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WELCOME

Choosing your next book should be part of the pleasure of reading.

I've brought these previews together so you can explore my thrillers in one place—from psychological suspense to the investigations of detectives you can follow from book to book.

Start wherever you like. The contents will take you straight to any preview, and you'll find a link to the full book at the end of each one.

Whether you've read many of my books or are meeting me for the first time, thank you for being here. I hope you find a story you won't want to leave unfinished.

Happy reading,

Leslie

FIND YOUR NEXT READ

STANDALONE TITLES

FREE PREVIEW: *RANSOM*
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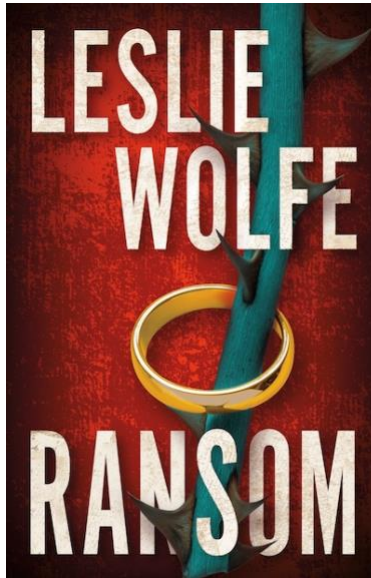
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STANDALONE TITLES

FREE PREVIEW: *RANSOM*

**Everyone knows who Olivia Taylor is.
Or so they believe.**



Your free preview begins on the next page.

DOWN

"Help me!" he cried, the sound of his own voice foreign, surreal, triggering bursts of light and fire inside his brain. "My eyes . . ." Gasping for air, he tried to push himself up from the cold marble floor of his hotel suite. But his arms were too weak and shaky, betraying him.

Panic surged as he felt himself losing control.

The burning sensation in his eyes intensified, his stream of tears unable to wash away the searing pain. His vision had blurred into complete darkness, now and then streaked with flashes of light and bursts of color—each shade a different kind of singe, each worse than anything before it.

"Call someone," he pleaded, choking and out of breath, extending a hand into the blurry darkness. No one answered, but someone was there. Or used to be. Was he alone? He remembered falling, hitting the ground hard, and losing consciousness for a while. But why? How had it happened?

Then he'd awakened screaming in pain. His eyeballs felt like they were on fire. The burning sensation spread quickly, his eyes watering uncontrollably. He reached up, instinctively trying to rub the irritation away, but that only made things worse. As a wave of red-hot pain surged through his body, he clutched his chest, pulling at his shirt and fighting it off as if it were a monster, its tentacles snaking around him, tightening and squeezing the breath out of his lungs.

Torn buttons clicked to the floor, but he still grasped at his barren chest as if he wanted to tear it open. His heart pounded wildly, slamming against his rib cage, each beat rippling violently through his body. He tried to stand again, reaching into the darkness for something he could hold on to but finding nothing. Crawling toward the door, he moved slowly—his breath agonizing and ragged, the horrid singe in his eyes unrelenting, and the claw that clutched his chest in a deadly vise unyielding.

"Hello?" he called weakly. Only the whooshing of blood in his ears responded. "Someone . . . please . . . help me," he said, as loudly as he could manage. His voice, fraught with agony, barely rose above the sound of his own racing heart.

He willed himself to crawl some more, hoping to reach the suite door and open it. Someone would see him. He couldn't lift himself on his hands and knees anymore; he could only push himself forward on the smooth, glassy marble, little by little, grunting with every choked breath. Something warm trickled down on his face, the thick, metallic smell of blood invading his nostrils. He rested his flaming face against the cold floor, unable to soothe the burning sensation spreading from his eyes into his chest, poisoning his blood with shards of fire.

The room started spinning, slowly at first, but then going faster and faster. Each chaotic heartbeat felt like a hammer against his ribs, rattling his weakened body. His stomach lurched and heaved, the pressure in his head building up, aching with the rhythm of his fast-thumping heart.

One by one, the psychedelic bursts of color flashing inside his head started fading into darkness. His face landed on the cold marble and lay still, his entire being following suit as the last trace of fight left his defeated body. His mind turned darkly inert and quiet, the sound of his heart erratic but fading away in the distance, as if it were somehow abandoning him where he lay on that floor. A shudder rattled his body, leaving him completely motionless in its wake.

The sound of slowly departing footsteps touched the vanishing edges of his consciousness. A door opened. A second later, it closed.

Then nothing but darkness and silence.

TROUBLE

A couple of months ago

Another hour or so and I'd be safe, leaving Seattle behind forever.

As I walked through patches of golden sunshine at Sea-Tac, I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. Every step through the airport's sprawling concourse echoed louder, every glance from a passerby seeming prolonged. I was just another traveler, but today, anonymity felt like a fragile mask. With a shiver, I pulled my ballcap lower over my eyes.

My spinner suitcase rolled quietly on the terrazzo floors, hauled effortlessly toward the security checkpoint. Seattle had been my home for a while, but now it felt like a prison. I was so close to freedom, though. I couldn't let anything—or anyone—stop me now.

For a moment, I took off my oversize shades and absorbed the unaltered colors of the magnificent morning, but then I put them back on. They were a small price to pay for staying unnoticed, together with my hair clumped in a low bun and the Seahawks ballcap I wore all the time. Like this, I was nobody. Just a twenty-seven-year-old woman in a ballcap and shades, jeans, and a light jacket over a nondescript gray T-shirt. So average. So forgettable.

My mind drifted, taken by the low hum of activity that occasionally blended with distant PA announcements. I drew closer to the wall to make room for a group of loud businesspeople and checked the time again. Not even half an hour left until my departure. My chest swelled with excitement; I'd always wanted to visit Las Vegas. And I was so done with Seattle.

Footsteps approached, but I didn't turn to look. It didn't seem to matter.

"Hey!" a man called loudly behind me. The voice, disrupting the airport's routine, raised a few passengers' eyeballs from device screens. I still didn't look, although the voice sounded somewhat familiar.

But it couldn't be. No one knew I was leaving today.

"Hey!" The same voice, angrier and closer, brought a shiver down my spine.

I didn't have time to look behind me. Catching up, he grabbed my shoulder and twisted me in place, then slammed me against the wall, knocking the breath out of my lungs.

"I'm talking to you!" he shouted, inches from my face, his breath searing my skin. He clumped the fabric of my denim jacket sleeve in his hand and twisted it, squeezing my arm until the fabric gave with a loud rip.

I stared at the scowling teenager in disbelief. I didn't recognize him at first, with the features I knew so well in his father diluted by youth, by eyes filled with rage, and his rebellious, tousled comb-back.

Avery Sinclair.

I squirmed and gasped, whimpering as fear choked me.

"What do you want?" I asked, even more worried when I noticed a couple of travelers getting ready to intervene. The last thing I wanted were witnesses. Questions. Suspicion. Pictures of me posted all over the internet as the latest unwilling star of some sordid airport drama. I turned my face away from him and from the bystanders' busy cameras.

He grabbed the lapels of my jacket and squeezed, crushing my chest and almost lifting me off my feet. He stood about eight inches taller than me. "Do you know what you did? Do you have any idea? I could kill you right now." He slammed me into the wall and let go of the jacket as one of the bystanders approached. My head bobbed, seeding a throbbing ache where my skull slammed against the cold gray stone.

"What do you want?" I hissed under my breath, glancing around for an escape.

The bystander touched his elbow gently. "No need for this, kid. Let's go." The broad-shouldered man was twice Avery's weight, in his fifties and with a shaved scalp and thick, muscular neck, the type you'd see at the gym lifting weights every day like their life depended on it. But the kid didn't care. He turned around and threw a punch at the man without even looking at him.

The man dodged the blow with ease, quick on his toes despite his sturdy build, and then grabbed Avery's arms and held them immobilized behind his back. "Settle down, kid, and no one will get hurt today."

In the distance, a couple of uniformed cops rushed toward us.

Great . . . *That* was the last thing I needed. Panic swirled inside me, mercilessly conquering my mind.

Eyes still round in unfeigned fear, I straightened my jacket and adjusted the ballcap on my head. Then I looked at two more concerned bystanders who'd moved in. "I don't know who this man is. He must have the wrong person or something."

"Liar!" Avery shouted, starting to writhe against the strong arms holding him still. "You lying bitch! How would you like to lose everything you got, huh?"

"What's going on here?" The first cop was a burly man in his forties with a bit of a limp in his heavy gait and thick, sausage-like fingers. He was out of breath from the stretch of light running he'd done to respond to the incident. His name tag read JENKINS in an all-caps black font on bronzy gold. His face crumpled in disapproval when he looked at Avery.

I did my best to look completely clueless. It wasn't difficult. I *was* shaken. "I have no idea, Officer. He . . . he just grabbed me—"

"She's lying! She knows who I am!" the young man screamed. "She knows what she's done, and now she's running away!"

"You can let go now, sir," Jenkins said. The Good Samaritan released his hold on Avery and stepped aside.

The cop's hand landed firmly on the teenager's shoulder. "If I have to chase you all over this airport, you're going straight to jail. Is that clear?"

Avery's jaw dropped slightly, but he nodded. "I won't run. I want her to know what she's done. To hear it from me." He propped his hands on his hips, breathing heavily and shaking his head as he looked straight at me, seething with rage. Then he spat on the floor, landing it inches away from my boot.

"That's enough, kid. Let's see some ID." Jenkins held his hand out until Avery handed over his wallet.

My gut locked in a painful twist. I was one purse-search away from serving time in prison. At any moment, Jenkins or his partner—a slightly overweight woman with a fierce look on her face and a name tag spelling out RAMIREZ—could turn around and ask for my ID. They could also choose to interrogate us both until they got to the bottom of the teenager's beef with me.

My knees felt weak without warning, and I had to touch the wall for balance. No one noticed.

"Avery Sinclair," Jenkins said, and then he whistled quietly, shooting his partner a loaded look. He looked at the kid. "As in . . . ?"

Avery straightened, seeming a couple of inches taller. "As in Sinclair Airlines. I'm *that* Sinclair's son," he clarified.

His rather arrogant statement changed the demeanor of the two cops. They became tense, guarded . . . concerned with the outcome and how it could affect them and their careers.

"And what is the problem here?" Jenkins looked at Avery first, then at me. I shrugged again, but conspicuously checked the time. A few more minutes of this nonsense and I was going to miss my flight.

"There's no problem," Avery said between gritted teeth. "I'll find her, wherever the hell she's going."

"Whoa, Mr. Sinclair," Ramirez intervened. "You didn't just threaten someone, did you?"

"No. Just stated facts," he replied. The officer seemed satisfied with his answer.

Jenkins turned toward me. "And you, ma'am? Would you like to file a complaint?"

For a moment, I considered it, just because I wanted to teach this snotty, arrogant asshole a lesson, and because the back of my head was still throbbing in pain. But I couldn't afford to have the police poking around in my life.

"No. I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding. I don't know who this young man is or what he wants with me," I said. "All I know is that I'm about to miss my flight."

Jenkins nodded. "Have a nice trip, ma'am."

That was all I needed to hear. I started running toward the checkpoint. "Thanks," I threw over my shoulder.

Behind me, I heard Avery's voice raised in disbelief. "*What? You're letting her go?*"

As I turned in to the business-class security screening aisle, I caught a glimpse of Avery being walked out of the terminal by the two officers.

It took me about ten minutes of running—all the time looking over my shoulder—to get to the gate.

I barely made it; I was the last passenger to board the flight to Las Vegas.

I took my aisle seat on the first row, still breathless, while a male flight attendant put my spinner in the overhead compartment. Another attendant locked the aircraft door, then pressed some buttons on a display above a folded jump seat.

And I breathed, relieved and yet shuddering under the jet of air from the vents above my head.

“Perhaps I could pour you a glass of champagne, ma’am?” the flight attendant offered. “We have a couple more minutes until takeoff.” He opened a storage bin and returned with a small blue fleece blanket. “In case you need it,” he whispered, setting it swiftly on the empty seat next to me.

I thanked him as I took the glass of champagne from his hands with a grateful smile. *Here’s to Avery Sinclair finding someone else to threaten*, I thought, raising my glass in a silent toast to myself. *May I never hear the name Sinclair again*. As I dipped my lips to the sparkling liquid, the Jetway started whirring and withdrew. The aircraft set itself in motion, pushing back from the gate. My eyes shifted toward the window, where the sun pierced the sky right above the terminal.

I wondered what had happened to incense Avery so much as to chase me through the airport. And how he’d figured out where I was.

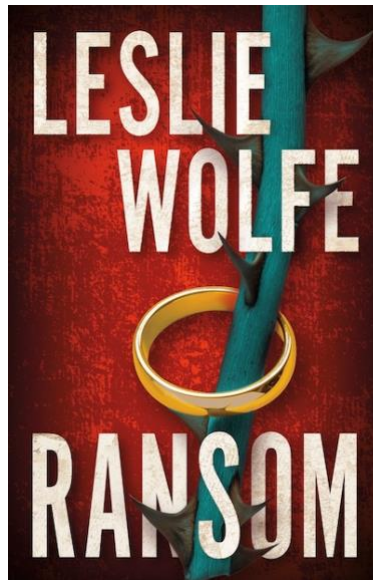
The Seattle business had ended badly; I knew that. It was messy. And *messy* meant *dangerous*.

