

Chapter One

Bighorn Butte, Washington
2,780 miles away

A chilly night with just a wedge of moon, mist brewing on the water and congealing in gullies. Six thousand feet below, Seattle glittered in a haze, but here on the butte, the air was thin and clear, steeped in eerie stillness. No light but the blue-white column of a halogen flashlight. No movement but the trusty reels of an old cassette tape recorder. No sound but the strangled sobs of a woman about to die.

Chevy Bankes looked down at the woman. Lila Beckenridge, her driver's license said, the photo showing razor-sharp cheekbones and hair scraped into a bun. A dancer, he'd decided while roping her ankles—callused feet and spaghetti-thin body, the faint odor of perspiration layered beneath her perfume.

And a screamer, a good set of lungs. Well worthy of her role in the performance that began here tonight.

Chevy stilled, the enormity of the moment weakening his knees. He'd had women before, he'd killed before, but never with such *purpose*. He'd never killed one woman to give to another, or taken a life for something greater than his own immediate need. In that sense, the dancer was unique. A first.

A perverse sort of gratitude washed over him, and he bent to stroke her cheek. She spit at him.

"Bitch!" He wiped his face with the edge of his shirt, snarling, and the rage jumped him. How dare she? That wasn't in the plan...

Who killed Cock Robin? I, said the sparrow, with my bow and arrow, I killed Cock Robin...

Chevy covered his ears. "No," he said, but the song threaded in—a haunting little folk tune like a mosquito buzzing in his ear. He slapped at the air around his head, trying to shoo it away, then drew back his foot and kicked the woman on the ground. Her jaw gave with the sound of wood snapping in a fire, a moan of pain ripping from her chest.

The song slipped away.

Chevy waited, forcing himself to breathe. Control. Silence. There could be no singing tonight, not when a plan seven years in the making was finally under way.

Shaking, he uncovered his ears, eyes wide as if he might be able to see the voice if it came again and ward it off. He glanced at the cassette—ten, maybe fifteen minutes of tape left—then at his watch. It was late, and he still had a phone call to make. Besides, his little sister was waiting, and she didn't like to be alone. Poor Jenny had spent enough of her young life alone and waiting for Chevy.

"Not much longer, Jen," he whispered, as if she might hear him. He turned off the recorder and picked up the box he'd carried all the way

up the butte. It was two feet long and about a foot deep, not overly heavy, but awkward, and he set it on the ground beside the dancer and opened the flaps. Styrofoam peanuts fluttered to his feet as he pulled out the fragile bundle and he unwound the tissue paper, layer by layer, round and round until—

“Jesus.” Chevy’s breath caught even though he’d seen the face before: dark, soulful eyes, vacuous smile, thick ringlets of human hair. He swallowed and sifted through the stack of insurance statements in the box, making sure this was the earliest doll in the set: *1862 Benoit. Bisque head and breast plate, wood body. Rare opening/closing eyelids. Appraisal—\$40,000-\$50,000.*

Chevy tilted the doll upright then tipped her down again—up and down, up and down—studying her eyes. Despite what the insurance appraisal said, this doll’s eyes had never closed. They remained open and watchful, taking in every little thing.

Who saw him die? I, said the Fly, with my little eye—

“Stop it,” Chevy snapped, his teeth grinding together. For the space of five heartbeats he listened, then blew out a breath. Get on with it: the woman needed work. He lay the doll on the ground, several feet away in case there was splatter, then pulled an exacto knife from his pocket and went back to the dancer.

She squeaked and he stopped. Shit, he’d almost forgotten.

He pushed PLAY and RECORD at the same time then crouched to one knee beside the dancer’s shoulder. Whimpers reeled onto the tape, garbled now by the broken jaw but stunning all the same, her terror rising to a fevered pitch as he bent over her.

Just a few screams away, now.

Heart galloping, Chevy went to work, glancing often at the doll, fighting to keep his hand steady. When he finished, he sat back on his knees and let the cries wash over him. A few minutes, no more, then, *click*.

Out of tape.

He opened his eyes and looked down at his handiwork. A little messy, but good enough. He dug his .38 Ruger from a bag of supplies and wiped off the woman’s temple. She was beyond noticing, her cries just snags in her breaths now, as if she knew it was over. Chevy measured an inch straight up, marked the spot with an eyebrow pencil, and placed the barrel of the pistol exactly on the spot. Squeezed.

A blessed silence rolled in behind the shot. Chevy held his breath, but he knew the singing wouldn’t come now. It never came when the cries were good.

He untied the dancer and arranged her limbs to his liking, then spent ten minutes gathering the things a crime scene team would spend hours looking for: exacto knife, gun and shell casing, tape recorder, the rope and tent stakes—all of it into his gym bag. Every last Styrofoam peanut. Once, as he shoved a peanut into his pocket and pulled his hand

back out, he dragged out some snack trash. He noticed and picked it up, a pulse of relief tapping at his chest. Being smart was key, being careful was critical.

Being lucky didn't hurt.

One last look around, and Chevy hiked back down the butte, carrying his bag and the box, stopping to check the dancer's cell phone about every twenty yards. He got halfway down before a cosmic little tune trickled out: service.

His pulse picked up. It was midnight in Virginia, but it didn't matter. This was the moment he'd been waiting for.

Let the games begin.

* * *

Arlington, Virginia

Midnight, the house tucked in, the child long asleep. A hundred-watt bulb glared down at a yellow mat in the basement, the air thick with the odors of perspiration and leather, the usual silence scuffed by illogical sounds of violence. Grunts, thumps, pants of breathlessness. The occasional screech of rubber soles.

The telephone.

Beth Denison scowled. She drew a deep breath, the air settling in her lungs like wet sand, then pulled herself back. Inhale, focus, balance. Strike. Her fist slammed into a hundred-and-fifty-pound sandbag. A hard left hook followed, a roundhouse spinning her around to land a kick that would have crushed an attacker's windpipe. She ducked from the rebound, pivoted, and jammed her heel where the average man's balls would be.

The ringing stopped.

She braced her hands on her knees, panting. No eerie message this time, no moans or heavy breathing. Maybe the caller was getting bored. She straightened and uncurled her fingers, wincing as each knuckle stretched through the pain. Tomorrow, she'd pay for not bothering to wear protective gear. Tonight, she needed sheer physical exhaustion to smother thought—about the future of the antiques firm, about Evan, and about phone calls from some jerk who apparently had a phone book, a few spare minutes in his evenings, and a flair for the pervers—

Ring.

She whirled and turned a dangling red speed bag into a blur, the flurry of sound beating at her ears. Not loud enough, though. The phone still sang out over it. Four rings, five. He wasn't hanging up this time.

"Damn it." She threw up her hands and took the stairs two at a time, planning to...what? Pick up and tell the caller what she was wearing? Tell him to go to hell? She eyed the kitchen phone, frowning at the number that dribbled across the caller-ID screen. Area code 206. Seattle, again, but she didn't recognize the number.

