went through all his stash in less than a quarter hour, until a violent cough seized him and he was choking on his vomit.

Afterward, he missed three days of school and was sick for almost a month. All throughout his twenties, the mere thought of a cigarette would unsettle his stomach. Someone might call his mother's behavior child abuse, but he knew better. She loved him hard enough to be willing to hurt him in the short run to inoculate him against the insidious poison.

The inoculation worked till recently, but the desire was coming back, whispering that his mother's concerns no longer mattered and a shortened existence would be a blessing. And tonight, with his empty life in his empty house, the real urge returned. He almost wished he grabbed a pack at the gas station on the way home.

No, he didn't. He needed a clear, clean mind now more than ever, not addled and altered by addiction. Plus, smoking may bring pleasure, and Joe didn't want any. He had guilt enough.

He undressed and slid under the thin blanket. After a while he pushed it aside, leaving only a sheet. One great thing about his office at work was the air conditioning. He never got around to installing a unit at home because it didn't seem to be needed before. The time lagged, and he tried to get along with it by breathing evenly. He tried to empty his mind, but the memories kept coming into the void.

His little boy, soon after he was born, the brows arched in permanent surprise over big curious eyes that, in just a month after his birth, became hazel—the cross between his father's brown and his mother's blue. And his ecstatic grin whenever Joe's face was close. The boy almost never cried, never complained, and slept through the night, the parents rarely hearing a peep from him until 5 or 6 in the morning. The most easy, sweet baby.

Then one day, Joe woke up on his own around 6:30 a.m., alarmed by the break in the routine. Alberto was 6-months old, and they had moved his crib into the nursery and installed a baby monitor... The doctor said it was sudden infant death syndrome, a term they offered when lacking an explanation.

Joe drifted in and out of unconsciousness. Then, closer to dawn, he slipped into the dreams—one familiar, and another new.

He came to the crib and looked down at Alberto. He touched him, and this time, his son woke up, stared at Joe with the wide green eyes, and smiled. Isabel put her hand on Joe's shoulder, watching him and her grandson with immeasurable love. That's when Joe remembered that she was dead and never knew Alberto. As

soon as he reached to touch her, a lump caught in his throat and she disappeared. And when he turned back to the crib, so did Alberto.

Then Joe rode with Steve as they always did while partners, but neither of them was driving. A shadow, a menacing presence, sat at the wheel. But nothing mattered, even that Steve was dead, because Steve was still around as long as Joe didn't make a move and kept silent. But Joe's longing was too strong. And as soon as he turned to see Steve's face, his friend was gone.

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He woke up crying.

Outside, Arleta awakened with the tires' screech of cars emerging from driveways. It was six a.m. Joe lay for a while, then got up and shut the window. Unhinged, he needed anchoring, even if it brought more pain. He staggered to the closet and kneeled before an old, maple-veneer trunk stored against the wall. He removed the shoe boxes from the lid and opened it for the first time in years.

He pulled his mother's things out one by one. Out came her blouses and a few pairs of slacks. She wore these whenever they had guests. He remembered the evening about five years ago when he first brought willowy, conventionally pretty Lana to dinner. He hadn't thought of marrying her, but he needed someone by his side. Isabel was sick, barely venturing out, and, they both knew, dying. After the dinner, when Lana was gone, his mother looked at him with her sunken, all-seeing eyes and stated, "You don't love this girl."

"It's too early to say," he had protested.

"We have hot blood, José. You've dated her for three months. If you are not sure now, you'll never be. It's hard to live your whole life with someone you don't love. Marriage is not something you try. Not in our family. Once you are in, you are in."

Isabel understood Joe better than Steve, and apparently even better than Joe understood himself. Lana didn't understand him at all. He didn't mind it before. He might feel content enough in his marriage, overall, if he had his mother and Alberto. He could get by.

No, that wasn't it, he thought, because if Isabel was alive there would be no marriage. Not to Lana. Isabel's death pushed him into it. He needed someone. Lana moved in a month later. They got married and in two years Alberto was born.

As devout a Catholic as his mother was, Joe knew she would understand him breaking up with his wife; she loved him too much not to. *She DOES understand me*, he corrected himself. He wanted to believe that Isabel was still around, still near somehow. This faith turned his pain into an enduring but bearable longing.

He pressed her old dress to his face, inhaling the lingering smell of rose oil she used in place of perfume, and then put it on the floor with the rest of her clothes. He found her reading glasses, some of his school papers she had saved, a tattered notebook of recipes in her Spanish handwriting, and a robe he bought her for her birthday with his first paycheck when he was eighteen, bundled around something...

Joe unwrapped it and took out, one by one, a framed photo of his parent's wedding...a stack of letters held with a rubber band addressed in Spanish to his mother from his father and posted with Guatemalan stamps...his father's old family album...Joe paused, holding the last object—Rafa's flannel pajama shirt, complete with a bullet hole and rusty spots of long-dried blood.

Joe stared at his findings. While growing up, he believed that Isabel had gotten rid of these objects. Their absence had sealed the silent pact between them, never to mention the man that Joe had struggled his entire childhood not to miss. Yet here they were, keepsakes of the dead, preserved lovingly for Joe one day to chance upon.

Numbly, he started placing everything back into the trunk then stopped, holding the letters. They belonged to his mother. He knew he should destroy them...But he also knew he couldn't. It was his professional habit compelling him to examine them, he told himself. He decided to keep them in his office.