I finished my champagne and wrapped the soft blanket around my shoulders. When I rested my head against the seat, I drifted off into thoughts of the past and plans for the future as the plane took off.

One more and that’s it. Only one more.

I promise

**Everyone wants to know if she's a murderer.
No one knows who she really is.**



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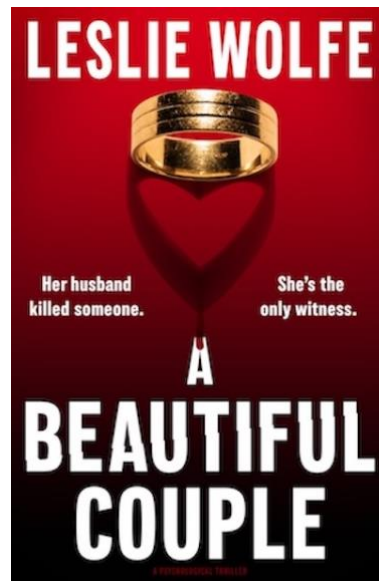
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FREE PREVIEW: *A BEAUTIFUL COUPLE*

**She wanted a divorce.
Now she's helping her husband hide a body.**



Your free preview begins on the next page.

AMANDA DAVIS

I killed a man.

The surreal words fill my mind, echoing in tremors that weaken my body. Wide-eyed, I stare at the body lying in a motionless heap at the bottom of the stairs, disbelief clinging to me in scattered thoughts and anxious breaths. As reality starts setting in, I gasp silently, covering my mouth to stifle a sob.

It can't be true. He can't be dead.

But I can see it's all too real. In his neck, twisted and crooked sideways to an impossible posture. In the sickening crack of broken bones that sounded just as he landed on the hardwood floor after bouncing down the steep flight of stairs. In the pooling blood that's slowly seeping from his head, gleaming burgundy under the yellowish light coming from the floor lamp by the door.

A noise outside startles me. Someone's coming. I freeze in place at the top of the stairs, my fingers white-knuckled on the handrail as the footsteps draw closer. Then, in the dark frame of the living room window, the profile of a woman appears, her face dimly lit as she passes by. Without turning her head to look inside.

I breathe.

But I also realize someone could've seen what happened. A passerby. A neighbor. Anyone.

I force some air into my lungs to steel my fraught nerves. Still holding on to the handrail for support, I climb down the stairs, careful not to slip, as if his fall could repeat somehow and seal my fate in vengeful symmetry, my body next to his. I hold my breath as I approach, senselessly hoping he's still alive, yet fearing it. When I breathe again, the metallic smell of blood invades my nostrils, filling me with dread.

I rush to the window and close the blinds, then peek outside between two slats. The street is eerily deserted and still. For now.

Crouching by his side, I feel for a pulse with frozen fingers. Touching his skin sears me, prickling the back of my head as if he could snap out of death and grab my shaky wrist.

There's no pulse.

His golf shirt is soaked with blood at the collar and smells faintly of aftershave, although his face shows a two-day stubble. His skull is fractured where it must've hit the edge of a step, the indentation clearly visible through his buzz-cut hair, despite the bleeding laceration. Reluctantly, I slip my fingers sideways and trace his neck, wincing as I find the protruding vertebra—a sign of a fractured cervical spine that resulted in a fatal spinal cord injury.

He died the moment he hit the floor.

I'm more than qualified to come to that conclusion. It doesn't change how I feel, though. Unsure of myself. Scared. Unsteady. My heart is racing, and my chest tightening, as if the walls of the room are drawing closer and closer, about to squeeze the life out of me.

The sound of an approaching car makes me rush to the window. It doesn't slow down until it reaches the corner and turns, tinting the darkness of the small, suburban street with hues of bright taillight red.

I turn on my heels and stare at the body, unsure what to do.

His eyes are still open, as if looking straight through me with hypnotizing, dilated pupils. It chills the blood in my veins. I crouch down and close his eyelids swiftly, barely touching him with the tips of my shaking fingers—eager to put some distance between me and him. I stand quickly and step back, unable to take my eyes off of him. Part of me still expects him to get up and grab me, slam me against the wall, then put his hands around my throat and squeeze until my world goes dark. Just as his is now.

But he doesn't move. He's dead.

I killed him.

The enormity of what I've done weighs heavily on my heart. How could I let this happen?

It seems I had no choice, and yet, the truth is that I *had* a choice, and I made the wrong one. That life-altering choice didn't happen a few moments ago, when I pushed him down the stairs.

No.

It happened earlier. Much earlier.

And now, I have to deal with the consequences of what I've done.

My first thought is to run, to put as much distance as I possibly can between me and the body lying on the blood-soaked floor. But there's no running away from this. Not right now. Not without a plan.

Walking backward, my heel stops against the bottom step of the staircase and I nearly trip. I let myself slide down and sit on a step. For a moment of respite, my elbows rest on my shaky knees and my face lands in my hands, hiding from the grim sight.

Perhaps I can stall things for a few days before they come for me, because I know they will. Clinging to that glimmer of hope, my mind starts working. I raise my weary head and look around, looking for anything I could use to buy myself some time. There isn't much.

One thing's certain: I have to get rid of the body.

I need help.

He's massive, at least six-three and well-built, weighing perhaps two-forty. It's what I liked about him...the strength, the agility, the apparent stamina and self-confidence. However, I'm not nearly that tall, and I'm one-forty at the most, on a bad, bloated day. I reach for his leg to test my strength, but stop before touching his ankle. It's pointless to even try. At work, it takes six of us to transfer a patient of his size from a stretcher onto a bed.

I take out my phone and turn it on. The bitten apple lights up white on the black screen, then vanishes, making room for a picture of my son. Tristan just turned nine; we took this pic last summer on the Santa Monica Pier. Seeing his piercing blue eyes touched by his enchanted smile brings the threat of tears to my own eyes.

What if I lose him? What if they lock me up and I never see him again?

I can't bear the thought of that. A hollow, burning ache opens up in my chest, swallowing everything. *No... I can't lose my son. That won't happen. Whatever it takes.*

I push the grim thoughts away and breathe deeply while typing in my phone's passcode. Tristan's face disappears off the screen.

It will be all right. But the words I've told myself fail to reassure me.

As the screen fills with apps, I realize there's only one person I can call for the kind of help I need. The one person I'd rather never call or see again. My fingers falter while retrieving the name from the contacts list.

Hesitating, I give the fallen body another look, desperately wondering if there's any other way.

There isn't.

I brace myself for the questions that are about to come my way like machine gun bullets, merciless and cold and ripping through me in rapid-fire sequence.

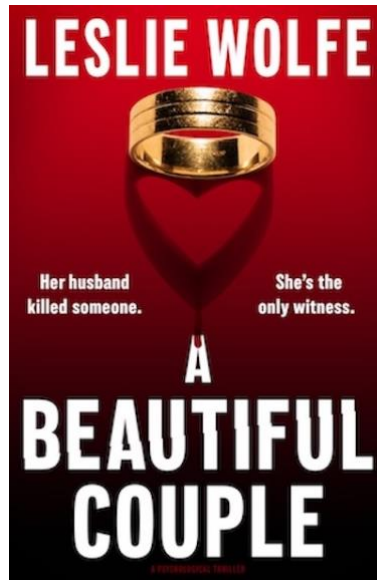
Then, I make the call, knowing that as soon as I share what I've done, there will be no turning back. My entire existence will be at the mercy of someone else. Someone I know I can't trust.

As the line rings in my ear, I reflect bitterly on the last few weeks, and on everything that's happened.

I never wanted any of this.

All I wanted was a damned divorce.

**Her husband killed a woman.
The only witness sleeps beside him.**



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FREE PREVIEW: *THE SURGEON*

**She's never lost a patient.
Until she recognized the man she was trying to save.**



Your free preview begins on the next page.

The Patient

What have I done?

The thought races through my mind, searing and weakening my body. The rush of adrenaline fills my muscles with the urge to run, to escape, but there's nowhere to go. Shaky and weak, I let myself slide to the floor; the cold, tiled wall against my back the only support I have. For a moment, I stare at my hands, barely recognizing them, as if I'd never before seen them sheathed in surgical gloves covered with blood. They feel foreign to me: a stranger's hands attached to my body by some inexplicable mistake.

A faint, steady beep is sounding incessantly over the constant whoosh of air conditioning. I wish I could summon the strength to ask them to turn it off. The operating room is at a standstill, all eyes riveted on me, widened and tense above face masks.

Only one pair of eyes is glaring, drilling into mine whenever there's a chance, the steel-blue irises deathly cold behind thick lenses and a face shield. Dr. Robert Bolger, still seated by the anesthesia machine, doesn't need to say anything. We've said to each other everything that needed to be said. Too much, even.

"Turn that thing off," Madison whispers. Lee Chen presses a button, and the ghastly sound is muted. Then she approaches me and crouches by my side. Her hand reaches for my shoulder but stops short of touching me. "Dr. Wiley?" she whispers, her hand still hovering. "Anne? Come on, let's go."

I shake my head slowly, staring at the floor. I remember with perfect accuracy the properties of the polymer coating they apply on all the operating room floors. Useless information taking space in my brain for no reason, since I'm the surgeon, the end user of these blue mosaic floors, not someone who decides what coating should be used.

"Anne?" Madison says my name again, her voice reassuring, filled with warmth.

"No," I whisper back. "I can't."

A bloody lap sponge has fallen from the table, staining the pristine floor inches away from the tip of my right foot. I fold my leg underneath me, staring at the sponge as if the bloodstain on it could come after me.

Madison withdraws under the fuming glare of Dr. Bolger.

He sighs and turns off his equipment, deepening the silence of the tense room. "Well, I guess we're done here." He stands with a frustrated groan and throws the echocardiologist Dr. Dean a loaded look. "Let's grab a cup of coffee to rinse off the memory of this disaster."

Dr. Dean throws me a quick glance as if asking for my approval. He probably feels guilty for being singled out by Bolger. I barely notice.

I don't react. I can't.

My mind is elsewhere, reliving moment by moment what has happened since this morning.

[LINE BREAK]

The day started well for me, without a sign of what was to come. A capricious, windy spring morning that made my daily jog more of an exercise in willpower than in physical endurance. Chicago has a way of showing its residents some tough love, with chilly wind gusts that cut to the bone, so to speak—there's no surgery involved; just weather and people's perceptions of it.

Like the past couple of weeks, I ran the usual three-mile loop through Lincoln Park looking at elms and buckthorns with renewed hope that I'd find a budding leaf, no matter how small. I was ready for spring and flowering gardens and warmer sunshine. Nothing else was on my mind; at six thirty in the morning, it seemed to be just an ordinary Thursday. Deceptively so.

At about seven thirty, I drove into the hospital employee parking level, taking my reserved numbered spot. I had reviewed the details about the day's surgery a final time the night before from the comfort of my home office, another set routine I have.

The procedure on schedule was an ascending aortic aneurysm. The patient, a fifty-nine-year-old male by the name of Caleb Donaghy. We were scheduled to start at ten sharp.

I'd met Caleb Donaghy twice before. The first time was during a consult. His cardiologist had found a large aneurysm and referred him to us for surgical repair. I remembered that consult clearly. The patient was understandably scared by the findings, and became more so with every word I said. He kept his arms crossed firmly at his chest as if protecting his heart from my scalpel. His unkempt beard had streaks of yellowish gray, and the same gray adorned his temples, as much as I could see from under the ball cap he had refused to take off. I let him keep it.

He was morose and argumentative for a while, disputing everything I said. What had he done to deserve the aneurysm? His parents had only recently died, and not of any heart-related issues. Only after spending a good fifteen minutes managing his anxiety was I able to evaluate him.

That was the first time we met.

Then I saw him again last night, after completing the surgical planning session with my team. Caleb Donaghy had been admitted two days before and had all his blood tests redrawn. He was sitting upright in his bed, stained Cubs ball cap on his head, arms folded, leaning against the pillows doing absolutely nothing when I came in. The TV was off, there were no magazines on his bed, his phone was placed face-down on his night table. The room smelled faintly of stale tobacco and boozy sweat. He was brooding, miserable and alone. And he was pissed. He'd just learned they were going to shave his beard and chest in pre-op. To add insult to injury, someone in hospital administration had swung by and asked him if he was a registered organ donor. For seven long minutes, he told me in various ways he wasn't going to let himself be sold for parts. He knew what we, doctors, did to people like him, who had no family left to sue us and no money to matter. We took their organs and transplanted them into the highest bidders. Why else would entire buildings in our hospital be named after Chicago's wealthiest?

I promised him that wasn't the case. He wouldn't listen. Then I told him that all he had to do was say no and organ transplant stopped being a possibility in case of a negative surgery outcome. Which is surgeon lingo for death on the table. That silenced him in an instant.

But that was yesterday.

[LINE BREAK]

This morning, Madison had my coffee ready for me when I got to the office. She's the best surgical nurse I've worked with, and my personal assistant when she's not scrubbed in.

Madison; Lee Chen, the talented second surgical nurse on my team; Tim Crosley, the cardiovascular perfusionist who operates the heart and lung machine we call the pump; and Dr. Francis Dean, the echocardiologist, are part of my permanent surgical team. Then it's the luck of the draw with anesthesiologists, and I drew the short and very annoying straw with Dr. Bolger. There's something off-putting about him. Could be his undisguised misogyny. Rumors have it he's been written up twice by the hospital administration for sexist diatribes insisting women don't belong in a clinical setting anywhere above the nursing profession. Contempt for women seeps through his pores, although recently he's grown more

careful about letting it show. He's also an arrogant son of a bitch, albeit an excellent anesthesiologist. His professional achievements fuel his hubris and dilute the resolve of the hospital administration when dealing with his behavioral issues. That's who Dr. Bolger is.