Six rings, seven. The answering machine picked up, her own cheerful voice spinning out. *Hi. You've reached the Denisons, or rather, our machine. You know what to do. Beep.*

"Hello, doll."

The voice was low and clear. A finger of fear pressed down.

"Beth. I know you're there. Pick up the phone."

Beth? The finger turned into a fist. She shot a worried glance toward Abby's bedroom. No sound, no stirring of the bedcovers. Thankfully, Abby had sunk into the kind of sleep nature reserves for the very young.

"Be-heth. It's been seven long years. Don't you want to talk to me?"

Her lungs seized. *No. Please, no.* It couldn't be.

"Yes, Beth." And his voice lowered. "Surprise."

The past sputtered to life, the chilling drops of memory trickling down her spine.

"I bet you thought I'd never find you," he said. "But I'm a resourceful man. In fact, I'm so resourceful that I've arranged some *very* special gifts for you. I can't wait until you see them." He paused, as if he knew she'd had to grab the back of the kitchen chair to stay upright, and that her world was suddenly careening into orbit.

Idiot, Beth said to herself. Of course he knew.

So don't answer. Just ignore him and don't pick up the—

"By the way, Beth, how's your daughter?"

She snatched up the phone. "*Bastard.*"

"Ah, there you are. For a moment I was beginning to worry."

Red sparks burst behind her eyes. "H-how?"

"How, what? Oh, I guess you haven't heard. Well, it's no wonder, of course. Why would anyone think to contact you with the news?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Freedom. Comeuppance. Getting what I've been denied all these years."

The room seemed to be in motion. Beth couldn't even swear her feet were still on the floor. She closed her eyes. Think, *think*. Why, no, *how* was he calling her? "I don't understand," she said.

"I'm sure you'll find the whole story on the internet with just a few keystrokes. For now, suffice it to say that I'm free. I've been free a while now, in fact, using the time to arrange the details of our reunion."

Nausea crawled up the back of Beth's throat, lodging there like a burr. *Free?* Hold on. Stay in control. If he was out of prison, there was only one reason he would contact her. And he couldn't possibly want to dredge up the past to get it. "I'll call the police. I'll tell them every—"

He chuckled. "No, you won't. You think you have everyone fooled, living your pretty life with your pretty daughter, but you've forgotten: I know your secrets."

She gripped the receiver so tight cramps screamed up the tendons

in her arm. “You don’t know anything.”

“Really?” he asked. Something clicked on his end, and for a second Beth thought he’d hung up. Then he was breathing in her ear again, a faint *whrrr* on the line. “Let’s review: I know what happened to Anne Chaney. I know why you moved from Seattle, all the way across the country to Arlington, Virginia.” He paused. “I know about your little gir—”

She gasped, then bit it back. Too late.

“Oh, that was nice, Beth. Do that again.”

“Stop—” She spat the word but caught herself. Quiet, now. Don’t make a sound. She remembered how much he liked sounds.

Scream, bitch. Cry for me.

“Let me hear your voice again, Beth,” he said. “It doesn’t need to be much, not yet. Just a few small sounds to get the opus star—”

Beth hurled the phone across the room. Fear and fury coiled in her belly like snakes, and she forced herself to breathe, letting fury writhe to the top. Damn it, she had to keep her head. Even as a free man he wasn’t half the threat to her that she was to him. He was the one who should be afraid. Besides, the call hadn’t even come from this part of the country.

Area code 206...Seattle.

Reality sank to the pit of her stomach. This wasn’t a dream. It wasn’t some vile memory from the bowels of another lifetime. It wasn’t a prank caller with a six-pack and a phone book, who’d latched on to a number he liked and kept hitting REDIAL.

It was Chevy Bankes.

The need to see Abby kicked Beth in the chest. She raced upstairs and peered into the bedroom. Abby lay sprawled in a puddle of moonlight, a toy cat clutched against her tummy, a real dog draped over her ankles. The dog swished his tail and lolled hopefully to his back, oblivious to the chill creeping through Beth’s veins as she stood watching the rise and fall of Abby’s stomach: one breath, two breaths, three. Three was the magic number. Beth always counted three breaths in a row before she went to bed at night.

This time she counted ten.

She slipped back into the hallway, the heels of her hands bullying back tears. Don’t cry. God knows, tears had never accomplished anything. This wasn’t supposed to have happened, but she’d always known it might. Bankes wasn’t the only one with a plan.

Inhale, focus, balance. She called on years of Muay Thai to center herself, then went to the master bedroom. She dragged a rocking chair across the room and set it beside a huge Chippendale chest of drawers. It was an early New England piece with heavily carved aprons, the escutcheons all original, the patina rich and dark. Still, she hadn’t bought this dresser for its age or beauty. She’d bought it for the cornices.

She climbed onto the tottering rocker and wrenched the finial on the top right cornice of the dresser. It creaked and gaped open.

A folded piece of paper sprang out. Beth tucked it under a sweatband on her wrist and reached back into the secret compartment. Her fingers curled around the butt of a 9mm Glock, cool and powerful, neglected but never forgotten. She lifted it, straightened both elbows, and sighted the little red light on the phone across the room.

She could do it. If she had to—for Abby's sake—she would.

She lowered the gun, climbed down, and unfolded the list of names from her wristband. Cheryl Stallings, her sister-in-law. Two attorneys, one who had authored Beth's will and another who had a reputation for winning at any cost. Three early-American furniture dealers, each of whom had offered cash for a few of Beth's finer pieces and would buy them, no questions asked.

Reviewing the list had a calming effect, a tangible reminder that she had a plan and the resources to achieve it. She took a deep breath. Despite the hour, she picked up the phone, then paused. The digits nine and one seemed to glow brighter than the rest.

I'll call the police, I'll tell them everything. But it was a bluff and Bankes knew it. She couldn't call the police. She couldn't do that to Abby.

Steadier now, she muttered a prayer—forgiveness, just in case there was a God after all. She cleared her throat and schooled her voice into the calm, composed tone she'd perfected years ago. Dialed the top number.

The first lie would be the hardest.

Chapter Two

New York, NY

Thunder rolled in, dragging Neil Sheridan from the depths of a stupor he'd worked on for weeks. A jackhammer pounded in his skull and he reached up, expecting to find his head split in two. His fingers closed around something warm and soft. His brain? No, a breast. He moved his hand. A second one. Oh, that's right, they usually came in pairs.

The thunder intensified. "Neil. Goddamn it, open the door."

He cracked his eyelids and sunlight bleached his eyes. He twisted from it, the breasts rolling over with a soft moan.

"Neil. I'm about to have the hotel staff unlock this door. Fair warning."

"Stop yelling," he muttered, lumbering to his feet. He found a pair of jeans at the foot of the bed and humped into them, bracing a shoulder against the wall.

"Go ahead, unlock the door," the voice in the hallway was saying. Rick? Damn it. The thunder had stopped, though pain still ricocheted around his head like a round from an M-16. Somewhere outside, a female voice took off in quick-fire Spanish and Rick cut her off: "I'm a police lieutenant, lady. Just unlock the damn door."