Chapter 5

Asia Johnson

Joe ate at his customary spot, a hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant serving an excellent, if greasy, breakfast. He then drove his well-used Subaru Outback to see Asia Johnson, the mother of Blake. To his surprise, he found out she moved to one of the transitional suburbs. Her new place, only half an hour drive from downtown L.A., must have been a vast improvement over her former residence at a housing project in one of the oldest districts in South Central.

He left her a message the day after Steve's death, but she hadn't returned his call. He called her again yesterday afternoon, and this time she answered and they set up the appointment. Detective Stout had already asked most of the questions Joe had for her. But sometimes, the passage of time brings into focus elements muddled by the first shock. At least, so Joe hoped.

His GPS led him to a bucolic area populated by modest but clean homes. Low and middle of the middle class, he guessed. Teachers, plumbers, nurses, and the like. Asia lived in a one-story duplex. A police car was parked in the next driveway; her neighbor, a cop, was home for lunch.

Joe knocked on the door and Asia opened it right away, as if she waited behind. She had closely-cropped, wiry hair and more loose skin than her fifty-six years warranted, like someone who used to be plump but shriveled all at once. She didn't say anything when he introduced himself, but led him in, nodded at a worn chair, and sat herself in another. Joe took a seat, and she stared at him with her tragic brown eyes, her face impassive.

"I'm sorry I have to bother you with this again, Mrs. Johnson."

"I've been in the hospital near a month. Came home to a message on my answering machine. Called you back, and a lady said she'd let you know."

That would be McCollum, Joe thought. She must have told Cowell, and Cowell had treated Asia's call as unimportant.

"So you were sick for a month?" he asked.

"Longer. That's just the stay at St. Vincent. My heart's no good."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Joe reflected on how lame and commonplace his words sounded. He could do nothing about it. He was ill equipped to offer

anyone solace. He took out his list and went over the routine questions first, and her patient answers matched her previous ones.

At last, he got to the worst. He opened the case he brought with him and extracted a gallon Ziploc containing the yellow baseball cap found in the apartment on Garden Lane. "Do you recognize this?"

Asia took the baggie. Her lips moved without uttering a sound while her hands rubbed the plastic, as if trying to feel the hat within. She nodded without giving it back to Joe. "Kids got no business dying before their mothers," she said. "When a mother dies before her child, she half-dies. But when a child goes before...both go."

Joe thought about the time she spent waiting for the cops to do something. She probably believed this FBI agent was no different, but still tried to guilt him into some kind of action. "You have another son, Adam," he said, and immediately felt stupid.

"He's my whole life. He's in Canada now."

"Canada?" Joe gaped at her. From what he knew, Adam Johnson, aged fifteen, went to the same school as his brother.

"In a boarding school," Asia clarified. "It's safer. I miss him badly. But I'll be moving there soon myself. He went a couple months ago. The pastor from our church flew with him. I was too sick to go. It's better this way. Before, I lived in fear every day that the man who killed my oldest will take this one, too. Every morning Adam stepped out that door, my heart was racing."

"How did you...Has your church helped you?" Joe asked.

"They did some legwork, but it was Gabrielle who started it all. She helped us a good deal."

"Who is Gabrielle?"

"Oh, a bit of a story there." Asia's face lit up a little. "Goes back to my Blake being taken to juvie. She was a shrink who talked to him, proved he was innocent. The lady is a certified angel. We didn't even know about the scholarship. All Adam's expenses are paid."

"He must be a good student," Joe remarked, flabbergasted.

"He is. Almost as good as his brother."

Another surprise. Blake Johnson a good student?

"She contacted me when...when they found Blake," Asia said. "We kept in touch after. I told her how I pray Adam would grow up and leave the projects. School there was bad, and I've got no money to help him. That good soul figured it all out. She found me this place, got some assistance. I'd never afford it on my disability. Doctors put a pacemaker in me, so I can't work. It's my

own fault. Shouldn't drive myself crazy, thinking how Blake was before he died. . . Gabrielle told me about the boarding school too. Then the pastor helped us fill out all the applications. Adam will have a good schooling, go on to college."

Joe thought the story a small miracle, a reminder that there were some good, caring people in the world. Learning, in the midst of this depressing visit, that Blake's brother may have had a sunnier future warmed him up a bit. Still, his instinct cocked its ear and his Hound brain probed for a possible underlining to this development, even some connection to the crime. He'd need to look into this, he thought.

But his likely misguided misgivings aside, it was great to see a little light in Asia's worn face. He thought of his own mother. During his childhood, they lived in slums too. When he turned fourteen, on the brink of a boy's most troublesome years, she pulled all the stops, filled out piles of applications, found a second job as a night attendant in a hotel owned by a Guatemalan couple, and moved them into a tiny apartment in the suburbs—and him into a much better school. But his mother was healthier and stronger than Asia then, shrewder too, and she didn't go through the hardest heartbreak of all, losing her child.

"Let's hope, Adam will stay off drugs," Joe said.

"He does!" Asia said. "And Blake never touched the stuff, no matter what the cops say."

It was natural for a mother to be in denial. The tissues of Blake's battered body confirmed the cops' version of his character. Still. . . Joe thought of his own mother who not only adored him, but also knew him best.

His doubting expression agitated Asia. "I'm telling you, Blake was a good boy! You go talk to Dennis Bosko, his counselor at school! He'll tell you."

"Were any other adults in close contact with him?" Joe knew that Blake's father had been dead for several years.

"His uncle Darrel. He lives in Alaska, but they talked on the phone. His chemistry teacher, Mr. Potter, used to give Blake extra assignments. Blake got A's and B's all through that class. And of course, the counselor in the juvenile center, Don Selvage. He liked Blake. And most important, Gabrielle. She helped clear my boy; she saw right through him."

"Tell me more about her," Joe asked.