When we're in surgery together, I always try to make it work as well as possible, for the good of the patient and the surgical team.

It never works. It takes two to dance in harmony.

I remember swearing under my breath when I saw his name on the schedule, then pushed the issue out of my mind.

Dr. Bolger was already in the operating room when I came in. "Good morning," I said, not expecting an answer. None came, just a quick nod and a side glance from behind the surgical drape that separates his world from mine, before he turned his attention back to the equipment cart at his right. The anesthesia machine helps him deliver precise doses. He controls the patient's airway from behind that protective drape. During surgery, I rarely, if ever, get to see my patients' faces.

My focus is on their hearts.

I'm forty-one and I've been doing this for twelve years, since I finished my general surgery residency. I moved to cardiothoracic right after that, and I never looked back. It's what I've always wanted to do. And I've never lost a patient on the table.

Not until today.

The thought of that hits me in the stomach like a fist.

For an instant, pulled back into the grim present moment, I look around me and try to register what I'm seeing. The surgical lights are off. Madison is still there, looking at me with concern. Lee Chen is sitting on his stool, ready to spring to his feet when needed. Tim Crosley is seated by the pump, his back hunched, his head hung low. If he could, he'd probably rest his forehead against his hands, but he's still working, still keeping sterile. As long as that pump's whirring, he's on duty.

My thoughts race back to the surgery. The operating room was filled with excited chatter, like normal. Virginia Gonzales, the semi-scrubbed nurse who runs back and forth, keeping us all organized and bringing us what we need, was sharing her experience with online dating. She's just been through a terrible divorce. She'd recently decided she could still go out there and meet people. I admired that resilience in her, and secretly hoped it wasn't desperation at the thought of living an entirely lonely life. But her first Tinder match had proven to be a man who'd misrepresented himself dramatically, and everyone on the team was laughing as she shared the details. He'd said he was a transportation executive, when he was in fact a truck driver. Nothing wrong with that, Ginny was quick to say, but the man had never heard of flossing, and during the twenty-five-minute encounter he'd let it slip he used hookers while he was on the road. Cheap ones, he immediately reassured a stunned Ginny.

A quick bout of laughter erupted in the operating room when Ginny added, "I just ran out of there."

Dr. Bolger glared at her. "Let's try to have some professionalism in here, if at all possible," he said, speaking slowly, pacing his words for impact. "If I'm not asking for too much."

I refrained from arguing with him. Everyone was working, doing their jobs. Surgical teams perform best when they have a way to let off some steam. If there's silence in an operating room, if no one's sharing a story, if the music isn't playing, then something's going terribly wrong.

I'd rather have them laughing all day long. That's how you keep death at bay. It's worked for me anyway. So far.

"What will you have?" Madison asked me, standing by the stereo.

"Um, let me think." The early morning jog had me thinking of The Beatles. "Do you have 'Here Comes the Sun'?"

Madison grinned from behind her mask; I could see it in her eyes. She loved them. "I got the entire greatest hits collection right here."

"Punch it," I said, moving between equipment and the operating table until I reached my station, by the patient's chest. Music filled the room.

Humming along, I held out my hand and the scalpel landed firmly in it. No need for me to ask; Madison knows how I work. I'm sure she can read my mind, although that possibility isn't scientifically proven.

From the first incision—a vertical line at the center of his breastbone—every step of the procedure was routine.

The sternotomy to expose the heart.

Opening the pericardium, the thin wrapping around the heart, and exposing the aneurysm.

It was big, one of the biggest I'd seen. But I knew that already from prior imaging studies. We were prepared for it.

"On pump," I said, instructing Tim to start circulating the patient's blood through the heart and lung machine.

"Cross clamp in position," I announced. "Cold flush," I asked. A cold solution of potassium was administered into the chambers of the heart. I flushed the exterior of the heart generously with the solution, knowing the cold fluid preserved the heart tissue while we worked. Within seconds, the heart stopped, its death-like stillness announced by the droning sound we were waiting for. The sound of flatline, or the absence of a heartbeat.

With the heart perfectly still, I started working to replace the aortic aneurysm with a graft. It took me almost an entire Beatles album to finish sewing it in.

It feels strange how I remember the cold above all else. It's always cold in the operating room. The air conditioning system blows air at sixty-two degrees. The cold flush that lowers the heart temperature and renders it still is delivered at forty degrees, barely above freezing. My fingers become numb after a while, but I move as fast as I can. Yet today it seemed colder than usual, the only premonition I can say I had.

I don't believe in them. I have my reasons.

When I was done with the sewing of the graft, I examined my work closely, checking if the stitching was tight enough. The final test would be when the blood started rushing through that graft. Then I'd see if there were any leaks and fix them. Usually there weren't. For now, I was satisfied.

"Warm saline," I asked. Those two words marked the end of the cardioplegia stage of the surgery, when the heart is perfectly still. I flushed the organ generously with warm saline solution, relishing the feeling of warmth on my frozen fingers, then used suction to get rid of the excess solution. "Releasing clamp."

The clamp clattered when it landed on the pile of used instruments. I held my breath, knowing this was the moment of truth.

The heart remained perfectly still.

Not fibrillating, not barely beating. Nothing. Just perfectly still.

And that almost never happens.

"Starting resuscitation," I announced. Madison gestured toward the stereo and Ginny turned it off, then started a second timer with large, red digital numbers. Silence filled the room, an ominous, unwanted silence underlined by the flatline droning of the heart monitor: "Epinephrine, stat."

"Epi in," Dr. Bolger confirmed.

The shot of epi should've done something. It didn't. I massaged the heart quickly, feeling it completely unresponsive under the pressure.

"Paddles," I asked, my voice tense, impatient. Madison put the paddles in my hands. Placing them carefully on opposing sides of the heart, I called, "Clear," and pushed the button. A brief interruption in the steady droning, then the sound of bad news was back.

I tried that a few more times, then returned to massaging the heart with my hands. "I need another shot of epi. Time?"

"Seventeen minutes," Madison announced, grimly.

"Damn it to hell," I mumbled under my breath. "Come on, Caleb, stay with me."

For a couple more minutes, I kept on with the massage, but nothing happened. The pump still kept his blood oxygenated and delivered to his organs, but the heart was another issue. Its tissue was no longer preserved by the cold potassium solution. With every passing minute, it was deteriorating, its chances of ever beating again waning fast.

"Come on, already! Live!" I snapped. "Come back."

I felt the urge to look at the patient's face as if it could hold some answers. I took a small step past the surgical drape—and froze, mouth agape under the mask, hand stuck in mid-air. I believe I gasped, but I don't think anyone noticed under the hum of air conditioning, the whirring of the pump, and the blaring of the monitor.

I recognized that man.

My blood turned to ice.

The face I'd seen yesterday and hadn't recognized was now clean-shaven. The ball cap was gone, his bald forehead marked by a port-wine stain on the right side. The birthmark was an irregular shape of red splashed across his forehead as if someone had spilled some wine there.

It took all my willpower to step back behind the drape. Breathing deeply, thankful for the cool air that kept my mind from going crazy, I abandoned the paddles on the table and stared at the heart that refused to beat.

"Time?" I asked again, this time my voice choked.

"Twenty-one minutes," Madison replied.

I slipped my hands into the chest and massaged the heart, knowing very well the heart compressions I was delivering wouldn't work.

I forced one more breath of air out of my chest, then said, "I'm calling it."

"What?" Dr. Bolger sprang to his feet. "Are you insane? Keep going."

I was expecting that. "I could do that, but he won't come back, Robert. We tried everything. The heart's not even giving me the tiniest flutter."

His steely eyes threw poisonous darts at me. "Giving up already? Why? Are your pretty little hands tired, sweetheart?"

I let that one go. It wouldn't help anyone if we argued over the open chest of Caleb Donaghy. "My case, my call." I held his seething gaze steadily for a moment. "Time of death, 1:47 p.m."

Heavy silence took over the room. Then people started shifting around, collecting instruments, peeling off gloves, turning off equipment. Only Tim stayed in place, the pump still working, still preserving Caleb's organs and tissues.

"It's unbelievable what happened here today," Dr. Bolger said. "You're unbelievable. Pathetic even. You didn't just lose your cherry... you threw it away."

The sexualized reference to the fact that I'd never lost a patient before left me wondering how much of his disdain was in fact envy. But that thought went away quickly.

Then reality hit me like a freight train.

What have I done? Have I just killed a man?

**She was supposed to save his life.
Not decide whether he deserved one.**



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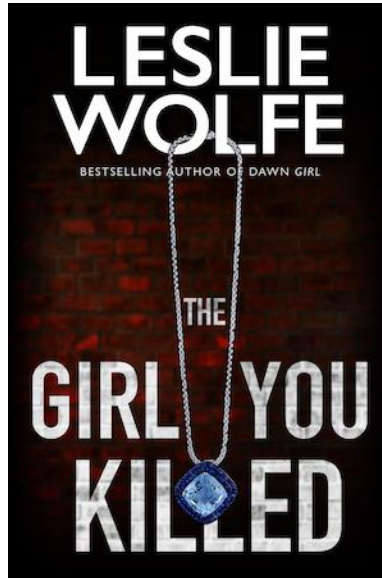
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FREE PREVIEW: *THE GIRL YOU KILLED*

He swears he didn't kill his wife.

Her final letter says otherwise.



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Chapter 1

A LETTER

They'd taken everything from him.

In a matter of days, Craig Brafford's entire world had been torn apart, pulled inside out, shredded to unrecognizable bits colored in hues of nightmare.

About half a dozen cops had rummaged through his house looking for who knows what, sparing nothing and breaking stuff out of spite; he'd seen the photos. Now the place was empty, front door unlocked, an invitation for local thugs to loot and occupy as soon as his arrest hit the evening news. He'd begged his lawyer, the widely successful Lamar Goodridge, to swing by and lock it, maybe turn on the alarm system.

"Not my job," the man had answered calmly, his voice low, frozen, loaded with contempt. "You can barely afford my services as it is," he'd added, glancing at the gold watch adorning his wrist. The man charged \$900 per hour, and Craig would've gladly paid for his time, but Mr. Goodridge couldn't let himself be caught giving a crap about one of his clients or running errands for them.

Humiliated, he'd lowered his head and never mentioned it again, cringing powerlessly at the thought of his beautiful home overtaken by hordes of street filth. Goodridge had taken his case on a hefty retainer that had cleaned Craig's accounts. Regardless, Goodridge still frowned when he looked at him, as if the sight of the inmate clad in an orange jumpsuit was offensive somehow, as if he'd never seen inmates before. Maybe Goodridge was wondering if Craig could pay his legal bills once the ordeal was over. Or perhaps he was trying to guess if his client had done it or not, although Goodridge himself had started their first meeting by saying, "I don't care if you're innocent. Either way, you deserve the best defense money can buy. *Your* money that is. Otherwise . . ." He let the word trail into silence, accompanied by a shrug and a hand gesture conveying his indifference for all the potentially innocent people who couldn't afford decent legal representation and would lose their freedom for only that reason: not being rich enough. Even if they were innocent.

He was smug, his lawyer. He rarely worked pro bono cases, and when he did, he only represented defendants from Sunnyside, the neighborhood where he'd been born and raised in dire destitution. He called his unofficial preference "a tribute to his ancestry." Either pro bono or full-paying client, his inquisitive eyes drilled into the very fabric of whoever sat across from him, and there was little he didn't see. That was probably why he could charge that much or why he rarely lost a case.

His retainer had left no bail money to be posted; Craig was tapped out, cash and credit. The five-hundred-thousand-dollar bail could've just as well been five million. Too proud and too ashamed to ask for help from affluent people he knew, he braced himself for weeks of confinement. With a swift drop of the judge's gavel, he'd been remanded, his attorney shrugging off his concerns about the time he'd have to spend behind bars awaiting trial.

Then he was hauled over to the Houston Southeast Jail, where he was locked up with the general population.

He'd assumed *innocent until proven guilty* would somehow apply to his time in lockup. He'd been sorely wrong. With the expedience and efficiency of a soulless conveyor belt, the system had stripped him of his remaining dignity, prodding and probing, inflicting physical pain whenever he didn't toe the line, and slapping a number on him without wasting a moment's consideration on his presumed innocence.

He was now prisoner number five-three-three-seven-one-nine.

The number resonated in his mind, the obsessive chorus of an unwritten song he couldn't rid his mind of, the epitome of his lost dignity, of his disappearing identity and his foreclosed freedom. Pale and feeling his insides tied up in a permanent knot of anguish and fear, he'd held his head down and had endured, day after day, waiting, hoping, reciting the unwilling mantra that had ensnared his rebellious brain.

Five-three-three-seven-one-nine.

That's who he was now. He'd unwillingly *become* five-three-three-seven-one-nine, quickly realizing it was far better than fighting back, than rejecting his new reality and its many insults and injuries, all in the name of a precept that only seemed to carry value in movies. There was no innocent until proven guilty. In prison, he was guilty. Nothing else. No one cared while he festered in that hellhole, forgotten by everyone, choking on his anger and shame.