"Hold on," Neil said, but his voice was a croak. He fumbled with the lock and pulled the door opened. A maid gawked at him.

"Whoa, you look like hell," Rick said, pressing a twenty into the maid's hand. He watched her skitter down the hall then stalked into Neil's suite. "I've been calling you. Heard you quit The Sentry. You've been back in the States over a month."

"Time flies."

Rick picked up an empty whiskey bottle, bent to the floor and hooked a lacy camisole between two fingers. He set both on a table littered with Chinese carry-out boxes, peeking into one. He sniffed. "General Tsao's chicken," he said. "With whiskey?"

"The beverage that goes with anything."

Rick nudged a second bottle with his toe. It rolled over a ripped-open foil packet on the floor. He glanced at the bedroom door, shaking his head so fractionally Neil thought he might have imagined it. "I want you to come to Arlington with me. You been wallowing in self-pity long enough."

“I’ve been wallowing in Jack and Jill. And they’re still waiting for me in the bedroom.”

“Jack Daniels and Jill Who? Do you even know her last name?”

“Didn’t ask,” Neil said, dropping into a chair and bullying his brow with his fingers. His brain ached, and that shouldn’t have been possible. He shouldn’t even have a brain anymore. At least, that’s what they taught boys in high school: too much drinking, too much screwing, and your mind goes blank, your soul goes numb, you become an empty shell of a man who can’t think or feel.

Promises, promises.

“Don’t you wanna know why I’m here?” Rick asked.

“I know why. You think I’m less likely to eat my gun in front of your wife and kids than I am here.”

A beat passed. “Are you?”

Neil closed his eyes, but the pictures came anyway: video footage of his brother visiting a refugee camp, running, running, until the ground exploded and Mitch went flying through the air. He blinked to kill the images. “Eating my gun would be too easy.”

“It wasn’t your job to stop the attack, Neil. The Sentry is a security organization.”

“Right. And I provided security for the bastard who blew up a refugee camp and nearly killed my brother.”

Rick grimaced. “Where’s Mitch now?”

“In Switzerland, healing. Getting good at phrases like *mea culpa* and *fuck off*.”

“I thought you held the copyright to those,” Rick muttered, thumbing three tablets from a roll of Tums. “Fly to D.C. with me. I’m looking at a murder case that’s interesting.”

Neil looked at him like he was an alien. “Murder cases haven’t interested me in nine years.”

“A woman was killed near Seattle three nights ago.”

“Not interested.”

“Hikers found her body early this morning.”

“Not interested.”

“She was a dancer, twenty-six years old. Had a little girl in preschool.”

Neil closed his eyes.

“The murderer could be the same—”

“I. Don’t. Care.” Neil ground the words, his jaw so tight that for a second he wondered if he could break his own molars. He reached for the nearest bottle but Rick got there first and heaved it across the room.

“Damn it!” Rick said, the last precious sips of oblivion splattering all over the wallpaper.

“Well, now look what you’ve done,” Neil grouched, coming to his feet. “And that was the last bott—”

Rick sprang. In two seconds, Neil’s spine was against the wall. “It

looks like Anthony Russell, you stupid, self-serving sonofabitch,” Rick said, his fingers biting into Neil’s arms. “This murder could’ve been done by *Anthony Russell*.”

Neil’s lungs shut down. Seconds passed before he got them working again, and when he did, he broke free of Rick with a shove. “Go to hell,” he said, but two strides later, spun around. “Anthony Russell is dead. I shot him.”

“After he jumped a bailiff and took off from his own arraignment. I remember.” A vein pulsed in Rick’s forehead. “It was never a sure thing, though, was it? That he killed that college girl?”

“He confessed. How much more of a sure thing do you need?”

“I mean—”

“What? *What* do you mean?” Neil advanced. “Anthony Russell abducted Gloria Michaels after a fraternity party. He stabbed her almost dead then shot her in the head for good measure, and when he escaped from custody, I killed the bastard. So whatever this Seattle woman looks like, there’s no way she was killed by Anthony Russell.”

“You didn’t find Gloria’s body where he said you would.”

A thread of doubt began to fray. Not for the first time. “The fucker *confessed*.”

“In exchange for the DA lessening three other charges.”

The pounding picked up in Neil’s head again. Anthony Russell’s reasons for confessing weren’t something anyone had bothered to examine too closely. They had a confession, that’s all that had mattered. “Why are you pulling Anthony Russell up on me?”

“The report about the Seattle woman rang some bells.”

“What bells?”

Rick ticked them off on his fingers. “Woman disappears with her car. Car was dumped, wiped clean. Body found days later in a wooded area, and some knife-work done on it. Thirty-eight caliber hollowpoint to finish her. Piece of candy wrapper at the scene.” He paused. “Reeses Cup.”

The ancient doubt began to dig roots. That did sound like Gloria. Even down to the tiny piece of candy that had been left in the car by her killer. Neil swallowed. “Raped?”

“Can’t be sure yet, but—” he paused and ran a hand over his face “—it looks that way.”

Fingers of dread crawled across Neil’s neck. He paced, trying to talk himself out of it, but the possibilities rose in his mind like specters: The possibility that Anthony Russell had lied about Gloria in order to strike a deal with the DA. The possibility that a jury might have sprung him, had he gone to trial. The possibility that when Neil turned his back on his wife and daughter in order to catch a murderer, he’d caught the wrong man.

And the right man had murdered a woman in Seattle last night.

“Neil, you knew the Gloria Michaels case better than anyone.

Come take a look at it. We can catch the next shuttle back to Virginia.”

Neil narrowed his eyes. “Why is a lieutenant in Arlington, Virginia looking at a murder three thousand miles away?”

“Seattle P.D. asked me to check on someone. The dead woman’s cell phone dialed a woman in my precinct the night of the murder.”

“Who?”

“Her name’s Elizabeth Denison.”

Neil combed his memory for the people he’d once connected to Anthony Russell. He couldn’t come up with anyone named Elizabeth Denison, but then that was no surprise. Because Anthony wasn’t involved in this. “You talk to Denison?”

“No one home. I put a car on her street to wait. Then the Gloria Michaels bells started clanging and I decided to come see if you wanted to look at it.”

Neil blew out a curse. Hell, no, he didn’t want to look at it. For nine years, he hadn’t concerned himself with such futile things as right and wrong, good and evil. He was nothing but an exorbitantly-paid guard dog. Jungles, mountains, deserts. Places where he never bothered asking if he was guarding the good guys or the bad guys, where all that mattered was getting off the first shot.

Fuck it. That was his motto now, and it was a far cry from the words inscribed on the federal shield he’d once carried.

He braced his arm against the wall and tipped his forehead onto it. “If you’re right,” he finally said, “I killed an innocent man.”

“Innocent? Anthony Russell was shooting at you. He left a bailiff paralyzed for life.”

“He was in custody because I collared him for Gloria.”

Rick stepped closer. “He was a murderer with a rap sheet as long as your dick. The only reason it matters whether you were wrong about him doing Gloria is the chance that her real killer hit Seattle last night. You get that?”