"She came from New York to do a demonstration for the other counselors. She questioned Blake some special way—to prove he wasn't involved in anything. And they reviewed his file and let him go. What's her last name? Something foreign sounding. . . Oh, Lord, my memory isn't so good. I call her Gabrielle. We don't miss or ma'am each other. Wait, I'll find it for you." Asia

got up, still talking as she went to the bedroom. "She mostly calls me. It's hard to reach her sometimes."

Joe heard a drawer being pulled out and the rustle of papers.

Asia returned with a card. "Here." She read, "Dr. Gabrielle Lubovich."

Joe took out his notebook and wrote down the name, the phone and email, and the address, a PO Box in New Jersey. He also wrote, *ask juvie counselor about Blake's interview*. "You said you're planning to move to Canada?"

"In a couple months when I'm stronger. A place near Vancouver. Their child protective service needs help with the disabled children. I'll take care of some tiny ones. I can do it. I love lil' ones. They'll give me a room, and I'll be close to Adam."

A few more questions and Joe was done. He looked at the Ziploc on her lap, but instead of releasing it, she asked, "Where'd you get my boy's cap?"

"We found where the killer kept your son," and he told her about the visit to the apartment. When he got to Steve's death and needed to stop, she took his hand into both of hers, her eyes peering with compassion. His tears fell, giving in to the comradeship of grief. She just sat with him, quiet. Then, she gave him the Ziploc and walked him to the door.

"I'll find your son's killer," he promised.

"I know," she said. "You aren't like the rest."

He left with a wrench in his heart, much as he imagined her pacemaker might feel. *When a mother dies before her child, she half-dies*, Asia Johnson had said. *You get him*, Isabel Vasquez said in Joe's head as he got into his car. *Do it for me, and Alberto, and Steve*.

The day loomed crisp. Even meeting Christie, later in the afternoon, and the anticipation of their sad reminiscences on the way to LAX didn't weigh on him as before. He had his task and the right not to drown in wretchedness. He would tell Steve's widow she had a right to life, too, and a duty to her soon-to-be-born kid.

Chapter 6

Dandelion

Dallas—middle of October

With the piercing ring of the bell, the school day was over. If only he could sneak off without running into Coghill and his pimped henchman, Middleton.

Brandon Mole grabbed his battered backpack and bolted out of the classroom while his teacher still dictated the homework in a monotone voice raised to overcome the end-of-class clamor. Brandon, aka 'Dandelion,' was a narrow teen of less than average height and athletic ability. His nickname was given to him by Coghill & Company, in spite of his obvious surname, because of the stiff yellow curls adorning his freckled face.

He emerged, one of the first out of C-wing, reached the corner of the building and peeked out. "Fuck," he whispered disheartened. Coghill and Middleton were hanging in the parking lot, a no-man's land that lay between the school and the bus stop. Were these two ever in class?

It would be a long way but a much better chance to be missed by the overgrown retards with itchy knuckles if he turned back and circled behind the school's portables. Dandelion stepped off the sidewalk to avoid the opposite current of the emerging teenage crowd and trudged warily to the end of the wing. When he reached it, there were no more people around, the din receding behind.

"Brandon? Hey! Brandon!"

He didn't know at first where the call came from. Then, he saw the police car parked on the street behind the row of trees. The car's nose pointed in the same direction Dandelion headed. The cop must have waited for him to come out and then followed. That was considerate of him. If he intercepted Dandelion in the parking lot, in everybody's view, it would have been a disaster. Not that Dandelion's denial saved him from harassment. But if Coghill and his stupid jocks knew for sure it was Mole who ratted out their cozy group to the principal, who in turn went to the cops, after they vandalized the library depository two weeks ago, they would fucking kill him. Dandelion trudged toward the idling

police car. Its driver remained inside, in the shadows. He motioned the boy to the back seat.

Dandelion sighed and got in. "You should arrest the fuckers already," he said at the barred partition and the back of the cop's head. "Coghill has made my life hell. How long does it take to investigate something like this? Can't you guys figure out fingerprints and all that crap?"

"It's not that simple," the cop said without turning.

"The vice-principal promised that I wouldn't need to talk to the police. I told him everything. What else do you want from me?"

"Buckle up and keep your head down if you don't want anyone to see you," the cop said.

Dandelion did as he was told. The car took off and veered onto the road. The doors locked automatically with a click. There weren't any door handles in the back. *Treating me like a fucking criminal*, Dandelion thought.

The car turned onto another deserted street. The boy met his driver's eyes in the rear view mirror. They were unusually light, the color of burnished steel. Brandon looked back. His school disappeared swiftly in the back window. Suddenly he missed it all—the school, the crowd, the bus which would take him home, and even the bullies in the parking lot. And as if knowing that he had seen them all for the last time, grave misery touched his heart.

Chapter 7

Gonzales' Mission

Los Angeles

Not bald, not wrinkled, not fat, not thin. All around medium. Nothing prominent except for the eye color. That's why your guy can't recall much. Especially after so much time has passed," Bon Lee said.

The young Korean, a talented sketch artist borrowed from the LAPD, and Joe were looking at the color pencil portrait Lee and Gonzales worked on for over an hour. The man Gonzales claimed he sold crack to at the apartment on Garden Lane, seemed to be a mousy creature, unremarkable except for his narrow, light eyes. *Like silverfish...*

Joe sat across from Lee and Gonzales in the county jail's visiting room, reserved for their art session.

"I am sorry," Gonzales said. "I wish I could help more."

"It's better than nothing," Joe said.