Him, being there . . . it wasn't supposed to happen. Not to him. Not ever.

He wasn't built for it. His athletic yet slender five-nine frame wasn't a testimony to hours spent pumping iron in the gym, like most of his fellow inmates were. His hands, fine, nervous, with long fingers and clean nails attested to the white-collar status he'd worked so hard to achieve. His tall forehead and pushed-up hair, his fine features and deep hazel eyes portrayed him as a charismatic and attractive man, a quality he'd always valued about himself but had started fearing since the day he set foot in Houston Southeast Jail.

In there, the common denominator of everything was fear. Primal, animalistic, incessant fear.

Yet three weeks had somehow passed, unnervingly slowly, while he learned to respond when called "seven-one-nine" or "inmate." He found that some of the wardens were just ordinary people making a living, while others thrived on inflicting pain on the prisoners under their control. Like E. Mellor, the six-foot-four, three-hundred-pound corrections officer with a sadistic glint in his eyes and a grin that stretched his lips over his grinding teeth like a predator's snarl. Mellor sometimes ran his hand over the tip of his rubber stick in an obscene gesture promising nothing good to the inmate who didn't keep his eyes lowered and didn't pay him off. Officer E. Mellor—who knows what the E stood for on his name tag—had taken the last few dollars Craig had on him the day he was remanded and had kept demanding more from the fountain that had already run dry.

That night, at least Mellor was out of sight, the guard pacing the hallways an older Latino, N. Chavez by nametag. His skin was darkened by years of smoking the cheapest stuff available, and his potbelly, stretching the buttons of his shirt to the point of snapping off like spat watermelon seeds, spoke of cirrhosis at some point in the man's near future. Dark circles under his eyes and a stained, grayed-out mustache completed the portrait of the only guard who had not laid a hand on him yet, since he'd been locked up in there. The others, Mellor more than any of them, had at least shoved him against the wall or took their rubber sticks to his kidneys in passing, just to show him how things worked. Just for the heck of it.

Garbled radio transmission came from Chavez's lapel, and he quickly responded with a numeric code, then headed straight to Craig's cell with a groan and an expression of frustration on his face.

Craig stood and approached the bars, clutching them with cold, sweaty, trembling fingers.

"Hands," Chavez said, waiting for him to turn around and put his hands through an opening in the bars. Then he slapped a pair of handcuffs on Craig's wrists, the touch of cold metal sending shivers down his spine. "Your lawyer's here to see you," Chavez added.

Craig's eyebrows shot up. "Now?" Goodridge had been there that morning, preparing him for tomorrow's day in court, the third in his trial.

Chavez shrugged. Grabbing his arm, he led him out of the cell and down the hallway toward one of the interview rooms. "What are you in for?"

"I didn't do anything, I swear," he replied, his voice sad, defeated.

A roar of laughter erupted from the cell they were just passing by. "Another innocent man thrown in jail," a guttural voice with a thick Guatemalan accent announced loudly, and soon the entire section was hollering, shouting obscenities, and laughing at his expense.

"No one in here is guilty of anything," Chavez said, sarcasm layered heavy in his voice. "Not even the ones who take plea deals." He shot him a quick look, then shrugged as if deciding not to give a crap about him anymore.

"Murder," he said, lowering his voice. "They're saying I killed—"

"Okay, go in there," Chavez said, shoving him gently into the room. The door buzzed and locked as it closed behind them.

A man in a tailored suit and expensive shoes stood quickly when he entered.

Craig turned to Chavez. "This isn't my lawyer." Chavez gawked at him, then grabbed his radio.

The attorney held his hand up. "This is no mistake. Arthur Flanagan, estate attorney," he said, extracting a business card from a holder and handing it to him. Then he popped the locks on his briefcase and opened it. "I have a letter for you." He took out a thick, bubble-lined envelope and handed it over to Craig.

Chavez took it instead, his gesture quick, determined. "I have to check this before you can see it. Procedure."

The attorney waited, standing impatiently, a fresh smell of pricey aftershave regaling Craig's nostrils, reminding him of what he used to have and had lost. Estate attorney? What estate? Had one of his parents died?

Chavez pulled the tab and unsealed the envelope.

"Who's this from?" the inmate asked.

The lawyer's eyes darted toward his open briefcase. Maybe he kept a notepad in there. "It's from Andrea Wilmore Brafford," he replied calmly. "It was to be given to you in the event of her death."

His breath caught. He tried to speak, to ask when she had given him that letter, but his throat was parched dry, and only a strangled, raspy whimper came out. He took a step forward and reached for the attorney's arm, but the man stepped back. Chavez grabbed his elbow, and he stopped, frozen in place, feeling the blood draining from his face.

"Take it easy, all right?" Chavez let go of his arm and pulled out a few folded, neatly typed pages from the envelope. He inspected them quickly, then handed the letter over to him. Before Craig could start reading, the guard looked inside the envelope. "There's something else in here," Chavez said, turning the envelope upside down above his hand and shaking it gently.

A pendant on a silver chain clinked quietly as it fell from the envelope and settled in the guard's hand. When Craig recognized the blue stones, a wave of nausea hit him hard in the pit of his stomach as the room started to spin with him. *No. This wasn't happening*, his thoughts raced. *It couldn't happen. I still remember what I did. I know what I didn't do.*

"Nice," the guard said, closing his fist around the pendant. "But you can't have this; you know the rules."

"No . . . no . . . please, let me touch it for a moment," he pleaded, stuttering, tears streaking his cheeks. "Let me make sure it's—"

"Okay, for one moment, and that's it," Chavez said, reluctantly opening his palm and letting out a heavy sigh tainted with mustard and onion and cheap tobacco.

Transfixed, he touched the chain with trembling fingers, the torn clasp, then ran his thumb over the center stone of the pendant, like he'd done so many times in the past. He swallowed hard, still staring at the small object curled in the guard's chubby palm. It was real. The nightmare was real.

Sweat broke at the roots of his hair and started trickling down his forehead. He raised his handcuffed hands to wipe his brow and noticed the letter he was still holding absentmindedly.

Breath caught inside his chest, he scanned the pages, looking for something that would make sense of it all, that would answer his questions. There was nothing, not until the last page, where the ending paragraph clarified everything for him with a few simple, paralyzing words.

The girl you killed is watching over you from paradise, lounging on cloud number nine with a Margarita in her hand, hoping you'll have everything you deserve in this life after she's gone. Goodbye, my love. You were the one.

Blood rushed to his head in a wave of rage, his heart pounding, his fists clenched so hard his knuckles cracked, the last page of the letter crumpled and stained by his sweat as it fell to the ground. "No, Andi . . . no . . . you didn't do this to me . . ." he whispered. Eyes staring into emptiness like a wounded, panicked animal, he rushed to the barred door and started pounding against the dirty, wired glass with both fists, the steel handcuffs cutting into his flesh.

"Let me out of here," he shouted. "I didn't kill my wife; I swear I didn't . . ." He repeated the phrase over and over, his voice breaking, threatened by tears of rage and powerlessness and despair. The only response he got was from other inmates banging against steel bars in rhythmic, surreal resonance muffled by the closed door.

"Hey, cut it out," Chavez shouted, but Craig didn't hear him. He kept pounding against the door, kicking at it, bloodying his knuckles against the scratched metal, pleading and calling for help. Unable to think clearly, he didn't notice the tears streaming down his stained face.

Chavez touched the radio button at his chest. "Need some help in here." Then he collected the pages of the letter scattered on the floor, slid them back into the envelope, and slid the pendant in there before folding the envelope and tucking it inside his chest pocket. "The DA will need to see this. It's evidence."

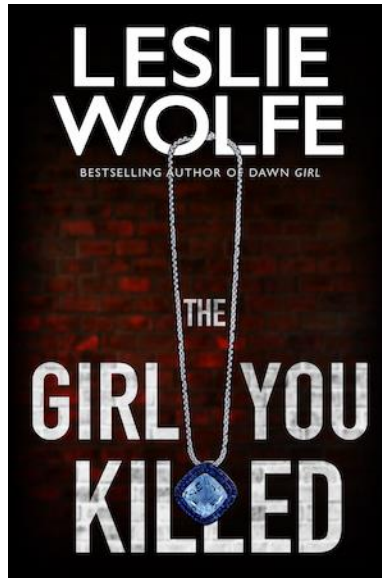
The guard's words hit him in the chest like a fist, but he kept banging against the door with all his strength under Chavez's disappointed look and the attorney's disgusted glare until he fell to his knees, drained, sobbing so hard he couldn't breathe. "I didn't kill her, I swear," he faltered, choked, gasping for air. "I didn't . . ."

Chavez walked over to him and grabbed his arm. "Get it together, already. You have court tomorrow."

He looked at the guard through the blur of tears. "You don't understand," he pleaded, grabbing at the man's sleeve. "The pendant, she—" He stopped in time, realizing what he was about to say.

The door buzzed open, and Officer Mellor stepped inside with a glint of excited anticipation in his eyes. "Seven-one-nine, you're coming with me

**His wife left him a goodbye letter.
And something far more terrifying than her words.**



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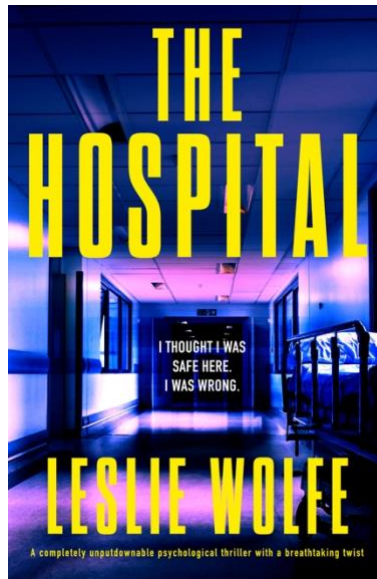
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FREE PREVIEW: *THE HOSPITAL*

**She can't remember who hurt her.
She can't see who just walked into her room.**



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Chapter One

Where am I?

The question rushes through my mind as my consciousness returns, hesitant and shattered, from a deep darkness. Slowly, accompanied by a throbbing headache that seeds nausea in the pit of my stomach, my awareness tries—and fails—to restore my understanding of where I am. Of what's happening to me.

Opening my eyes seems an impossibly difficult task. I battle the weakness in my muscles, yearning for the light to help me get my bearings. Yet, my eyelids remain stubbornly closed.

Fighting the frailty of my body, I try to raise my hand and touch my face but my hand doesn't move. It's as if it is too heavy to lift, to attempt the tiniest gesture.

Even my face feels like a stranger's. Distant. Cut off somehow. The sensory inputs are weak and remote, almost like something I would perceive second hand, like watching an intense movie and sharing the character's emotions, sensations, and fears. Feeling real, but distant and disconnected.

As much as I struggle to open my eyes, not the faintest shred of light cuts through the deep, absolute blackness. My world has been swallowed by darkness.

Panic washes over me in a sweeping wave, each heartbeat thundering in my ears. My mind, a jumbled mess, grasps frantically at the frayed edges of my memory as I try to remember why I'm trapped in a paralyzed world. Every attempt to move is met with terrifying stillness where there should be motion.

What's happening to me?

A scream builds up in my chest and comes off my lips as barely a whimper, almost too quiet for me to hear.

A memory dashes through my frantic mind, fueling my all-consuming fear.

It isn't clear. It doesn't feature images and actions and people I recognize; merely a blurry recollection of emotions I've felt and things I've done. A dream more than a memory, a nightmare really, and just as terrifying.

In my vision, I am running for my life with frenzied footsteps that falter when I look over my shoulder, breathing shallow and fast between desperate shrieks. Instead of seeing who's after me, the space behind me is a void, filled with the same darkness that has overtaken every corner of my world now. I recall screaming, pleading, calling for help. I can still feel it in my body: the despair, the fear, the screams searing my throat. And running, faster and faster, with a sense that whatever is chasing me is gaining ground.

As I relive it in my mind, I feel the same fear gripping my throat and strangling it. The darkness grows suffocating, a relentless oppressor, ripping me from the ground and spinning me higher and higher, my thoughts spiraling into chaos.

From that torment, a single clear thought emerges.

Whatever I've been running from has caught up with me. And now I lie here, vulnerable and helpless, unable to move, unable to see where I am.

I breathe slowly, the effort to fill my lungs with air almost impossible, and urge my hectic mind to settle. It doesn't come quickly or easily. Flashes of the same memory, looping in my mind over and over, do nothing to calm my fears. But I keep at it, breath after excruciatingly slow breath, listening to the air entering my body then leaving it without apparent connection to the rapid rhythm of my heartbeats.

My mouth feels dry, my tongue sticky and swollen.

That tiny bit of sensory information is like unearthed treasure in the black emptiness in my mind. I take it and follow it like an unraveling thread, in search of a way out of the labyrinth. Soon enough, more such morsels start to collect and form an image I can read.

I'm thirsty. My lips are chapped, and the tip of my tongue does nothing to moisten and soothe them. I try to move my fingers one more time, slowly and mindfully, to no avail. Just as stubbornly, my eyes stay firmly closed, protecting the darkness within at the cost of my sanity.

Just as the irrational fear is starting to return, I hear the blaring yet muted siren of an ambulance in the distance, faint but approaching. I pay close attention to that and the other, almost indistinct, sounds I'm beginning to pick up, and images start taking shape in my mind.