I get it, Neil thought, but was somehow afraid to breathe. If he did, it might infuse new life into his veins, might make him start caring about something again. He’d sworn that off nine years ago.

But even as the warnings trolled through his mind, his hand slid into his pocket, a battered piece of ribbon and plastic squeezing into his palm. He held it tight, closing his eyes against the worst possibility of all.

If he’d been wrong about Anthony Russell, then Mackenzie had died for nothing.

That thought almost buckled his knees. That, and the thud of something landing hard on his conscience. The body of a Seattle dancer.

He pulled his hand from his pocket, leaving the barrette in its hideaway. He took a deep breath and looked at Door Number One, knowing he wouldn’t choose it, and that Jill Something was going to wake up there alone. A better man might have felt guilty about that, the kind of man who had room on his conscience for such things.

But Neil didn't. Too many corpses there.

Chapter Three

“Lila Beckenridge of Bellevue, Washington,” Rick said in a low voice, after they settled into the plane seats. He pulled out two file folders and handed them to Neil. “She was leaving a rehearsal, stopped at a convenience mart, and never made it home.”

Neil opened the folder containing crime scene photos. “Whoa,” he said, biting back the taste of bile. “He carved on her?”

“Cut off her eyelids. That’s them on the ground.”

Neil angled the page, winced. “Jesus,” he said, and sifted through the pictures, trying not to be disturbed by how Lila Beckenridge seemed to stare at him through the crusted blood and dirt on her face. He forced himself to note more mundane details. An inch above her temple sat the bullet hole—small and black and ironically tidy, like a period at the end of a story no one yet knew. A bruise darkened her right jaw but aside from her face, she looked almost neat: her arms were bowed out at her sides like a frozen ballerina, her blouse tucked in and skirt pulled neat around her knees. She was stringy thin, and the close-ups of her wrists showed what appeared to be rope burns. A couple of other shots focused on holes in the ground, as if she might have been staked down before she died.

Neil swallowed and opened a second folder labeled E. DENISON. “Is this all you’ve got on the woman at your end of the phone call? Driver’s license and house deed?”

“Hey, I’m not FBI. Besides, there’s nothing to have. Don’t know why someone’s calling her.”

“Someone? You mean the murderer.”

“Or Beckenridge.”

Neil thumbed through the report. “The call was made just after midnight. Beckenridge’s time of death is estimated between six and twelve.”

“*Estimated.* How many times have you seen a medical examiner’s opinion changed by an autopsy, especially when the body isn’t fresh?”

Occasionally, Neil thought, but not often enough to assume error. Neil might have been out of the game for a while, but he hadn’t forgotten the three basic rules of criminal investigation. Rule Number Two: everyone in the chain is as dirty as its dirtiest link.

The woman named Elizabeth Denison was in a chain that included a murderer. It didn't make her a criminal herself, but it did mean she was in the loop enough to know something about him. Something that would lead them to him.

He shifted, uneasy with the faint throb of excitement in his chest. None of this meant anything was going to change about Gloria Michaels's murder. There were similarities between her case and this Lila Beckenridge—enough to raise eyebrows—but there were differences, too. Chief among them was nine years and three thousand miles. If Gloria's killer had been on the loose all that time, where had he been?

Of course, Neil wouldn't know the answer to that. Because Neil had spent that time hiding behind M-16s and a convenient motto.

The plane hopped, wheels skidding on the runway. They taxied to the gate and Rick put away the folders. "You ready?" he asked.

Neil had a sudden longing for Jack and Jill.

"Come on," Rick said. "We'll find you a razor, a coat and tie. We'll pound the pavement a little, go talk to Denison. Find out why she got a phone call from a dead woman."

* * *

The lazy feel of a Saturday evening glazed Denison's neighborhood—long shadows stretching across manicured lawns, the smell of charcoal in the air, a group of kids putting together a game of four-square in the street. The kids darted to the curb when they saw Rick's car, poured back into the street with their ball and bucket of chalk after he rolled past. Half a block up, a lady getting her mail waved at them like they must be old friends simply because they were on her street, and at a driveway on the right, a man waited for his beagle to finish peeing on someone's tulips. He nodded and returned Rick's salute from the steering wheel.

"Mayberry," Neil muttered, and downed a handful of aspirin with a swig of oily coffee. "Wonder what Ms. Denison's neighbors would think if they knew about her buddy out west."

"Yeah well, keep in mind that she might not know whoever's calling her. No need to go in there all scary and mean."

"You made me shave and put on a suit," Neil said. "How can I be scary and mean with my good looks hanging out?"

Rick snorted.

"It's the scar, isn't it?" Neil ran his finger along the pale, jagged ridge that ran from his left ear lobe to his chin, jogging under the crook of his jaw. Made him look like his cheek had once been torn from the bone.

It had.

"It's not the scar, asshole," Rick said. "It's the way you come off all the time. Intense, dangerous. Screwing the world."

"Women go for all that dark, leashed power."

“You’re not trying to get this woman in bed, you’re trying to get her to *talk*. And in case you’re thinking about waving pictures of Lila Beckenridge in Denison’s face, forget it. We’re gonna keep the murder under wraps until we’re sure she’s connected.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Hey, Lila Beckenridge’s cell phone coulda been picked up and dialed by anyone.”

“Pansy,” Neil said, but Rick didn’t bite. He parked along the curb and unwrapped a new roll of Tums, popping three or four into his mouth. Damn it, for the first time noticing how the years had piled up: lines were etched into Rick’s broad, Slavic brow, deep grooves digging around his mouth. At forty-two, he looked fifty and downed antacids like a food group.

He also, come to think of it, hadn’t mentioned Maggie on the trip back. Bragged about the three boys and waved around pictures of his new baby daughter, but hadn’t spoken of Maggie even once.

Huh.

Neil cocked his head, waiting for him to finish the Tums. “You okay, man?”

“Look,” Rick said, turning to him. “The department’s got some legal stuff going, on account of us jumping the gun last year, screwing up a man’s life. Like that first suspect from the Olympics’ bombing in Atlanta, remember? Well, this guy committed suicide after we started hounding him.” He paused, frowning at something only he could see. “He was innocent.”

“Ah, man.”

“We’re in court over it right now. So no matter how much you *want* this Denison woman to know the murderer, I can’t accuse her of being involved in anything until I’m sure. Besides,” he said, glancing down the street, “look around. Ten bucks says any woman living here in Beaver-Cleaverville don’t know squat about a murder.”

“You’re on,” Neil said, following Rick’s gaze to Denison’s house. It had a quaint feel to it, with butter-yellow siding, azaleas blooming in the yard, three ferns hanging from the porch. A good match for the petite, pretty woman in the driver’s license photo.

But all that did was bring Rule Number Three to mind: Things are never as pretty as they seem.