Gonzales gained some weight, was clean-shaven, wore a blue jumpsuit, and seemed to be in good spirits. The new drugs the doctors prescribed for him appeared to be working. His court day was approaching and Joe intended to testify on his behalf.

Lee gave the sketch to Joe, gathered his pencils and took off.

"I'm really sorry about your friend," Gonzales said to Joe in Spanish. "If I can do anything, just ask. I won't snitch on one of my own, but anything else I'm your man."

Joe took a measure of the young man, thinking. The inmates' interrogation transcripts from the Colorado and Arizona prisons made him think of a code of silence surrounding McKee and Bacholski's deaths.

"How is your mood?" he asked in English. "Stable?"

"I can think straight," Gonzales assured him. "I stick to my meds. They're not downers like the crap I took before."

"Maybe you *can* do something," Joe said, "but think it over carefully." And he explained the gist of it.

"I'll do it!" Gonzales said after he understood what Joe needed from him.

"Remember, it's one of the worst prisons in the country, the Super Max. You'll need to mix with other inmates. I'll do my best to ensure someone watches your back, but at times you'll be on your own. You should think about it more."

"I've decided! It's good!" Gonzales' black eyes were bright.

"Okay," Joe said. "I'll set the wheels in motion. The sooner you become my ears, the better. And after a month or so I'll pull you out, even if you don't hear anything."

A few days later, Manuel Gonzales' trial was postponed. He was given a new, temporary identity of GD Martinez, a convicted cop killer, transferred to the USP in Tucson, and placed in the same wing where Conrad Bacholski was housed before his fatal escape attempt.

§ § §

Joe sifted through information on Sheppard he collected from the Vault, NARA's electronic reading room, and good old Google. A well-to-do Texas family, oily background, Yale education. A widower. One son deceased. The man didn't lead a happy life, in spite of his advantages and achievements.

Joe read on. He found it interesting that Sheppard, even though he ended up a politician, didn't seem to plan it this way. His degree was in psychiatry, and his area of interest forensic psychology.

Joe marked a number of Sheppard's articles, to order and take a look at later. He noted that, for the last twenty-odd years, the Senator hadn't published anything of significance. His name appeared for a while among the co-authors of the articles written by, most likely, his graduate students, and then even that stopped. Joe compared the dates. The last time Sheppard wrote anything scientific was two years before he first ran for the Senate. Which, of course, made sense. But Joe had a feeling he overlooked something.

He took a couple of pills to halt his budding headache and returned to browsing Sheppard's official website. He made another note to himself, *Obtain list of Sheppard's staff*. He came across a few pictures. There were women posing with the Senator in some of them, but not the one from the photographs he and Steve found.

As he worked, Joe's thoughts would occasionally turn to the Good Samaritan who helped Asia Johnson. He looked forward to talking to Dr. Lubovich about Blake. She could have some insights whether the boy had some secret life.

Someone knocked on his door.

"Go ahead," Joe called, and in came the young Dante Gayle, of big hulk and male-boobs, wearing a look of triumph and trying to cover it with a phony expression of humility. Joe occupied the only chair, so Dante remained standing.

"Let's hear it," Joe folded his arms.

Joe's new partner checked his notes. "First, Senator Sheppard. A Ph.D. in forensic psychiatry. Some interesting work on genetic links in psychopathic personality disorders. Was married for ten years to his college sweetheart. Lost his wife to cancer, never remarried. Had one son named Robert, or Bobby. Pretty much ditched science after his son's death. Some years later, entered politics..." Dante paused.

Joe was nodding, rocking his chair a bit to the rhythm.

Dante's face fell a little. "I wish you wouldn't send me chasing after things you already know yourself," he said.

"It's good practice for you," Joe said.

Dante continued in a voice that had lost enthusiasm. "His son was about the same age as Blake Johnson when he died. You probably already know how."

Joe stopped rocking.

"He was kidnapped in broad daylight, in Dallas. His chopped up body was discovered about a month later. They didn't have good forensics then, but they believed his blood was drained as the cause of death." Dante paused.

"Go on," Joe said quietly.

Dante perkiness returned. "I checked on women associated with Sheppard. I started with the most obvious ones, according to their age, Sheppard's students. Just a few of them fit, so it wasn't a big deal. I found this graduation picture on the Internet. It was taken about ten years ago." Dante placed a print in front of Joe.

The girl in the photo didn't look as sophisticated as in the photos from the suspect's apartment, and her face was younger and fuller. Joe wanted to applaud Dante.

"Gabrielle Lubovich," his new partner said. "Doctor Lubovich, after Sheppard was done with her. Has a long resume, writes articles on forensic psychiatry, speaks a few languages...I still need to find her present whereabouts."

"That's okay," Joe said automatically, his eyes on the picture. "I've got it."

"Damn!" Dante exhaled with exasperation. "I thought I got ahead of you at last!"

Joe shook his head and smiled. A sight Dante apparently didn't expect because he looked taken aback. "There's a storage closet at the end of the corridor," Joe said. "Mind bringing a second chair?"

§ § §

"Blake's killer could be the killer of Sheppard's son. Or it could be a copy-cat murder," Dante mused.

Joe, pacing to and fro in the tight space, shook his head. "The question is, *why* he sent the photos," he said. "That is, if he *did* send them."

"I'd say that hypothesis is pretty solid."

"It's still a hypothesis, Gayle." Joe paused, thinking. "I want you to make inquiries to all the major police departments about teenager killings similar to Blake's. If there's anything recent, you may find out quickly. If the same man killed Sheppard's son and Blake, he's been operating for years."