A few moments after the siren stops, I'm aware of people chatting as they pass by, also distant somehow, but close enough. If I screamed, they would probably hear me. I draw breath as forcefully as I can and try to call out.

Only a whisper comes out of my mouth, and the people continue unperturbed, walking away with brisk steps.

Still, I'm not alone.

The whoosh of my own blood in my ears subsides a little as my panic wanes with that realization.

More sounds start filling my world, no longer dampened by my fear. A distant PA calls for a doctor to report somewhere I don't quite catch. Closer and a little louder, the subdued and rhythmic beeping of a machine, its sounds synced to perfection with my own heartbeats.

I'm in the hospital.

It's the only logical conclusion I can draw. And it means that I didn't escape from whomever I've been running from after all. I succumbed to their attack, and it landed me here, helpless and vulnerable and lost. Fear returns with that thought, but this time tinged with a fiery anger, swelling my mind with questions I can't answer, while the face of my attacker remains shrouded in obscurity.

I play that snippet of memory again, hoping I'll be able to catch a glimpse of the person I tried to run from. I can't visualize a face nor remember a name. I don't remember much at all; only that I'm not safe, and that next time, there will be no escape. I'm absolutely sure of that, as I'm sure of my own name.

I'm Emma Duncan, and I survived. I'm still alive.

It feels good to say it, even if it's only an unspoken thought.

[LINE BREAK]

My world has been silent for a while when the sound of approaching footsteps makes me hold my breath, while the thumping of my heart grows faster and faster, echoed by the increased beeping of the monitor.

Footsteps walk past, quickly and purposefully, then return. I can feel shifting air gently touching my cheeks, a sensation I've never been aware of before. Between the soft sound of rubber soles on the floor and the air moving inside the room, I can picture someone walking back and forth, close to me. Close enough to touch.

Perhaps close enough to kill.

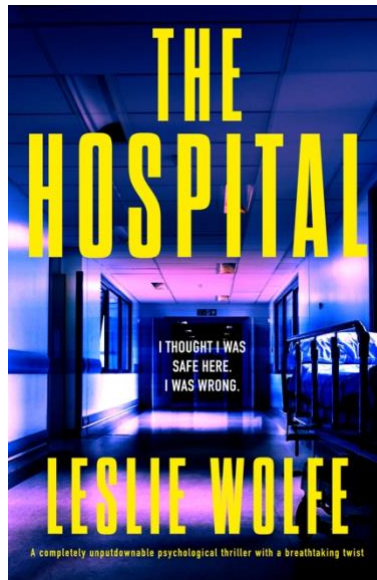
My first instinct is to stay quiet and wait for them to be gone. It's senseless, irrational, only a short while after I tried my best to get attention by calling out. Maybe this person will have answers for me. Or perhaps they are here to finish the job they started when I was running, trying to escape.

A quiet sob leaves my chest before I can stop it. Tears emerge from the corners of my eyes, but they don't roll down my cheeks. Or I don't feel them if they do.

The rubber soles freeze for a dizzying moment, then approach quickly. A warm hand clasps mine and squeezes gently.

"You're awake," a woman's voice says cheerfully. "That's wonderful. I'll get the doctor."

**She's terrified of being left alone.
Until she realizes someone is there.**



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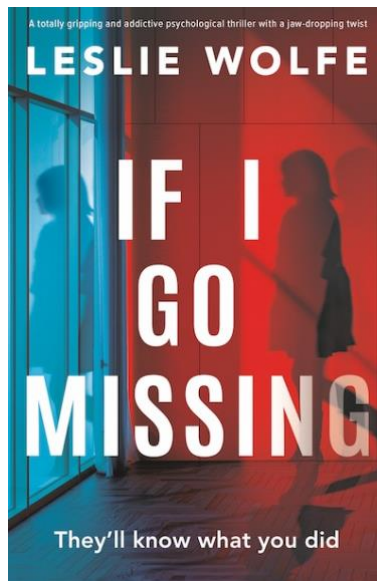
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FREE PREVIEW: *IF I GO MISSING*

**Her missing best friend left behind a binder.
Alana's darkest secrets are inside.**



Your free preview begins on the next page

Chapter 1

If you're reading this, I've gone missing.

And I have just a few words to get you to know me, to understand what I'm about, to care about me enough to leave the rut of your daily routine behind and invest a little bit of your most precious asset—your time—in finding me. In bringing me home.

My plan is to make it as easy as possible. Enclosed in this binder you will find the tidbits that form a person's existence. Mine. A jigsaw puzzle made of photos, bank accounts, social media usernames and passwords, fingerprints, and DNA. Twenty-nine years of personal history told in a few pictures, some faded with time, others crisp and fresh and new, all equally meaningful. If I put it in here, whatever it may be, it's important for you to look at it with an open mind and decide if it had anything to do with my disappearance.

If I could, now that I'm writing this, I wouldn't be shy; I'd tell you straight up what's going on. But I can't. I don't have a crystal ball to know what the future will hold. As I'm sitting at my desk, in my peaceful den, typing this letter, it's no easy task to look ahead at such a horrifying possibility.

Going missing. The thought brings shivers down my spine.

How does one begin to know what will be the critical information needed to solve my disappearance? How do I choose from the vast number of memories contained within my life's journey, those that would help you find me?

Nevertheless, I have to try, blindly, like someone feeling their way through the deepest darkness, frail yet unstoppable, seeking the power of light to shine over them and set them free. Although it's deathly serious, building this binder reminds me of a game I used to play with my best friend as children. Or—I should be precise—teenagers, just starting to look at life differently, yet still believing in the magic that had lit our childhoods with enchantment.

I remember going on two- or three-days outings here and there, ready to explore the world, to conquer it, to make it ours. I remember the pervasive smell of mothballs that ruined our appetite and gave us migraines, yet didn't stop us from writing secret missives that could only be read in a mirror's reflection, using one of Da Vinci's favorite ways to encode messages. I'm a lefty, so mirror-writing comes easier to me than it would to most people. But that's not the point; I digress.

Life feels this way to me right now, like a mirror-written letter I cannot comprehend. But if you can find the right mirror, my life will bare its secrets in front of your eyes. And you'll understand everything I'm trying to say here but cannot find the words for.

You see, I'm afraid for my life. And I'm not sure whether the secret I discovered is the reason why I've gone missing and you're reading this. All I know is that I'm caught in a quagmire of shadows and deceit, an inescapable trap that might have swallowed me already.

My only hope is you. Most people like crime in fiction, on television or in books. Those people shy away from looking at crime's realities, repelled, shrouding themselves in disbelief, thinking that denial will be the protective shield that will keep their lives pristine and safe. Others are the exact opposite, eager to stare at blood puddles and flare their nostrils at the first whiff of death, unrelentingly looking for scapegoats and making up lies to support their fictitious scenarios as they go along. To them, the lure of someone else's misery is heady and unescapable.

Neither can be trusted to find the truth. Especially when that truth is wrapped in a lie, shielded from the light of day in such ways that no one can see it. Serving the lie in perpetuity, just as a host organism serves and feeds the parasite coiled around its heart.

This is the kind of person you'll need to be to find me. Different. Someone who chose to fight crime, not just be entertained by it in fiction and news media. Someone with an unrelenting passion for making people's lives a little better at the worst moments of their existence. I'm hoping that's who you are, hellbent on a mission to find out what's real, and that you won't stop until you get answers.

You were meant for this.

Only you can find me.

Please do.

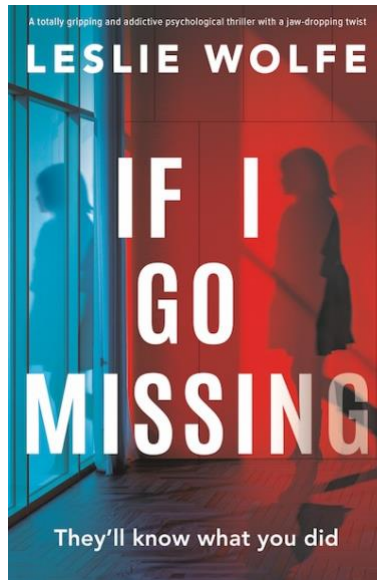
Before I end this message, I have to apologize to my dear husband. I'm so sorry for hiding this binder. Just know I didn't hide it from you, and I hope you found it easily. You know everything about me anyway; probably nothing within its pages is a surprise to you. I hid it because it gives whoever finds it complete access to my life, to everything I am, I own, and I love. You're already privy to all that, but such power in the hands of the wrong people could have terrifying consequences. So, I kept it hidden, away from nosy housekeepers and the occasional overnight visitors, and you obviously found it and gave it to the detective investigating my disappearance. Thank you for doing all that. Maybe it will help bring me back a little bit sooner.

To all the people who care about me, I want to say something, knowing it won't bring much relief to the anguish you must be feeling right now. Here it is, nevertheless. I'm strong, resilient, and I can endure. My parents raised me well. I won't go down without a fight. Just know that, and know I'm counting the seconds until we're reunited.

So please flip through the pages and find answers to your questions, some of which you haven't yet asked. It's in your power to save me. No one else can.

Please find me.

**Some secrets can ruin a friendship.
Theirs could leave one of them dead.**



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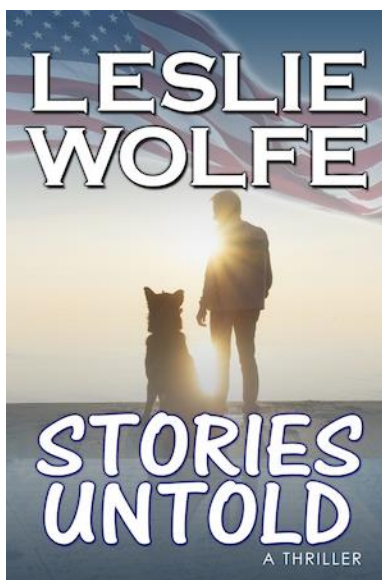
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FREE PREVIEW: *STORIES UNTOLD*

**He's chosen the day he'll die.
She has twenty-four sessions to change his mind.**



Your free preview begins on the next page.

The Chosen Day

He was ready to die.

Not fighting the thought anymore, not even feeling sorry for forfeiting his tomorrows.

All feeling had abandoned his weary heart, leaving nothing but hollow space behind. Nothing more than emptiness, the vacant shell of what he once was, back in the day when life was wondrous and joyful and fun, centuries ago, when he was still alive.

He leaned back farther in his seat and enjoyed the silence that engulfed the warehouse. The last of the employees had clocked out and gone home. Even Terrell, who took the most convincing to leave while he was still there looking busy in his small office, had left almost an hour ago. Most of the warehouse was shrouding itself in darkness, while one fluorescent light after another reached their automatic delays and went off, precisely sixty minutes after the last human being had tripped the respective motion sensor. It was almost like nightfall in a way; it had to do with life, but wasn't natural. There, in the realm of the immense office supplies warehouse, it was life that generated light, not the other way around.

Soon darkness would come, and bring relief with it.

His desk lamp was the only light still on, and he stared at its pale, yellowish glow for the longest time. Absentminded, he pulled two small, white pebbles out of his pocket and let his fingers play with them, rubbing and knocking them against each other, making soothing, muted sounds that filled the hollow silence. No thoughts crossed his mind; he could have stayed like that for ages, lost in the transcendence between life and death, caught between his past and his nonexistent future.

But no, he had a job to do. He forced himself to come back to reality and shrugged off the emptiness that had swallowed him whole. He let the two pebbles drop into his pocket, then tapped on the fabric to make sure they were tucked safely in there. His eyes struggled to focus on the paperwork lying in front of him on the desk's melamine surface, guaranteed to be scratch and stain resistant.

He shook his head angrily, inviting the unwanted tidbit of office product description to get out of his head, and then reviewed the list of dates printed on the sheet of paper he held with firm, cold fingers.

Only one policy left, that was all. The rest of them had passed the two-year mark that was the typical suicide exclusion waiting period. Most life insurance policies would pay the benefit even in the case of suicide, if more than two years had passed since the policy had been underwritten. His had passed that mark, except for one. He looked at the date and counted in his mind. Five more months, and that last one would reach the threshold, putting the suicide clause into effect.

Huh... From a risk analysis perspective, the insurance companies believed no one could hold on to the will to die for as long as he had, and that's why they were willing to pay. He reflected on that thought for a while, while his eyes wandered absently to the letters that formed his name, printed in all caps at the top of the form. The insurance companies knew how to quantify and manage risk, but they had never met nor quantified Dylan James Ballard. By the time the dust would settle on his grave, numerous actuarial busybodies would adjust that risk factor based on his precedent, and soon that clause would probably run three years instead of two. No insurance company could stand to make less than billions in profits each year.

Not his problem anymore; none of it.

All he still cared about was his wife, and he'd made sure she'd be well taken care of. The rest had stopped mattering a long time ago.

He stood with a groan and pulled the calendar off the wall, then sat back in his chair, flipping through the pages. Six months from today was November. The last of the policies would mature in five months, but he didn't want to cut it that close, so they wouldn't be suspicious.

He picked up a red pen and read through the dates, looking for one that would be worthy to become the day he stopped breathing. A Monday... what could be worse than a Monday in November, right? It would probably be a gloomy, never-see-the-sun kind of day, cold and humid and foggy and nasty, like November Mondays can be in San Francisco.