Chapter Four

Denver, Colorado
1,694 miles away

The moment Chevy saw her he knew she was the next to die: She parked a ninety-something Buick LeSabre in Lot F, Row 12, a good distance from the entrance to the Fuller Cancer Treatment Center. She wore a long, peasant skirt and clogs, and her stride was slow, distracted. The fact that she talked on the phone as she walked was a point in Chevy's favor. But what really sealed her fate was the colorful turban that marked her as a chemo patient.

Yes, she was the one.

Adrenaline surged. Chevy straightened, wanting to take her now. She was only thirty yards away, coming closer. Then again, it was four-thirty and broad daylight. And every second he debated it—now or later, now or later—she stepped that much farther from him and closer to the temporary safety of the visitors' entrance.

He waited five seconds too long and smacked the steering wheel.

"What's the matter?" Jenny asked. She'd been dozing in the passenger seat.

"Too risky. I'll have to wait."

"Fraidy-cat," she teased, but Chevy wasn't in the mood and turned to snap at her. Only the look on her face stopped him. She was pale and gaunt, the hollows of her eyes more pronounced than usual. Traveling had been hard on her—the late run from Seattle, then waiting for Chevy the next day while he took care of business in Boise. They'd lost a whole day on the road while he arranged to have the dolls sent on the appropriate dates, cleaned out his bank account, emptied his safety deposit box.

But now they were in Denver, and things were moving. Beth Denison's second gift had just walked into the hospital.

He pulled a picture of Beth from his breast pocket. It was worn, a rip where he'd torn it from last July's issue of *Antiques Magazine* slashing through her elbow, fold lines scoring her body like the crosshairs of a rifle. But her face was clear enough, and he smiled at the knowledge that on that pretty cheek was a remnant of their time together. During all the years in prison, he'd wondered if she remembered him. The scar told him she must—every time she looked in a mirror.

He closed his eyes, turned the ignition just enough to get power, and pressed PLAY on the tape player in the dash.

“You bastard...I don’t understand.” Gasp. “Stop!” Broken breaths.

Her panic touched him like the hands of a lover. The beginning of her well-deserved suffering.

STOP. REWIND. PLAY.

“You bastard...I don’t understand.” Gasp. “Stop!” Broken breaths. “H-how?”

STOP. REWIND. PLAY.

“Chevy?”

Jenny’s voice snapped him back.

“Are you going to call her again?” she asked.

“I can’t,” he said. He turned off the tape and took a deep breath, trying to unravel the knots of tension that balled in his groin. “Not yet. You know I had to get rid of Lila Beckenridge’s phone.” He looked at the doors through which the turbaned woman had gone. “It won’t be long until I have a new one.”

“I don’t know why you like listening to that tape. She just sounds mad to me.”

“Scared, Jenny, not mad.” An edge of anger pressed down. Chevy loved Jenny, but she didn’t understand the process. She didn’t comprehend what it took to silence the singing.

And she wasn’t well. She hadn’t been well since the night they’d met Beth Denison.

“Whatever you say,” she said. “You’re The Hunter.”

“Stop it,” he snapped. The Hunter. That’s what the press had dubbed him during his trial for the murder of Anne Chaney. The prosecutor’s big sound bite all those years ago had been that women weren’t in season when Chevy put a bullet in Anne Chaney’s back, at the edge of a lake known for its elk and eight-point deer. They took some heat for the comment, as well as for the crass reference to a second woman, dubbed “the one that got away.” But the press seized upon Chevy’s nickname and it stuck. The Hunter—capital T, capital H. Jenny thought it was funny, but it had always irked Chevy. He was no hunter. A hunter lies in waiting, unnoticed, and strikes in the blink of an eye. Snap, you’re dead, and you didn’t even know I was there.

Where was the thrill in *that*?

The thrill was in the preparation, the process, the control. In capturing a woman’s first tiny quavers of surprise, coaching her through a steady rise of terror, and getting her to deliver the final screams of agony and surrender when the moment was right. He shouldn’t expect Jenny to understand, really. Even for him, there had been a learning curve. Three women before Anne Chaney, and the first, Gloria Michaels, hardly even counted. She’d been an impulse, a compulsion in a moment of rage when the singing was too much to endure. But he’d learned from her and done the others better, each a more fulfilling experience than the last.

Beth Denison would be the ultimate fulfillment. Her suffering

would be the result of a master plan and an amusing irony: a set of antique dolls that she'd never had the privilege of seeing, but that had changed both their lives seven years earlier. The night Anne Chaney died.

He reached into the console between the two front seats and got the envelope of insurance forms. The top one, for the doll that was supposed to blink but didn't, was already Xed out. He went to the next page. *1864 Benoit. Bisque head and breast plate, kid body. Replaced cork pate with human hair. Missing from the Larousse collection until 1995. Appraisal —\$20,000-\$25,000.*

He leaned over to show the picture to Jenny. "Look," he said. "You always liked this doll, didn't you?"

She didn't answer.

"I'm not going to mail this one. You and I are going to hide it. You can help me find a good place, okay? We won't want anyone to find her for a long, long time." Just like the cancer patient. No one would be finding her, either. "Do you want me to get the doll from the trunk for you?"

No response. Chevy put the insurance papers away and opened the Atlas, knowing he might as well be talking to thin air. "Listen, tonight shouldn't take too long. If we get back on the road, say, by midnight, then by morning we can get to about—" he did some quick calculations, following I-80 eastward—"here. Omaha. I've never been to Omaha," he said, tapping it on the map. "How does that sound?"

He held the map over in front Jenny. Nothing.

"Jen?" He sighed and put the map away. She was gone again, to that dark, silent place where no one could touch her. Where no one could hurt her.

Chevy closed his eyes on the sadness and when he opened them again, the woman who was next to die pushed through the hospital doors. He straightened, a thrill slipping down his spine.

"Okay, okay," he said, his fingers trembling with excitement. "Here we go."

* * *

There was no answer at Denison's front door, but an impressive-sounding dog began barking the minute they rang the bell.

"Bring any of those special Milkbones?" Neil asked, and dropped off the porch. He wandered to a gate overlooking the back yard, the air smelling of freshly-turned soil and flowers. A plastic wheelbarrow and munchkin-sized rake, shovel, and gloves were stacked in the corner of a brick patio, with the adult-size gardening tools lounging in a pot nearby. Petunias and some tiny creeping flower Neil couldn't name sprouted from flower beds, and two flats of red and white cocktail begonias—the tag was still in them—sat by the gate.

Elizabeth Denison was in the middle of putting in her spring

flowers, teaching her kid to garden. A daughter, Neil decided. Pink-and-purple wheelbarrow, pink flowers on the miniature gardening gloves.

His heart gave a tug.

“Think she bailed?” Rick asked, coming up behind him.

Neil flared his nostrils. “Doesn’t feel like it. The gardening’s not finished, but things are kinda put away, not like she dropped everything in a hurry.”

“Let’s go talk to the neighbors. Maybe they know her schedule. Deed says she’s owned this house three years.”

“No husband, right?”

“All in her name.”

Single woman with at least one child. Dog. Gingerbread home, complete with flower beds and ruffled curtains in the windows. Boyfriend who cuts up women? Neil had to admit that didn’t seem to fit.