Dante made another note on his pad. "I'm trying to understand what motivates the killer," he said. "He drains a young doper of his blood; the motivation can be sexual. But he also executes two serial killers while they're incarcerated! What's his motivation there? Revenge? Or someone contracted him?"

"We don't know enough to come up with a motivation."

"Let's say he did kill Sheppard's son. The Senator gets something on him. Some implicating evidence. But the killer finds something about the Senator and sends him a warning. What could that be? An affair Sheppard is trying to keep secret with that woman?"

"Sheppard isn't married. And if the background records we pulled are recent, she isn't married, either. They wouldn't need to hide an affair." Joe stopped and gazed out of the narrow window. "You think they can be in a relationship? With that age difference?"

"He is a Senator. He used to be her advisor in grad school, and you know how it is with those charismatic professors and their adoring female students. The fact is they've obviously been close long after she got her Ph.D., which is unusual."

Joe was pacing again. "The interview she conducted with Blake..."

"Want me to look into that?"

"No," Joe said. "You've enough on your plate already." He met Dante's sly gaze. Joe appreciated the younger man's ability to connect dots, but not in this particular instance.

"Is that all?" Dante asked, innocently enough.

"Yes." Joe dropped into his seat. He caught himself folding his arms and his own defensive gesture annoyed him.

Dante, his good spirits departed once again, rose from the chair and grabbed it, about to take out.

For one weird, weak moment, Joe wanted to delay the rookie's departure. "Leave it," he said instead, "it's yours now."

Dante set the chair back and grinned. Discomforted, Joe waved him off.

§ § §

Joe's call was answered by Don Salvage himself.

"Yes, in part it was a demonstration for the L.A. Juvenile Justice counselors, but mostly we just wanted to help Blake," Salvage said. He sounded disheartened as if he was still affected by Blake's death. "That boy couldn't afford a lawyer. He should never have been detained in the first place. The evidence against him was all hearsay. You know how those young rascals are always trying to hang things on others and protect the real culprits. Blake was what you'd call a teacher's pet. Some of his more rowdy classmates resented that.

"In any case, I found out about this shrink, Dr. Lubovich, a rising star of some sort. She was coming to L.A. to demonstrate an alternative method of questioning to the forensic psychology graduate students. I contacted her myself.

"I offered Blake as her subject, told her about him. I even helped to organize the event. She was gracious, very sympathetic." His voice gained color at the memory. "Her demonstration floored us. And it sure cleared Blake. Too bad her method will never go mainstream. You can't train just anyone."

"Why is that?"

And Don Salvage explained it to him.

Chapter 8

The Polygraph and the Ice Cream Parlor

Dallas—end of October

A slender young woman with dark, intense eyes walked down the second floor corridor of the Dallas FBI Headquarters. A gym hoodie and designer suit pants clung snug to her hard body. Her Italian shoes were sensible but elegant, and a roomy, sturdy, overpriced purse hung from her strong shoulder. While not much above average height, her confident posture made her appear taller. On a scale of horses, Gabrielle Lubovich was an Arabian.

She stopped in front of a door, listened for a few seconds to the nagging voice coming from inside, nudged, and the door opened a bit on its smooth, noiseless hinges. In the room, Professor James Weizlan, a withered man in his sixties, hovered over a barely out of his teens technician installing some new polygraph equipment.

Gabrielle stood in plain view but invisible, as if her vibes blended discretely with the background. After some tinkering under the discomforting gaze of the black spider eyes behind the Professor's gold-rimmed glasses, the young man clicked on start and several flat lines ran across a screen.

Gabrielle closed the door, went down the corridor, and into the women's restroom. When she emerged, her eyes were tearing, her face flushed, and her soft, stretchy jacket unzipped at the top revealing the upper thirds of her boobs, now hoisted to a maximum elevation. Her color turned to its normal pale hue before she made her way back. Reaching the door, she knocked and marched in.

The two men raised their heads and Weizlan's face hardened. "Miss Lubovich. To what do we owe the pleasure?" The icy glint in his eyes contradicted his dismissive tone.

"I would like you to reconsider signing my request to interview Baca," Gabrielle said, her English colored by a Slavic accent.

"I am not obligated to grant access to offenders kept in high-security facilities to independent researchers, even those with your connections. The last time I obliged, you got a confessed killer off death row." Weizlan tried to avoid looking at her jutted décolleté. "As you remember, it was my testimony that

led to his conviction. Until you came waltzing in. Well, dear, no more. Find some other means to get your way. You have a talent for that, I'd say your biggest."

Gabrielle approached the table and inserted herself between the young and the old, making the former flush with her proximity. She gazed at the set up. "You should hire a fortune-teller instead, Professor," she said. "This thing can ruin a lot of innocent lives, as it almost ruined Brin James'."

"Only because he is guilty, Lubovich."

"*Doctor* Lubovich. You tend to forget my proper salutation, Doctor Weizlan."

Weizlan's face reddened. "A polygraph is an accepted method, *Miss* Lubovich. And ethical. Unlike the methods you employ."

"Yeah, I know, being ethical is so very important. I only wish it worked, too." She turned her friendly gaze at the technician, and he couldn't help smiling at her. "I tried polygraphs on my most interesting subjects, you know. Those bastards have no problems passing, as soon as they figure out how it works."

"That's not true," Weizlan said, looking less ambushed and more in the saddle. "Something I can demonstrate right now. Why don't we strap you in for a test drive? The equipment needs to be checked anyway."

Gabrielle arched an eyebrow. "I do have a weakness for virgins."

The technician swallowed.

"Let's bet," she said to Weizlan. "If you prove me wrong, you'll keep Baca out of my wanton clutches. If I prove you wrong, you'll sign my paper. Deal?"