He chose the second Monday, the twelfth, and circled it firmly with the red pen. Then he squinted a little in the dim light, and read what was written right underneath the bold digits that formed the number twelve. *Veterans Day (Observed)*, it said there, in font so small and discreet, it was almost like the calendar makers had been ashamed to print those words. How appropriate a day for him to choose; how fitting. Decidedly, he revisited the date with the red pen and circled it a couple of times more.

Satisfied, he flipped the calendar pages back to May, and hung it on the wall in its rightful place. Then he turned toward his computer and opened a browser window. It was time for the next phase of the plan.

He scrolled through countless search results and spent his time reading reviews and looking at people's faces before he finally chose her. Dr. Angela Blackwell, forty-four years old, highly credentialed, favorable reviews, published works. Not cheap at all, but he didn't care to save money this time. He needed the perfect witness, someone whose testimony would carry weight in court, someone who could swear his wife had nothing to do with his death, so the cops wouldn't suspect her of any involvement in his sudden demise. Then the insurance bastards would leave Taylor alone and have no alternative but to pay the death benefits.

He checked the time on his phone and almost smiled, noting it was probably late enough to not risk catching the good doctor still in her office. He dialed the number, and after four rings and the customary beep, he cleared his voice and spoke plainly.

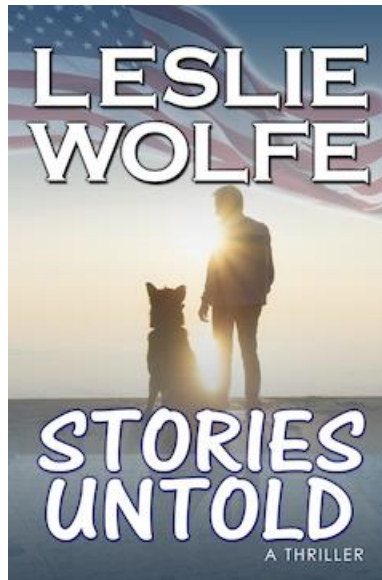
"Yeah, Dr. Blackwell, hello. I need your help. I need a few sessions during the next six months or so. I will pay in cash; I believe that won't be a problem. I can't have anything like that show up on my record; I hope you'll understand. Please call me back."

He ended the call and leaned back in his seat, then allowed the silence to settle over the vast space of the warehouse, after the last echo of his voice had vanished. He closed his eyes, feeling nothing but emptiness, the familiar absence of feeling that shrouded him wherever he went.

He was ready to die, and now he knew just when that was going to happen.

November twelfth

**He knows how to survive a war.
He doesn't know how to live with what he survived.**



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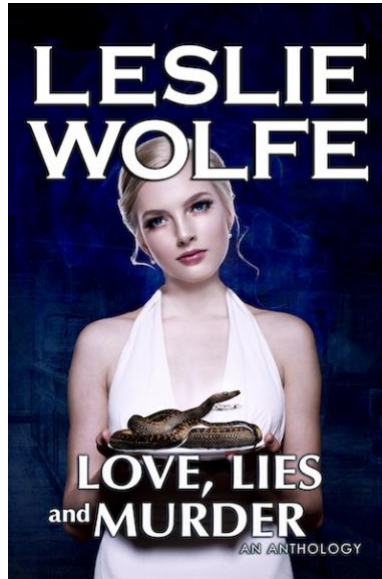
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FREE PREVIEW: *LOVE, LIES AND MURDER*

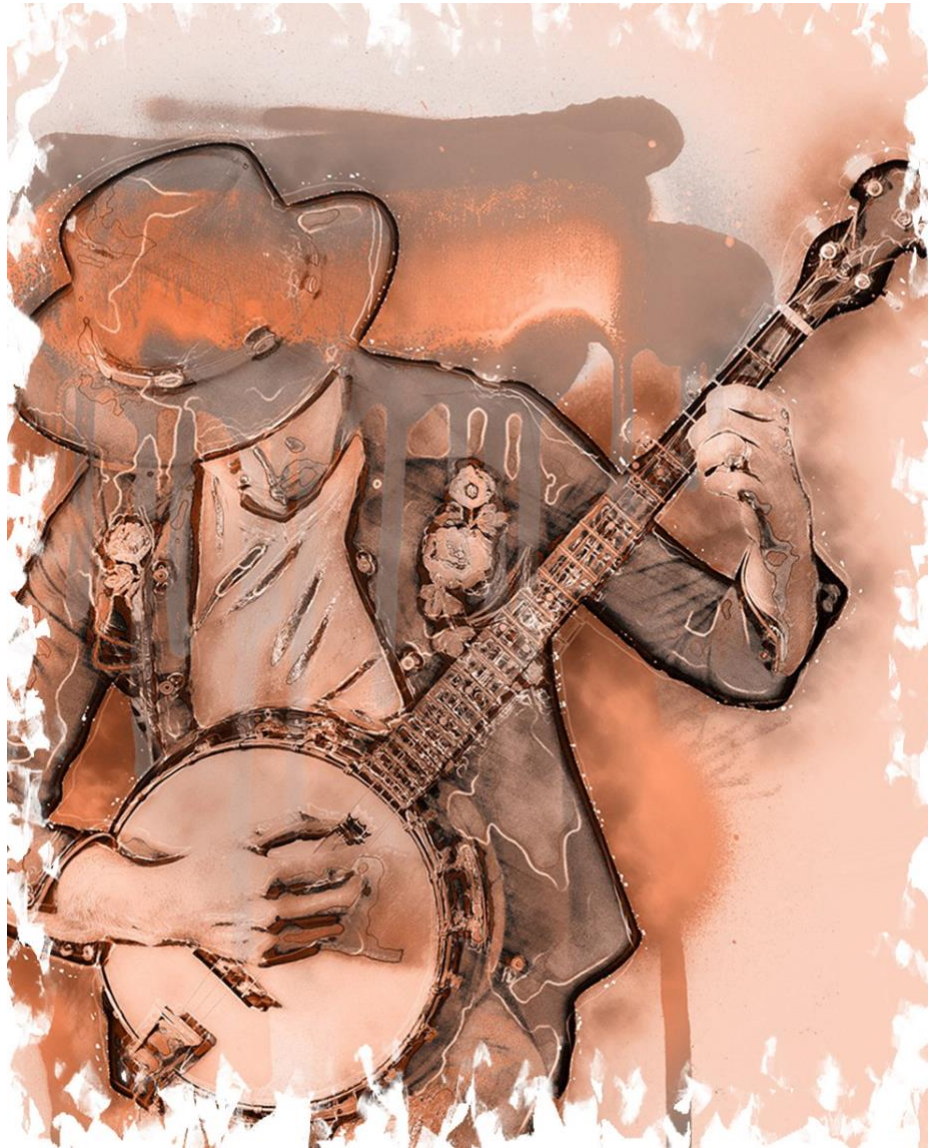
**Love can save a life.
It can also be motive.**

Nineteen short stories of love, deception, and murder.



Your free preview begins on the next page.

The Banjo



He ran parallel with the train as fast as he could, reaching for the handlebar and trying to figure out how he could hop inside, when the freight car was that high. It was above his waist level, and he needed to grab onto something with both his hands and pull himself inside the car, if he didn't want the risk of slipping under the car and losing one or both of his legs in the process.

Freight train hopping was more difficult than he'd expected. He was almost out of breath and the train seemed to move faster, catching speed, while the distance between his extended hand and the handle he was aiming for increased inch by inch. At least that car had its door wide open and seemed empty. If he could only push forward some more, gain up on the damn thing, come close enough to venture a foot up that step, while grabbing onto the handle.

The train squealed and slowed down, as the tracks curved a little, and he pushed himself to run faster. Then he lunged forward with the last drop of energy he had left, and grabbed that handle while his left foot found the wide step underneath the car's open door. His right arm flailed in the air, desperately looking for something to grab, while his body was pushed backward by inertia. Then he felt a strong hand grip his right wrist and yank him up forcefully. He landed face down on the car's floor, while the same strong grip dragged him all the way inside.

"A thing like that could get you killed out here," he heard a man's voice say calmly.

He looked up at the man who'd pulled him inside. He was young, barely twenty years old, if even. His face was grimy, smudged with dust and sweat and dirt, and his clothes were nothing unexpected for a habitual train hopper. His blue eyes were fixed on his Rolex, and he quickly covered it with the sleeve of his windbreaker.

Still panting hard, he pulled himself up to his feet and shook the young man's hand.

"Thanks," he said, "I appreciate it."

"Huh," the young man replied with a grin, dazzling white teeth sparkling against the grime on his face. "You should." Then he laughed, a quick laugh cut short by a few coughs. "You're no train-hopper material, dude," he continued when he was able to catch his breath. "What, you got lost, or somethin'?"

"Nah," he replied, still panting. "Just looking for someone."

The young man whistled. "So, you got a place to live, and nice clothes, and food, but you hop trains for fun?"

"Not for fun, no. I'm looking for my brother," he replied. "Someone said he might have been riding freight trains through these parts of the country."

The young man gave him a good look, head to toe, and he felt he was being evaluated. Maybe the kid was thinking how much money he had on him, or if it was worth killing him. He held his gaze steadily, unafraid, glad to feel the holster of his weapon tight against his ribs.

"Name's Travis," the kid said, extending his dirty hand again.

He took it and shook it firmly. "Jack."

"Got some food on you, Jack?"

He hesitated a split second, then took out two of the chocolate bars he'd stuffed his pockets with before leaving the city.

Travis took one carefully, almost as if he expected him to slap him or punch him or something. Then he whistled again, and slowly unwrapped the bar, savoring the experience. Then he wolfed it down in two good bites, chewed hastily with his mouth open.

"Umm, good stuff."

Jack watched him eat and felt something tug at his heart. This kid was about the same age as Conrad, his younger brother who had vanished almost two months ago. Conrad was going home from school one day, and it was later than usual.

He'd stayed at school longer, working in the lab with three other med-school students, colleagues of his at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, and those three students were the last people to have seen him.

From the lab, he had to cross the campus and walk a few blocks through Streeterville, to the Brown Line train station. From what Jack was able to deduct, it was already dark when Conrad had left the university about seven, his banjo strapped on his back, and a small backpack in his hand. That's the way his colleagues described his appearance that day. He was his normal self, maybe a little tired after a long day studying countless blood samples on the electronic microscope, and he'd told everyone he was hungry.

Then he vanished. When he didn't come home that night, Jack had called the cops, but Conrad was an adult and they weren't going to open an investigation for at least twenty-four hours. His brother's phone was going straight to voicemail and, lacking any other means of investigating, Jack had gone to the university the next morning. He talked with Conrad's colleagues and heard that he had been in a good mood the day before, doing his usual routine after lunch, when he sang a couple of songs in front of the building for his cheering colleagues and passersby. There was no girlfriend who anyone knew about, nor did he seem disturbed by anything. He'd just left the night before, going home, as he normally did.

Only he'd never made it home.

Jack retraced his steps, with the help of a couple of students who'd walked to the Chicago/Franklin Brown Line with Conrad before, and knew which side of the street he liked to walk on, and where he usually stopped for a snack before hitting the train station. He walked the same street, by the ballpark, carefully observing every detail, yet almost missed the white wood shards that littered the street corner, next to some tangled, coiled banjo strings.

When he realized what those were, all the blood rushed to his chest and his heart thumped heavily, as if fighting to escape his chest cavity. He dropped to his knees next to the scattered pieces of wood, and took one in his hand, gently running his fingers over the glossy finish. Then he crouched lower, looking under the nearby trash can and saw a photo, barely showing from underneath some street litter. He grabbed it with two fingers and held his breath. He already knew what it was, an old photo of Conrad and him, when they were much younger, taken the day Jack had bought Conrad the banjo.

That day Jack had taught him how to play it, and Conrad, a talented guitarist and a natural for anything with strings, was playing the theme song from *Doctor Zhivago* before the end of the day. Not perfectly, but it was recognizable, and soon thereafter it was better, the twangy sound of the banjo warm and full under his fingers, sounding more and more like the balalaika in the original theme song. Since that day, Conrad had kept their picture tucked inside his instrument's pot, taped in place with a piece of transparent adhesive tape still clinging to the photo in Jack's hand.

He moaned loudly when he noticed the bloodstain on the photo, and, as if living through a nightmare, he heard one of Conrad's colleagues make a 911 call.

Nothing happened after the cops came; nothing useful anyway. Yeah, they'd confirmed the blood on the photo was his brother's. But that's where the trail went cold, despite countless video cameras scattered in the area, and endless interviews with pedestrians whose normal commute took them along the same street at about the same time of day. Then they speculated Conrad might be dead, a John Doe in some morgue, or an amnesic lost somewhere in the hospital system. But they couldn't find him anywhere, not in any morgue or hospital.

Jack didn't trust the police would do a good enough job. Per their official statement, they didn't have anything to go on. No other evidence, no body, no witnesses. Instead, they had countless crimes happening in Chicago every day, so many they were overwhelmed with work and unable to continue pursuing a case that had gone cold that quickly. But Jack didn't give up. He took the rest of the semester off, leaving his students in the capable hands of a colleague, and took to the

streets, determined to find out what happened to Conrad. He talked to people, and spent day after day at that street corner, with Conrad's photo in his hands, showing it to everyone.

He was about to give up, defeated, although he still dreamed at night that his brother was out there somewhere, waiting for him, needing his help. But he'd already spoken with everyone, and he recognized almost all the people who commuted on that street on a daily basis. He kept going to that street corner though, as he'd done every day for the past month, and showed Conrad's photo to anyone willing to take a look. More and more people threw sympathetic, sad glances his way, while slowly shaking their heads; no, they hadn't seen him. Not then, not since.