“Whoa, there she is,” Rick said.

He nodded to the street where a dark green Suburban slowed. The driver paused, spoke to a kid in the back seat, then swung the rear of the SUV down to the garage door. She popped the locks and got out.

Things are never as pretty as they seem.

Rick walked toward her. “Ms. Denison? I’m Lieutenant Richard Sacowicz with the Arlington Police Department, and this is Neil Sheridan. We’d like to have a word with you.” He pulled out his badge, letting it suffice for both of them.

Her glance flitted to Neil and he crossed his arms, accustomed to the once-over a six-foot-three man-with-an-ugly-scar always got.

“You need to talk to me?” she asked, a little tension in her voice. “Why?”

“Mommy, who’s that?”

The kid, a little girl wearing a baseball cap with a ladybug embroidered on the front, had unbuckled and climbed out of the car.

“Abby,” Ms. Denison said, “why don’t you go let Heinz out? It sounds like he’s about to leap out a window.”

“Heinz is our dog.” The child glanced at Neil but spoke to Rick. *Scary and mean.*

Rick bent to his haunches. “Is he friendly?” he asked.

“If you’re not a cat.” Abby snickered. “Hey, why did the cat cross the road?”

Rick didn’t miss a beat. “Because it was the chicken’s day off.”

“No,” she scolded, wagging a finger at him. “To prove he wasn’t chicken.”

“Oh, man, you got me. Hey, how does a chicken tell time?”

The little girl’s eyes danced with joy. “One o’cluck, two o’cluck, three o’cluck.”

Rick chucked her under the chin and Neil had to admire the method. Rick could schmooze with anyone. Make them tell their deepest secrets.

“Abby,” Denison said, holding out a key to her daughter, “go let the dog out.”

Abby took the key but stood rooted in front of Rick. “Hey, what did the three-legged dog say when he walked into the saloon?” She jammed her fists at her waist, affecting her rendition of what was apparently John Wayne. “I’m lookin’ for the man who shot my paw.”

Rick laughed out loud. Neil wanted to. A surprise, that.

“Hey,” Ms. Denison injected, “what happened to the girl who ignored her mother?”

“It’s okay,” Rick said, while Abby humphed and trotted to the side door. “I could use some new material. I have a nine-year-old who thinks he’s a comic.” Fellow dumb-joke-survivor, Mister I’m-a-Parent-Too. Yeah, this was definitely what Rick was good at.

“Will this take long?” Denison asked. “I can’t leave this furniture out here for long.”

“It’s a Queen Ann highboy,” the little girl called out, heading for the side door. “Worth a *lot* if Mr. Waterford is right, but Mommy says he lies through his tee—”

“Abby.”

Waterford. A mental list began forming in Neil’s mind. Names to check on, clues to follow. An instinct not quite dead after all. Another surprise.

Some unlikely combination of collie, husky, and who-knows-what charged out and Abby squealed. The dog flew from person to person, gathering scents, then circled Abby until she said the magic word “cookie” and they both trotted inside.

“Great watchdog,” Rick said, kissing ass a little more. And, “No, it shouldn’t take long.”

“Okay.” Denison reached into back seat of the SUV, and Neil took her in. She was a small woman, wearing jeans, Nikes, and a white tee under one of those fuzzy sweaters that opens down the front. Made you want to pet her. Her build was slender, tight like an athlete. Dark hair fell past her shoulders with a few wind-blown bangs herded over the top of her head as she slid her sunglasses up. She turned, tee ball paraphernalia in hand, and the sunlight struck her face.

Neil blinked. A scar—a wide, inch-and-a-half long hyphen—marched high across her cheekbone. It didn’t lessen her attractiveness, wasn’t garish or twisted like his. But it gave her depth, character. A story.

She popped a button and the garage door lifted. It was an enormous, two-car affair enlarged into a spacious finished basement, and brightly lit. The whole thing was filled with...stuff. That was the only word Neil could think of for it. Furniture, dishes, baskets, toys, quilts, boxes. Books and magazines filled a counter and a laser-jet printer sat beside a computer, filled with twenty or so pages of print-outs. The top page was a picture of an old-fashioned doll and beside it, a real version of

the image in the picture lay in a partially-open box, the UPS label dated yesterday. The doll itself was cushioned with tissue paper and Styrofoam peanuts, and stared at the ceiling.

Neil picked it up, the gaze wide-eyed and penetrating. “Antiques,” he said. “You’re an antiques dealer?”

“I’m a researcher for Foster’s Antiques. Would you like to know what my research says about the value of that doll you’re holding?”

He arched a brow. “Six months of my salary?”

“I doubt you make that much.”

Neil bit back a smile, setting the doll down. Denison came over and tucked it deeper into its packaging, an oddly protective gesture, and his gut lurched at the sight of her hands.

He skimmed her throat, neck, face—any bare flesh that was visible. No injuries buried under makeup, no defensive bruises or scrapes. Just fresh abrasions on her knuckles. He thought of Abby, then dismissed that possibility as quickly as it surfaced. Little girls who take beatings from their mothers don’t play tee-ball the next day, or roll around with big dogs and tell chicken-jokes to total strangers. But something—or someone—had been at the other end of Denison’s fists recently.

“I need to get upstairs with Abby,” she said. “We can talk in the kitchen.”

They followed her up the stairs and into her family room, where Neil braced himself for priceless figurines and ancient rugs and Louis-the-Whatever furniture he’d be afraid to touch. He wasn’t even close. It was warm and homey, and might have graced the cover of a home and garden magazine in the grocery check-out line. It was neat, but not compulsively so, with Barbie dolls and plastic horses frozen in action on the hearth, a watercolor of some four-legged creature drying on the coffee table, and the scent of chocolate chip cookies lingering in the air.

An unexpected attack of warm fuzzies dimmed Neil’s hopes: Rick was right. This woman lived a Beaver-Cleaver life, though Neil couldn’t recall wishing Mrs. Cleaver would take off her sweater to give him a better look. Elizabeth Denison wasn’t the type to know a murderer. The best he could hope for was that she actually knew Lila Beckenridge.

He nursed that hope and strode past Abby and Heinz on the sofa. Followed Rick into the eat-in area of the kitchen.

“What’s this about?” Denison asked.

Rick took over. “Do you know a woman named Lila Beckenridge?” he asked, showing her Beckenridge’s driver’s license photo.

Her brow wrinkled as she looked. “No, I don’t think so.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’ve never heard the name before,” she said, looking genuinely perplexed.

“What about Gloria Michaels?” Neil asked, and again, she shook her head.

“Just after midnight on Wednesday night,” Rick said, “you received a phone call from Seattle. Who was that caller?”

For a fraction of a second, she froze. Then her eyes darted down and left, and Neil ground his jaw at how classic it all was.

Damn her, anyway. Beaver’s mom was about to lie.

Chapter Five

And that was Rule Number One: Everyone lies, everyone. Criminals, witnesses, victims, sexy young mothers with cute little girls.

Wives.