Weizlan answered with a predatory smirk.

A few minutes later, Gabrielle sat across from the technician with the expendable bands around her thorax, electrodes attached to her palms, and a blood pressure cuff around her upper arm. He asked her all the usual control questions, periodically clearing his throat under her stare.

At one point, Weizlan's sharp eyes stopped at her feet. "Take off your shoes so we have no curling of the toes."

She nudged off her shoes.

"Do you own a dog?" the young man asked.

"Yes. A Doberman."

"Yes or no, please," Weizlan said.

"I feel like a criminal already," she complained to the technician.

"You have a very healthy pulse," he told her.

"Slow heartbeats are typical in people with under-developed conscience," Weizlan remarked.

"As well as in people who exercise a lot," Gabrielle explained to his sympathetic colleague.

"Concentrate on the test," Weizlan said.

"Are you married?" The technician asked another of the control questions from his list and colored.

"No." Gabrielle smiled. "Are you?"

He reddened more.

"Have you ever committed a crime?" The stern question came from Weizlan.

"No... Unless you count stealing a few coins from my mother's purse when I was little."

"I'm not married," the technician piped in.

"Have you ever assisted in a crime?" Weizlan asked, his eyes on the monitor.

"Not to my knowledge."

"Yes or no."

"No."

"Truth, so far," the technician commented.

Weizlan scowled. His coolness seemed to be dissipating. "Do you believe a punishment should match a crime?"

"Mmm... Elaborate, please, I don't understand the question."

"Should a murderer be executed with the same brutality he displayed toward his victim?"

Gabrielle stared at him, silent for a while. "I think it's a trick question, Professor Weizlan."

"Not at all. A rather simple one."

"A measure of brutality is subjective. One must take into consideration other factors, some mitigating, some aggravating. The answer can be given only on a case by case basis."

"You are being evasive, Miss Lubovich, but I've heard what I wanted to hear." Weizlan smiled.

"There was nothing to hear. I think you're trying to trap me, but I doubt you know what into yourself."

"Is your father deceased?"

"Yes." Gabrielle closed her eyes.

The technician nodded to himself at the steady lines running across the screen.

"Keep your eyes open. Was your father's death a direct consequence of his..." Weizlan made a show of searching for a word. "...behavior?"

Gabrielle's heart rate jumped. She opened her eyes. "What are you implying, Professor? That my parents deserved their fate?" Her words were deliberate.

"I only mentioned your father."

Gabrielle gazed at the wall. Her face was calm, but something savage lurked behind that calmness. "My father didn't bring his death on himself. Neither did my mother."

"So, no?"

"No!"

"This response can't be used," the technician said. "The subject's agitation is unrelated to the question itself."

Gabrielle smiled apologetically at him, turned her eyes back to the wall and took a few slow, deep breaths. Both the technician and Weizlan checked the screen. Gabrielle's heartbeat slowed down with promptness. The technician mouthed 'Wow!'

"Any more questions?" she asked. She seemed paler and drained.

"Do you believe that criminal tendencies are inherited?"

"Yes, to a degree. But you should stick to the actual test, James, instead of trying to rouse me. Give it a rest. It's been ten years."

Was the old lizard involved with her? Ten years ago he may still have been a man, the technician thought.

Gabrielle turned toward the open window and furrowed her brows. She rubbed briefly, absentmindedly, at her right upper arm. The technician recalled her doing this before. Must be a habitual gesture, he thought.

"Do you smell that?" she asked.

The men exchanged glances.

"It's pretty strong! Someone is smoking right outside!" Gabrielle gaped at them, as if not comprehending their dull senses. "Gosh, I can't stand it!"

"Don't you smoke?" Weizlan asked.

"Moi? No! Unless it's grass. And organic."

"Truth again," the technician said.

Weizlan peered at her with doubt, then at the lines.

"*That* was it?" Gabrielle asked. "Oh, well...you got me! I quit a good while ago. So the thing works, I guess."

"Still the truth," her young champion proclaimed.

Weizlan scowled at him. "Do you believe that Brin James is innocent?" he fired at Gabrielle.

"Shame on you, Professor. You know the answer." She sat upright and started pulling the electrodes off. The technician hurried to assist her.

She picked up her purse, walked to the window and got out a pack of cigarettes. She lit one and sucked in the smoke.

The two men watched her, engrossed. "Smoking is not allowed in the building," Weizlan muttered.

"What smoking?" She shrugged. "Don't you trust your lie detector?" She dropped the cigarette into the waste basket, pulled a paper out of her purse and handed it to him. "Pony up, Professor."

Without a word, grimacing, Weizlan scratched his signature underneath a few names already on the form.

"Thank you!" she said, and strode out of the room like a regal cat.

§ § §

Once outside, her proud posture crumbled and she fled to the restroom again. It was deserted when she ran in, ripped her jacket down her right shoulder and pulled an inch long pin out of the inside of her bicep. She dropped it into the wall receptacle, grabbed one of the sinks with both hands and gave it a furious tug. "You fucking shit, you bastard!" she hissed. Another jerk made a crunching sound, and the sink started to sag. Sobered up, she pushed against the sink, trying to force it back into place. She somewhat succeeded, but it careened.

She picked up her purse from the floor, stepped to the next sink, and got out her make-up bag. Out came a few wads of cotton and some Band-Aids, a bottle of hydrogen peroxide, and a smaller one with tea tree oil. She soaked a cotton ball in the tea tree oil, poured the peroxide over and pressed the cotton ball to the bleeding mark. She covered it all with a Band Aid. She straightened her top, pushed her hair away from her forehead, and, checking the mirror, dabbed off the beads of sweat with a paper towel.