Until one day, he found a homeless woman at that street corner, going through the trash can with shaky fingers. She stared at the photo for a long time, then said she must have been mistaken, because the man she'd seen still had his banjo. It was banged up, but the man still played, mostly at night, riding the freight trains. She'd seen him on the Burlington Northern Santa Fe rail, headed south, like many others, fleeing the cold and bitter wind of Chicago winters. Or maybe it was Union Pacific? She didn't remember. Probably he was going to California, but she wasn't sure; the man she'd seen didn't talk. He just played sad songs, she'd added, some reminding her of movies she'd seen, many years ago when she still was somebody who had a life.

Now, looking at that kid munching on the second chocolate bar, he only hoped that someone out there had shared their food with Conrad, wherever he was.

"So, who you're looking for?" Travis asked, wiping his mouth with an off-brown sleeve.

Jack took out Conrad's photo. "This is my brother; his name is Conrad. He disappeared from Chicago, two months ago. Have you seen him?"

Travis smacked his lips and sucked his teeth. "What if he don't wanna get found, huh? Man's got the right to roam free, ya know."

"If I find him and he tells me to get lost, I will," Jack said. "Have you seen him?"

Travis thought for a while, biting his lower lip. "I should be smarter than this and milk you of some cash, but you're an okay guy. No, I haven't seen him, but train beaters barb about some guy playing a banjo on them trains."

"Where? When?" Jack asked, suddenly invigorated.

"On the UP lines, mostly, back and forth from California. It's like the man doesn't wanna get anywhere; just wants to ride. Maybe he's a gypsy, not like you and me. But that's just what I heard tramps talk, that's all. I haven't seen him."

"What the hell is a UP line?" Jack asked, frowning impatiently.

"Union Pacific, man. You gotta learn your trains if you want a future that don't end up in the big house."

Jack scrambled to the car's open door, looking outside as if getting ready to jump off the train.

"Whoa, hold it; you're on a UP train now. Relax."

He still stared into the darkness of the moonless night, letting the wind cool off his burning face. One second his heart swelled with hope, and then next it dropped to the abyss of despair. How was he going to find Conrad among so many trains, going in all directions? He could spend years searching and not find him, passing him in the night without even knowing.

Then he turned toward Travis, a glimmer of renewed hope glinting in his eyes. "Will you help me? I got money. I got more in the bank. I just want to find him."

Travis stared at him for a long moment, then muttered, "Uh-huh, it's not like I got any prior engagements, if you know what I mean," he laughed, then coughed some more. "Get some sleep. We'll need to change trains, hit the California line."

Jack sat on the dirty floor, leaning against the car's rusty wall, and tried to doze off but couldn't. The train was going faster, rattling and chugging rhythmically against the tracks. Then it slowed and pulled into a side line where it stopped with a long, screeching sound of iron against iron.

"Uh-oh," Travis said, jumping to his feet. "Not good. Bulls might come."

"Say what?"

Travis rolled his eyes. "Bulls, as in railroad cops. They catch us here, we're screwed." He leaned outside, checking the surroundings. It was quiet and dark, nothing moved.

"Ah, we're cool," he said, "we're on a branch line. They're keeping us parked here until another train passes us by. We're low priority," he scoffed, "we're unimportant. What else is new?"

Then he curled on the floor, hands folded under his head in a makeshift pillow. "Great time to nap," he muttered, half-asleep. "It's quiet for a bloody change."

He followed suit, but only leaned against the car wall as he'd done before; he couldn't bring himself to put his face on that grungy floor. The long hours caught up with him, because he dozed off without even knowing it. He dreamed of his brother, playing the banjo, and sometimes singing with it, although he always thought his voice didn't reach the skill of his fingers. But whenever music transported him, he added words and vocals to the instrument, and Jack loved the end result, although Conrad didn't always. Then the sound of a chugging train overlapped, almost drowning the banjo chords, and his eyes opened wide. He lunged to the door and held his breath.

There it was, faint, disappearing with the passing train, the sound of a banjo in the darkness. Without thinking, he got off the train and started running to catch the other one, his feet unstable against the loose ballast. He didn't care, and he forged ahead, clinging to the sound of that banjo as if it were a lifeline. Then he heard Travis behind him, coming fast.

"Move it, if you wanna catch this one, it's a dicer! Move your ass!" he yelled, and slapped his back as he passed him. He was younger, taller, faster, all helpful traits with train hopping.

Travis got his footing on a car and pulled himself inside, then yanked his arm and Jack let himself be pulled up, flailing desperately until he landed on the dirty floor of a freight car covered in loose straw that stunk of cow dung. But he didn't care; if he listened hard enough, somewhere under the chugging noise of the train, he could still hear the sound of the banjo.

"How do we get to him?" he asked, as soon as he could catch his breath.

"Ever been on a train car before?" Travis asked. "On top of it?" he added, gesturing with his finger.

He shook his head.

"It ain't that hard, I'll teach you," Travis said. "Let's wait until we clear the branch line. Someone might see us."

Jack looked at the kid with unspoken gratitude. He could've robbed him by now, taken his money, his cards, and his watch, or just killed him altogether. Instead, the kid was helping him, without asking for anything in return.

"What's your story?" Jack asked. "How come you're here?"

Travis smiled crookedly and turned away a little. "It was either this, or the system. My mom died, and they came to get me. My foster family was crooks, really bad people. I couldn't stay."

"How old are you?" Jack asked.

"Almost eighteen," Travis replied. "Soon I'll be able to do something other than ride these trains. Don't know what, and don't know how, but at least they won't chase me no more."

Slack-jawed, Jack found himself at a loss for words. He worked with young people, he was used to seeing them in school, clean and fed and loaded with attitude, texting and laughing and undisciplined. He wasn't prepared to see someone so young battle life on his own like that, starving on a train.

"Let's get going, we're good now," Travis said. "This cannonball's slowed down a little."

He led the way, demonstrating skill and athletic dexterity in getting them to the end of the car, then on top of the next car. From there, knees shaking worse than they'd ever done, Jack crawled on all fours behind the daring, young boy, who walked the train upright, wind in his face, unafraid as only teenagers can be.

As they got closer to the engine, the sound of the banjo grew louder, clearer, and Jack started to recognize some of the songs his brother used to play. Energized, he felt his fear vanish, and came down from the car's rooftop like a pro, imitating all of Travis' moves without hesitation. Then Travis pulled open a panel, and they entered the car where the banjo sounds were coming from.

It was dark, and the open side door only let occasional, distant light come in. The man didn't stop playing when they entered, and didn't look at them. He continued to play, his fingers comfortable and accomplished on the strings. Jack approached him, holding his breath.

"Conrad?" he called, but the man didn't stop playing.

He stared at the man and didn't recognize his brother. It was dark, and the man wore an unkempt beard that could have been growing for about two months. His clothes were so grimy, he couldn't tell if they were the ones Conrad had last been seen wearing. Jack resigned to listen, crouched on the floor next to the man, not daring to breathe. Soon a new day would break, and he'd know.

When the early light broke through the panels of the freight car, the man laid his banjo on the floor and closed his eyes. Jack searched the man's face, looking for a familiar trait, and couldn't be sure.

"Conrad," he called again, quietly. "It's me, Jack," he said, touching the man's arm.

The man kept his eyes closed, as if sleeping.

"May I?" Jack asked, gesturing toward the banjo, but the man didn't say anything and didn't open his eyes.

He took the banjo gently and started playing "Lara's Song," the theme music from *Doctor Zhivago*. In his hand, it sounded weird, almost unrecognizable; he'd never had Conrad's talent, only schooling. Note after note, the music came back to him, and his playing became stronger, more confident, and more recognizable.

When he started playing the unmistakable chorus, the man's eyes opened, and in those green irises Jack recognized his brother. He smiled and continued playing, hoping Conrad would say something, but he remained quiet. He watched Jack play the entire song, his eyes speaking volumes, but his words absent.

Then Jack set the banjo down and took out the photo. Conrad looked at it without a sound, but after a while, he took it and tucked it inside his banjo.

"Yes, yes," Jack exclaimed, "that's us, Conrad. You and me." Whatever had happened to his brother, there was still a part of him left intact, buried deep inside that man, and that part would guide Conrad home, just as it had helped him find another banjo to replace the broken one.

The train screeched and stopped, and Travis quickly pulled the door shut. "Trouble," he said. "Be quiet. We're in a big station; I believe it's Yuma."

"Good," Jack replied, and helped his brother to his feet. "We're going home. Come on, Conrad, let's go."

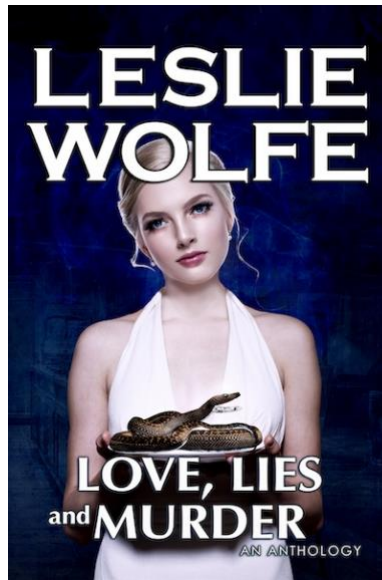
He pulled the car door open and jumped off, then Travis handed him the banjo and helped Conrad down. The kid's eyes were hollow, and his lower lip trembled a little. Jack took his hand to his pocket, and then changed his mind.

"You too, kid."

Travis stood there, in the doorway, staring, stunned.

"Yeah, you're coming home with us. Come on, it will be fun to have another brother. We might even teach you how to play the banjo."

**You know what they mean to you.
You don't know what they're capable of.**



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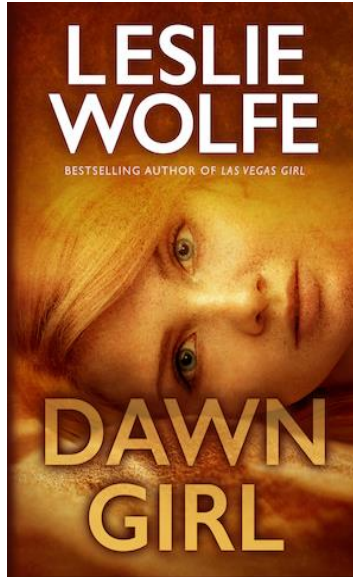
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TESS WINNETT SERIES

FREE PREVIEW: *DAWN GIRL*

**For him, every victim is practice. For FBI agent Tess Winnett,
the next one is a woman she still has time to save.**



Your free preview begins on the next page.

Chapter 1

READY

She made an effort to open her eyes, compelling her heavy eyelids to obey. She swallowed hard, her throat raw and dry, as she urged the wave of nausea to subside. Dizzy and confused, she struggled to gain awareness. Where was she? She felt numb and shaky, unable to move, as if awakening from a deep sleep or a coma. She tried to move her arms, but couldn't. Something kept her immobilized, but didn't hurt her. Or maybe she couldn't feel the pain, not anymore.

Her eyes started to adjust to the darkness, enough to distinguish the man moving quietly in the room. His silhouette flooded her foggy brain with a wave of memories. She gasped, feeling her throat constrict and burning tears rolling down her swollen cheeks.

Her increased awareness sent waves of adrenaline through her body, and she tried desperately to free herself from her restraints. With each useless effort, she panted harder, gasping for air, forcing it into her lungs. Fear put a strong chokehold on her throat and was gaining ground, as she rattled her restraints helplessly, growing weaker with every second. She felt a wave of darkness engulf her, this time the darkness coming from within her weary brain. She fought against that darkness, and battled her own betraying body.

The noises she made got the man's attention.

"I see you're awake. Excellent," the man said, without turning.

She watched him place a syringe on a small, metallic tray. Its handle clinked, followed by another sound, this time the raspy, telling sound of a file cutting through the neck of a glass vial. Then a pop when the man opened the vial. He grabbed the syringe and loaded the liquid from the vial, then carefully removed any air, pushing the piston until several droplets of fluid came out.

Dizziness overtook her, and she closed her eyes for a second.

"Shit," the man mumbled, then opened a drawer and went through it in a hurry.

She felt the needle poke deeply in her thigh, like it was happening to another person. She felt it, but distantly. She perceived a subdued burning sensation where he pushed the fluid into her muscle, then that went away when he pulled the needle out. She closed her weary eyes again, listless against her restraints.

The man cracked open ammonia salts under her nose, and she bounced back into reality at the speed of a lightning strike, aware, alert, and angry. For a second, she fought to free herself, but froze when her eyes focused on the man in front of her.

He held a scalpel, close to her face. In itself, the small, shiny, silver object was capable of bringing formidable healing, as well as immense pain. The difference stood in the hand wielding it. She knew no healing was coming her way; only pain.

"No, no, please..." she pleaded, tears falling freely from her puffy eyes, burning as they rolled down her cheeks. "Please, no. I... I'll do anything."

"I am ready," the man said. He seemed calm, composed, and dispassionate. "Are you ready?"

"No, no, please..." she whimpered.

"Yeah," he said softly, almost whispering, inches away from her face. "Please say no to me. I love that."

She fell quiet, scared out of her mind. This time was different. He was different.