“The call we’re wondering about came two nights ago at twelve-oh-nine,” Rick said. “Was it a friend of yours?”

“No.”

“Then who was it?”

“Look,” she said, “I got an obscene phone call late Wednesday night. That’s all.”

Neil cracked a smile. “That’s a good story, stick with that.”

She glared at him and Rick cut in. “The call lasted eighty-two seconds, Ms. Denison. That’s a long time to listen to an obscene phone caller.”

Her jaw closed. Neil could almost hear the *click* of it locking. He glanced at Rick: *Ten bucks, buddy.*

“So, what did the caller say?” Rick asked.

“He said the normal things an obscene phone caller says. I didn’t take notes.”

He.

Rick frowned. “Are you afraid of this man?”

“Of course I’m afraid. I told you, it was an obscene phone call. It was creepy.”

“Then why didn’t you file a police report?” Neil asked.

She crossed her arms. “Last I heard, being creepy on the phone isn’t against the law.”

She was right. Reports of obscene phone calls came into police stations every day, and were generally blown off by the front line of desk cops before the complaint could consume any paper. But Denison’s attitude didn’t make sense. A single mother getting frightening phone calls in the middle of the night should’ve been oozing cooperation. She should’ve been relieved to have a couple of heroes knocking at her door.

“How long have you worked for Foster’s?” Rick asked. Digging mode now.

“Six years, full time. Before that I worked part-time in their Seattle gallery.”

“Seattle,” Neil mused.

She crossed her arms. “I haven’t been back there in years, Mr.

Sheridan. I moved here right after I finished my degrees.”

“Degrees in what?”

“I have a BA in American History and an MFA in Art History.”

She was almost defiant when she said it, a little jut of her chin and solid eye contact, as if daring him to find something untrue. Good liars did that—told the truth wherever possible to minimize errors. She was good. And she had fascinating eyes, the kind a man could fall into if he weren’t careful, and not even realize he was drowning. Wide, the color of black coffee, with high, slashing brows and thick lashes. Exotic, but something else, too.

Exhausted. Neil would bet his good hand she hadn’t slept much lately.

“Do you travel in your work?” Rick asked.

“I sometimes attend antiques exhibitions, usually long weekends at holidays.” She paused. “Not Seattle.”

Neil pointed to her face. “So it isn’t jet lag that put those bags under your eyes.”

She pulled back. “Abby wasn’t feeling well; I was up last night with her. And I wasn’t aware that answering the phone in my own home was a criminal act. Do I need a lawyer?”

Neil’s patience slipped its leash. She was lying, plain and simple. He moved to the telephone on the counter. “Well, you just might. Should I call the Public Defender’s office for you?” He purposely fumbled with the phone, pushing a button. “Oh, sorry,” he said sweetly, and Rick cursed beneath his breath.

“You have...two...new messages,” said the mechanical male voice.

Denison panicked. “You can’t do—”

Neil caught her wrist when she went for the phone. A caller’s voice spun out, female: *“Ms. Denison, this is Margaret Chadburne, in Boise. I was just checking again on the dolls I sent you. You should have received the first one this morning.”*

Denison’s pulse galloped beneath Neil’s fingers. He loosened his grip fractionally.

Beep.

“Hey, honey, it’s me. Hannah said you picked up Waterford’s highboy from the gallery this afternoon. Call me as soon as you’ve looked it over.”

The ending beep sounded and he looked down at Denison. “Who was that?”

“Margaret Chadburne, in Boise. She was checking again on the dolls she sent—”

“The other call.”

“My boss. Evan Foster.”

“Honey,” he said, and she gaped at him. “He called you ‘honey.’”

“Evan Foster wasn’t in Seattle last night and didn’t call me. Leave him alone.”

Neil bit back a smile. “You’re very protective of your friends.” He turned her hand over and eyed the abrasions on her knuckles. “Is that how you got these?”

“I’m a kickboxer,” she said, yanking her hand away. It was the first thing she’d said that actually fit. Tough, controlled, combative. For a second, Neil let his mind wander, envisioning that lean body in spandex, releasing all the tension that seemed to tie her in knots...

Bad move. Neil shook it off. “Where’s your husband?” he asked. “Excuse me?”

He pointed to the foyer, where he’d seen a large photo on the wall beyond the kitchen door: Denison in a cream-colored dress, a sprig of flowers blossoming in her hair and a sandy-haired man at her side. “You’re wearing a ring,” Neil said, “but he doesn’t own this house with you. Where is he? Seattle, maybe?”

“Dead.”

The answer came as a jolt, but would be so easy to verify there was no reason to question it. “When?” Neil asked.

“Seven years ago, when I was pregnant with Abby.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Denison,” Rick said. “How did that happen?”

Her chin lifted a notch. “Adam was flying back to Chicago with my family after graduation, to look for a house. The plane crashed. My parents, my brother, my husband, and two-hundred-and-three other people on board died. Anything else?”

Whoa, that wasn’t the type of story Neil expected. Love-gone-bad, an affair, a divorce. Not the tragic loss of someone—everyone—she loved, in the blink of an eye.

“Okay.” Rick handed her a card. “If you hear from this caller again, let me know, okay?”

She took it—planning to throw it in the trash the minute they were gone, no doubt—and Rick went back through the family room. Neil followed, trying to let it go, then thought, *Screw that*. He veered to the couch and knelt beside Abby. “I hope you feel better soon, sweet—”

“Mr. Sheridan!”

“I feel fine,” Abby said. She was confused.

Neil rose, cocking his head to Denison. “Amazing how kids bounce back like that, isn’t it?”

“Hey,” Abby said, “what happened to your face?”

The question came out of the blue, and wasn’t from her arsenal of jokes. Neil touched his scar. “I had a really big boo-boo a few years ago. Kind of scary, huh?”

“No. Mommy has one, too. It just means you hurt once.”

Well, there was a perspective he’d never considered. Pretty insightful for a six-year-old but honest anyway, which was more than the girl’s mother had managed. A pang of worry thrummed in his chest: Abby had no choice about what her mother dragged her into; a child never does.

The thought haunted him as he strode down to the curb, and he fisted his right hand on the roof of Rick's car. Spasms shot to his elbow. "She's lying," he said, forcing himself to flex his fingers.

Rick made his eyes big. "Ya think?"

"Damn it, she knows him. He murdered a woman and she's lying for him." His heart was beating double time. "Take her in, man, charge her with accessory. Work her over."

"Sleep deprivation? Water boarding, maybe?"

"Screw you."

"Obscene phone calls, Neil. That's her story and it fits. Maybe she's really afraid."

"Then why didn't she say so? Jesus, Rick, you're a police lieutenant and I'm—" He stopped. He wasn't anything anymore. "If she were scared, she'd have said so."

"She did."

"Bullshit. The creepy phone call thing was a cover for that asshole and you know it." He slid a hand into his pocket, found the broken barrette. "I have to know, Rick. Whether it was Russell or not, that fucker cost me everything."

Rick looked at him over the roof of the car. "I loved her, too."