A door swung open. By the time a woman in a business suite approached, Gabrielle dropped her supplies back into her bag and looked put-together. The woman stepped toward the lopsided sink and hesitated.

"I wouldn't risk it," Gabrielle said.

§ § §

It was the same October day and just as balmy in Deep Ellum, more than two decades earlier.

A shabby ice-cream parlor—'eclectic' they call them nowadays—was situated in a small Victorian building. The sunshine sparkled on the sky-blue ceramic floor of its petite, shaded patio. An elderly couple enjoyed strawberry Sundays at one of the tables. A young pair got up from another.

They were teens who knew the nooks and crannies of the Deep Ellum by heart, both dark-haired and dark-eyed, unrelated by blood but with a resemblance of siblings. At 18-years, the boy was almost fully-grown, tall and broad-shouldered. The lanky girl was yet to shed her 14-year old awkwardness, her scrawny frame and apprehensive bearing a far cry from the cool of her adulthood.

Hovering a head above her, the boy hopped down on the pavement and stopped her atop the patio's single step. She had a cone in her hand, plain vanilla. The light of first love, or first lust, if there is a difference, was in her eyes.

To the girl, Bobby, her soul brother, so diligent about taking care of her—first at his father's appointment, but soon of his own accord—was the best of humans; a boy of light and promise, and in addition, inconceivably, as full of faith in her as she was of distrust in herself.

"Nobody cares," she said, hungry for him to blow-away her doubts. "Your dad is only interested in me because I'm a freak."

He took her hand and she stared at him, wide-eyed. That was the moment; it was possible then. He could change everything because he was the only one who mattered.

"You are not a freak. You are fierce."

She shook her head and dropped her eyes, because that wasn't it.

"I understand you," he said. "I know you better than he does." He tried to catch her eyes again.

It still wasn't what she was after, but getting closer...

"I came up with something," he said. "It's too serious to discuss in a hurry. Let's talk tonight, when I come home, okay? I love my dad, but his whole approach... He's not the god he thinks he is."

She didn't know what he had in mind, but hope's wings fluttered in her narrow chest. She would guess it years later, and her futile longing grew stronger. He would know what to do, she thought. He was so smart.

Bobby likely saw the light in her face, because he cupped it in his big hands and kissed her—the only kiss they shared. The first and best she had, from the firmness of his lips and tongue, to the tremble of his fingers on her skin, to the desire spinning her head. She could never recapture that kiss, even as she blossomed into a sinuous, sophisticated shrew; not in all her years of screwing with a vengeance.

She was drunk with bliss when he got into his little VW bug. They waved to each other and he twisted his neck looking back at her, both his car windows rolled-down.

She still smiled stupidly as the VW rolled a few hundred yards and slowed down at the yield sign at the end of the block. A man lurking on the corner dashed to Bobby's car.

Wearing a jogging suit and a black ski mask, he held something in his hand—a gun, she later understood—which he stuck into the open passenger window. A second, and he got in and the little VW took off. No one else on the street, except for her, realized that the kidnapping happened.

She gaped for a few long moments that she later thought of as an inexcusable eternity, the unaware elderly couple chatting behind her. Then, the ball of ice cream plopped by her feet and she screamed.

When she saw Bobby months later, he wasn't whole. His severed head featured a hollow, decaying face, mummy-like because he was drained of blood before he died. The head didn't look like him at all.

Sometimes, she felt angry that Damien allowed her to see the body—but only sometimes. Often, she wondered if the delirium of their first kiss had dulled Bobby's usual quick-thinking, and if because of that, his death was her fault.

§ § §

As the new silver Corolla turned East along Commerce, the sun shone mellow in the gray-blue sky, and the city's air caressing Gabrielle's face through the open windows tasted of a burned Moroccan coffee, barbecued ribs, and occasional exhaust. She drove past graffiti murals, the old tea-room building, sign-posts plastered with advertisements of upcoming indie shows, and turned on a narrow side street.

Most of the shops here were shut down, with a few beaten cars parked along the curb at random. The ice-cream parlor was long gone, its patio stripped of the awning, the bright blue tile faded and chipped.

Gabrielle gazed at it from her slow-rolling car.

The patio's resident bum lifted his shaggy head but, by the time he raised his cardboard solicitation, the car had already passed. It slowed down at a yield sign near the intersection, while two other cars approached cross-wise.

A gruff male voice yelled into the right side of Gabrielle's face, "Open the door!"

She turned and stared at a silencer dressing the long muzzle of a Smith and Wesson 500, the 'Bone Collector,' pointed at her through the passenger window. A leather-clad hand held the gun, the face behind hidden by a black ski mask with light, dead fish eyes peering through the slits.

Fast as a snakebite, she seized the man's wrist, pulled his hand from her face, and floored the gas. There was a dry 'pop,' and a bullet hole marked the front glass, spreading shard petals.

§ § §

The bum, shook-up by the mad squeal of tires and honks, struggled to his feet. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he watched a white Sedan roll across the intersection and almost crashed into the Corolla's rear as it ran through, dragging along a man in a jogging suit. The Sedan screeched to a halt, while a pick-up heading in the opposite direction swerved around and pulled over up the street.

Beyond, the Corolla moved into the empty lane, nearly sideswiping the parked cars just as the man disconnected, rolled, lurched up and disappeared into an alleyway. The Corolla came to a stop a hundred yards ahead.

The bum ran toward the intersection. An older couple climbed out of the pick-up. The three of them met by the Sedan. The bum knocked on the driver's window. The silver haired old lady slumped inside did not respond. Her head lolled on her shoulder, eyes closed. The car was running in park.