Neil's heart jerked. "Not the same."

"No," Rick agreed, "and God willing, I'll go my whole life and never know how it feels. But you know I can't do surveillance on a woman who's under suspicion of answering her ph—"

"Look."

Rick followed Neil's gaze toward Denison's house. Through the front picture window, she could be seen picking up her phone. She carried it to the window, saw Rick and Neil, and dropped the blinds. But her silhouette was still visible, and within seconds, she hung up.

"That was quick," Neil said.

"Come on, Neil. We can't spy on the woman like this. Watching her isn't gonna tell us anything."

"Then what is?"

"Looking at Gloria Michaels's murder again, for one, and putting it up against Beckenridge. Maybe we'll find enough to get your friends at the Bureau to re-open the case."

"Friends?" Neil said, and sank into the front seat. "Oh, shit."

* * *

But it was the right thing to do. They headed back to the precinct and hashed through Lila Beckenridge's murder—as much as anyone knew yet. Finally, Rick took Neil home and dumped him in the guest room. For the first time in recent memory, Neil slept sober.

He started Sunday on the phone, tracking down Ellen Jenkins at a country club, playing golf. He called for a rental car—upgraded to a 2009

Dodge Charger with a hemi when he got there—and decided he needed something more appropriate to wear to meet Ellen than desert gear or ripped jeans. He came out of a department store wearing pleated blue slacks and a cream shirt with an embroidered logo above the pocket. The country club set liked embroidered logos, he decided, though he couldn't quite make this one out. It looked vaguely like a penguin.

He rolled through Chester County, Pennsylvania two hours later, Ellen's neighborhood marked by turreted mansions with high stone walls, four-car garages, and gated pools and tennis courts. Her country club came into view like a landscape that might be pictured on a wine bottle, and at the front gate, Neil found his name on the magic list that granted entry. The manager of the golf course was expecting him, the logo on *his* pocket recognizable as cursive letters.

"Her party just got to Hole Seven," the manager said, and tossed Neil the keys to a cart. "I were you, I wouldn't wanna interrupt her."

"Aw," Neil said, "Ellen's a pussycat."

The man scoffed. "And the rest of us are wounded mice."

* * *

Ellen didn't look up when he got there. "Sheridan, if you breathe one word before I sink this putt, I'll use your balls on the next hole."

Neil wasn't stupid. He watched eastern Pennsylvania's fiercest DA crouch down and line up her shot, take one practice swing, then sink the ball in the cup twelve yards away.

She took a bow, the men in her foursome applauding. A caddy took her club and one of the men kissed her on the cheek. Neil decided it was Byron, the same husband she'd had nine years ago, though the poor bastard was showing his age.

"Man, you got old," she said, coming over to Neil. "Is that a penguin on your chest?"

"You'll be buying this brand for Byron come Christmas."

"I told him I'd ride with you and meet them at the next hole. You know how to drive this thing?"

"Hang on."

* * *

He got close to the eighth tee then tucked the cart between a sand trap and wild area. He pulled off his sunglasses. "Smacking balls around agrees with you," Neil said. "You look good."

"And you look like a terrorist trying to sneak onto a golf course."

"It's the penguin."

"It's the scar," she said, and angled his cheek toward her. "I heard about the shooting afterwards. I didn't know...I mean, it must've been worse than I thought."

“I was out of the game a little while, but now it helps me pick up women.”

“So, you and Heather...”

Neil swallowed. “We only made it a couple years after that.”

“Okay.”

And that was just about all the emotional chit-chat Ellen Jenkins was capable of, not that Neil was very adept at it, either. “I need a favor,” he said.

“No shit.”

“I want to re-examine the Gloria Michaels murder. Anthony Russell may not have killed her.”

Ellen’s jaw didn’t drop, she was too poised for that. Still, there was a tightness in her throat Neil could see. “And you brought me boatloads of evidence, I presume?”

“A woman was killed in Seattle on Wednesday night. Too much like Gloria...”

He laid it out and when he was done, Ellen said, “But can they show the bullet came from the same gun that shot Gloria?”

“Not that easy,” he admitted. “It’s a thirty-eight, but it’s a hollowpoint. Hollowpoints get pretty busted up when they hit something hard.”

“Like a skull,” Ellen said. She took a deep breath and got out of the golf cart, wandered a few steps toward the sand trap, and adjusted her visor. Neil followed a few steps behind, letting her think. “I always wondered if that asshole Russell was lying,” she said after a moment. “Why shouldn’t he? Make up a story about killing Gloria Michaels and snap, no more death penalty. Hell, his attorney was orgasmic over the deal.”

Neil knew it was true but bristled nonetheless. “Russell dated Gloria, and had the right history. It’s not like he didn’t look good for her murder.”

“Bullshit. You Feds came in because it looked like a kidnapping, then you browbeat your way through the investigation, fingered the guy, and turned him over to us.”

“Hey, I’m not here to use you as a confessor, damn it, I’m here for some help.”

“So why don’t you call your Fed cronies?” Then she waved a hand. “Never mind. The Feds eating crow? They don’t know how.”

“I just want the paper, Ellen. I’ll find enough to get the FBI on board.”

“It’s a closed case. The paper is a matter of public record.”

“I don’t want just the parts that are a matter of public record. I want all of it. The narratives, the photos, the *impressions*. The notes to each other in the margins of the reports, the emails. That’s what I need, Ellen.”

“I’m the one who handled Russell’s indictment.”

“And your objections to doing it are all over the record.” Not only the record, but the newspaper and political gossip columns, too. Ellen wanted the death penalty but the DA at the time, Wallace McMahan, ordered her to drop premeditated murder and go for manslaughter. Manslaughter was an easier win. And in this case, because Russell’s end of the bargain was to talk about Gloria’s murder, the deal came with an added bonus for McMahan: one more X in the win column.

“Wally McMahan is running for the senate now,” she said. “This could throw egg all over his face.”

“You hate Wally McMahan.”

A tiny smile curled her lips. “I do, don’t I?” She looked at him sideways. “So give me what you’ve got on the Seattle woman. I’ll look at it after the ninth hole. *After*. And after a shower and a couple of stiff martinis. Come by the house at six o’clock. I’ll let you know.”

* * *

It was the best he could hope for. Neil spent the afternoon at a coffee shop hooked up to their WiFi and making phone calls to Seattle. Seattle wouldn’t tell him jack shit about Beckenridge: he wasn’t a cop, he wasn’t a Fed, and he wasn’t a lawyer. He wasn’t even a reporter. He was nothing.

He dropped by Ellen’s McMansion at ten til six.

“I’m not sure the unsub in Seattle is Gloria’s killer,” she said, handing him a cardboard box full of files. “But if there’s even a chance, I want you to get him.”

“Ellen, I could kiss you,” Neil said.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s what they all say.”

He was loading the box of files in the Charger when Rick called.

“I’ve got Lila Beckenridge’s autopsy,” he said. “And something else you won’t believe.”

“What is it?”

“Meet me at my office.”

“I’m two hours away.”

“So drive fast.”