§ § §

Gabrielle zipped up her jacket and pulled on her hood. She picked up her attacker's gun from the floor and got out of the Corolla.

Three pairs of eyes at the intersection followed her every move. "Hey!" The bum yelled, "You okay?"

She didn't answer or turn as she reached the alley.

"Stay put, lady! Let the police figure it out," the other man called.

And the bum again, "Don't go there! He might be armed!"

"Is that a gun?" That was the woman from the pick-up. "She has a gun!"

Gabrielle stepped on the threshold of a passage between the buildings. The alley seemed to cut through the block and continue beyond the courtyard where she stood. She scrutinized the lay of the land, the corners and bushes behind which her attacker could hide. A few seconds, and she backed out and hurried to the car. She noticed the missing right side-mirror—rubbed off together with her would-be kidnapper—so she went back and retrieved it from the road.

The bum at the intersection called again, "Hey, lady?"

She didn't respond on her way back to her car.

"You oughta talk to police!" the other man joined.

His worried mate chimed in, "We need your insurance information!" and to the others, incredulous, "She's running off! Write down her license plate!"

"I can't see jack at this distance," her husband answered.

§ § §

Gabrielle revved the engine and took off. "You're dead, fucker," she muttered, tears rolling. She looped around the block, peering at the pedestrians on both sides of the streets. Then she headed straight North, staring ahead, her face grim. After a while, she pulled a cell phone from her purse and pressed a number on her speed-dial.

"I was about to call you," a man's voice came. "We need to talk. In person. Come to the ranch as soon as—"

"The Doll-maker is back," Gabrielle cut him short. "He is in Dallas. Do you know how I know? The fuck shit just tried to abduct me."

Silence on the other end. She waited as she navigated her car toward the highway.

"Are you coming?" The man sounded shaken.

"Yes."

"When?"

"Two hours." Gabrielle hung up.

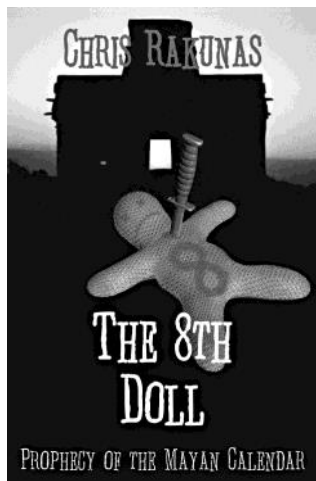
Later, the three witnesses describing her contradicted each other on what she wore, how she looked, and whether there really was a gun. The biggest stir the incident produced were calls to the Deep Ellum police department from the witnesses' insurance companies and from the distraught son of the old lady, the driver of the white Sedan, whose stroke proved to be fatal.

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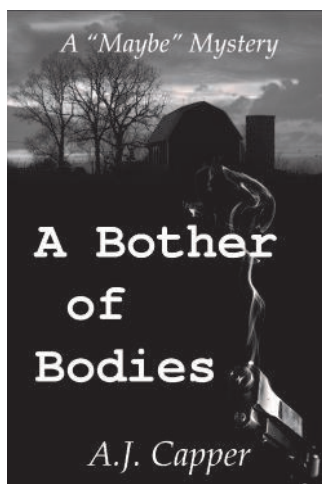
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The 8th Doll

by Chris Rakunas

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A Bother of Bodies

by A.J. Capper

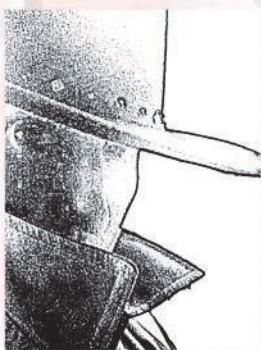
Mabel Fuller and her brother are on the run because of Mabel's attempt to kill their mother fifteen years ago. But they're not worried about the law. Their main concern is the family that raised them, the McAllisters. Mabel and Dean manage to avoid the large Irish network with frequent moves and aliases. Or, so they thought. When dead bodies turn up in Dean's newly-purchased barn, the brother and sister fear the McAllisters have found them. Until they realize it's something worse...

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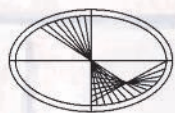
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FBI Agent Joe 'Hound' Vasquez is on the scent of 'Viper,' a mysterious and sadistic serial killer. Viper murders young men, executes other serial killers while they are incarcerated in maximum security prisons, and most recently took the life of Joe's partner. Joe is not just out for justice; he's out for revenge. To complicate matters, Joe suspects that Dr. Gabrielle Lubovich, a beautiful, controversial researcher and profiler connected to the case, had assisted Viper in the past and is now on the monster's short list. With pressure increasing from above to solve the case and the chase narrowing, Joe must choose between destroying the woman he loves or becoming the man he was determined never to become.

A broken hearted FBI Agent on the run from his demons...a sadistic genius with a penchant for vengeance...a beautiful forensic psychiatrist with a monstrous past...A doomed love triangle born of crime. Can Agent Vasquez survive the *Blood Matter*?



About the Author: M.V. Ghiorgi grew up in Russian Caucasus. When the simmering war flared up in the turbulent region, the author's parents were persuaded to let their Georgian/Jewish mutt offspring seek a future in the U.S. The author arrived with a one-way ticket, \$400, and a suitcase filled with manuscripts in Russian written during school breaks. After a few years, the author became proficient in and fell in love with the English language. M.V.'s novelette *The Fox* was the Eric Hoffer 2015 Award editor's choice. *Blood Matter* is this aspiring actor and filmmaker's first novel.



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