Chapter 2

DAWN

"What if we get caught?" the girl whispered, trailing behind the boy.

They walked briskly on the small residential street engulfed in darkness, keeping to the middle of the road. There were no sidewalks. High-end homes lined up both sides, most likely equipped with sensor floodlights they didn't want to trip.

She tugged at his hand, but he didn't stop. "You never care about these things, Carl, but I do. If we get caught, I'll be grounded, like, forever!"

The boy kept going, his hand firmly clasping hers.

"Carl!" she raised the pitch in her whisper, letting her anxiety show more.

He stopped and turned, facing her. He frowned a little, seeing her anguish, but then smiled and caressed a loose strand of hair rebelling from under her sweatshirt's hood.

"There's no one, Kris. No one's going to see us. See? No lights are on, nothing. Everyone's asleep. Zee-zee-zee. It's five in the morning."

"I know," she sighed, "but—"

He kissed her pouted lips gently, a little boyish hesitation and awkwardness in his move.

"We'll be okay, I promise," he said, then grabbed her hand again. "We're almost there, come on. You'll love it."

A few more steps and the small street ended into the paved parking lot of what was going to be a future development of sorts, maybe a shopping center. From there, they had to cross Highway 1. They crouched down near the road, waiting for the light traffic to be completely clear. They couldn't afford to be seen, not even from a distance. At the right moment, they crossed the highway, hand in hand, and cut across the field toward the beach. Crossing Ocean Drive was next, then cutting through a few yards of shrubbery and trees to get to the sandy beach.

"Jeez, Carl," Kris protested, stopping in her tracks at the tree line. "Who knows what creatures live here? There could be snakes. Lizards. Gah..."

"There could be, but there aren't," Carl replied, seemingly sure of himself. "Trust me."

She held her breath and lowered her head, then clasped Carl's hand tightly. He turned on the flashlight on his phone and led the way without hesitation. A few seconds later, they reached the beach, and Kris let out a tense, long breath.

The light of the waning gibbous Moon reflected against the calm ocean waves, sending flickers of light everywhere and covering the beach in silver shadows. They were completely alone. The only creatures keeping them company were pale crabs that took bellicose stances when Kris and Carl stomped the sand around them, giggling.

"See? Told you," Carl said, "no one's going to see us out here. We can do whatever we want," he said playfully.

Kris squealed and ran toward the lifeguard tower. In daylight, the tower showed its bright yellow and orange, a splash of joyful colors on the tourist-abundant stretch of sand. At night, the structure appeared gloomy, resembling a menacing creature on tall, insect-like legs.

"It looks like one of those aliens from *War of the Worlds*," Kris said, then promptly started running, waving her arms up in the air, pretending she was flying.

Carl chased Kris, laughing and squealing with her, running in circles around the tower, and weaving footstep patterns between the solid wood posts.

"Phew," Carl said, stopping his chase and taking some distance. "Stinks of piss. Let's get out of here."

"Eww..." Kris replied, following him. "Why do men do that?"

"What? Pee?"

"Everybody pees, genius," Kris replied, still panting from the run. "Peeing where it stinks and bothers people, that's what I meant. Women pee in the bushes. Men should pee in the water if they don't like the bushes."

"Really? That's gross."

"Where do you think fish pee? At least the waves would wash away the pee and it wouldn't stink, to mess up our sunrise."

"Fish pee?" Carl pushed back, incredulous.

"They don't?"

They walked holding hands, putting a few more yards of distance between them and the tower. Then Carl suddenly dropped to the ground, dragging Kris with him. She squealed again, and laughed.

"Let's sit here," he said. "The show's on. Let's see if we get a good one."

The sky was starting to light up toward the east. They watched silently, hand in hand, as the dark shades of blue and gray gradually turned ablaze, mixing in dark reds and orange hues. The horizon line was clear, a sharp edge marking where ocean met sky.

"It's going to be great," Carl said. "No clouds, no haze." He kissed her lips quickly, and then turned his attention back to the celestial light show.

"You're a strange boy, Carl."

"Yeah? Why?"

"Other boys would have asked me to sneak out in the middle of the night to make out. With you, it's a sunrise, period. Should I worry?"

Carl smiled widely, then tickled Kris until she begged for mercy between gasps of air and bouts of uncontrollable laughter.

"Stop! Stop it already. I can't breathe!"

"I might want to get on with that make out, you know," Carl laughed.

"Nah, it's getting light. Someone could see us," Kris pushed back, unconvinced. "Someone could come by."

Carl shrugged and turned his attention to the sunrise. He grabbed her hand and held it gently, playing with her fingers.

Almost half the sky had caught fire, challenging the moonlight, and obliterating most of its reflected light against the blissful, serene, ocean waves.

Carl checked the time on his phone.

"A few more minutes until it comes out," he announced, sounding serious, as if predicting a rare and significant event. He took a few pictures of the sky, then suddenly snapped one of Kris.

"Ah... no," she reacted, "give that to me right this second, Carl." She grabbed the phone from his hand and looked at the picture he'd taken. The image showed a young girl with messy, golden brown hair, partially covering a scrunched, tense face with deep ridges on her brow. The snapshot revealed Kris biting her index fingernail, totally absorbed by the process, slobbering her sleeve cuff while at it.

"God-awful," she reacted, then pressed the option to delete.

"No!" Carl said, pulling the phone from her hands. "I like it!"

"There's nothing to like. There," she said, relaxing a little, and arranging her hair briefly with her long, thin fingers. "I'll pose for you." She smiled.

Carl took a few pictures. She looked gorgeous, against the backdrop of fiery skies, pink sand, and turquoise water. He took image after image, as she got into it and made faces, danced, and swirled in front of him, laughing.

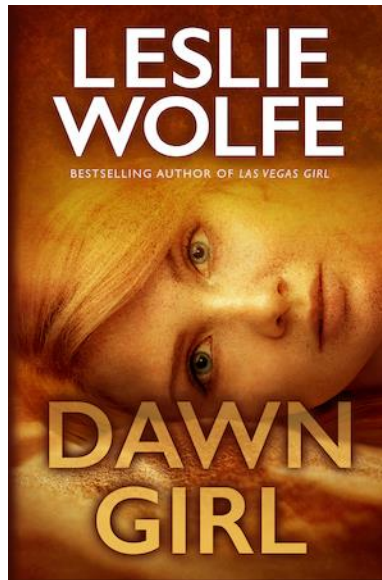
The sun's first piercing ray shot out of the sea, just as Kris shrieked, a blood-curdling scream that got Carl to spring to his feet and run to her.

Speechless, Kris pointed a trembling hand at the lifeguard tower. Underneath the tower, between the wooden posts supporting the elevated structure, was the naked body of a young woman. She appeared to be kneeling, as if praying to the rising sun. Her hands were clasped together in front of her in the universal, unmistakable gesture of silent pleading.

Holding their breaths, they approached carefully, curious and yet afraid of what they stood to discover. The growing light of the new morning revealed more details with each step they took. Her back, covered in bruises and small cuts, stained in smudged, dried blood. Her blue eyes wide open, glossed over. A few specks of sand clung to her long, dark lashes. Her beautiful face, immobile, covered in sparkling flecks of sand. Her lips slightly parted, as if to let a last breath escape. Long, blonde hair, wet from sea spray, almost managed to disguise the deep cut in her neck.

No blood dripped from the wound; her heart had stopped beating for some time. Yet she held upright, unyielding in her praying posture, her knees stuck firmly in the sand covered in their footprints, and her eyes fixed on the beautiful sunrise they came to enjoy.

**The girl on the beach wasn't his first victim.
And he's already looking for his next.**



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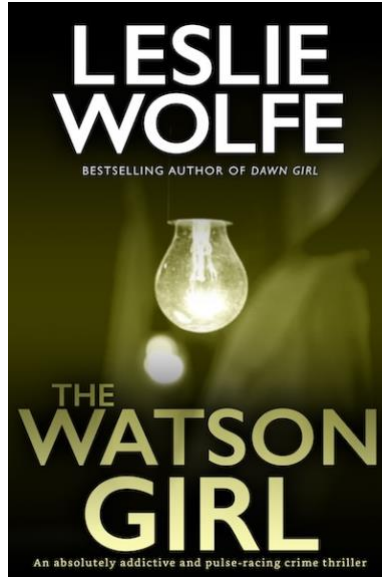
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FREE PREVIEW: *THE WATSON GIRL*

**She's young. Beautiful.
And a serial killer's loose end.**



Your free preview begins on the next page.

Cold-Blooded Beginning

Fifteen Years Ago

He knocked on the door with the barrel of his gun, then screwed on a silencer while waiting for someone to welcome him in. He checked the surroundings one more time. In the heavy dusk, shadows were long, and sounds were too muted to disturb the suburban peacefulness. A dog barked in the neighborhood somewhere, and the distant rumbling of remote highway traffic were so distant he could barely register them.

The two-story house had warmly illuminated windows on both floors, with white sheers that made the soft lights shimmer, and gave the massive, Colonial Revival home a fairy-tale look. The distant sound of a cartoon made it all the way to the dimly lit porch. He recognized the guttural voice of Daffy Duck.

Only one car was parked on the wide, three-car garage driveway, the silver minivan Rachel Watson liked to use while performing the functions of modern-day motherhood, with one or more of her three children loaded in the back seats. Allen Watson's car was nowhere in sight. But Watson always garaged his Benz, careful not to get a speck of dust on the custom paint that must have set him back a small fortune.

Even if he couldn't see his car, he knew Watson was home.

He knew it because he never left anything to chance. He'd waited patiently in his own car, parked discreetly around the corner and almost entirely hidden by the generous foliage of a thriving palmetto. He kept his eyes glued to the street, watching, stalking his target. Now he was ready.

He heard footsteps approaching the door, and he tightened the grip on his gun, hidden behind his back. The door swung open, and Allen Watson stepped quietly to the side, a tentative smile on his lips, and a hint of an intrigued frown creasing his brow. He waved him in, and he obliged, his gun firmly in hand. Watson closed the door, then looked at him inquisitively.

"What are y—" Watson's question faltered mid-word, as he registered the weapon in the now-visible hand and froze, taking wavering steps back until he hit the wall behind him. Watson's eyes, rounded in surprise, drilled into his, while words failed to come out of his gaping mouth.

"No... No..." he finally managed in a hoarse voice, weak and choked.

He hesitated a little and took his time to raise the gun higher, aiming for Allen's chest from only a few feet away. Then the sound of tiny feet pattering on the hardwood upstairs preceded a high-pitched voice, resounding loudly above their heads.

"Who is it, Daddy?"

He looked up briefly and saw two of Watson's kids staring down at them, dressed in colorful pajamas, their hands gripping the balusters supporting the balcony banister above the main living room.

"No..." Watson whispered. "Please..."

He couldn't delay anymore.

He pulled the trigger twice, in rapid sequence, and Watson fell to the ground in a motionless heap as the terrified shrieks of the two children pierced his ears. He lunged up the stairs, climbing three steps at a time, then ran toward the

bedrooms. Within a few leaps, he caught up with the two screaming children. Then silence engulfed the home once more, as he searched the house room by room, looking for the third kid.

The light was off in the last bedroom, and the pajama-clad offspring was lying on her belly, arms folded under her chin, facing away from the door and watching cartoons on a tablet. The sound coming from the small device was unexpectedly loud, shrieking and grating like only cartoons can sound. Why she couldn't watch them on TV with the other two was of no concern to him. The bluish light emanating from the tiny screen contoured the kid's head like a surreal halo, drawing a bullseye for his weapon.

Soon he was finished upstairs and ready to go back downstairs, when a knock on the front door made him freeze mid-step. He pulled back, closer to the wall, and held his breath. Worried, he checked the windows next to the main door, only partly covered by curtains, then he shifted his gaze to Watson's body, collapsed just a few feet from that door.

The visitor might see his body through the open curtains. All he had to do is want to peek inside, and lean to the side a little. *Damn!*

The knocks repeated, a little louder and longer this time, followed by the doorbell chime. Then he heard a man's voice, suppressed by the massive door.

"Hey, it's Ben from next door. I have your cordless drill." The man stopped talking, knocked a couple of times more, then continued, "I'll leave it here, on the porch. Thanks, buddy!"

The unwanted visitor went away, his footsteps loud and heavy, but almost indistinguishable against the animal voices on TV. He breathed slowly, calm, calculated.

A moment later, he made his way through the sprawling first floor cautiously, looking for Rachel Watson. He listened intently, and somewhere beyond Daffy Duck's nasal voice, he heard clattering noises coming from the distant kitchen. A hint of a smile stretched the corner of his lip and curled it upward as he headed there with silent, feline steps.

He didn't know how long everything had taken, but it was time to go. The sound of sirens in the distance brought an urgency to his departure, and he left the home quietly and hurriedly, after checking the undisturbed, peaceful surroundings once more, paying thorough attention to every detail. The home across the street had its main floor flooded with light, with all the curtains pulled aside, allowing the yellowish shimmer to overflow into the street. The family there was on display while they went about their business. He frowned. People should be more concerned with their privacy. With people like him.

He decided to sneak behind Rachel's minivan and screen the surroundings once more before heading back to his car. He crouched a little, and within a few steps, he was hidden behind the minivan, careful not to touch it. He looked at nearby homes and listened for any sounds that didn't belong. His frown deepened with the nearing sound of police sirens, but then he looked up and froze, feeling his blood turn to ice.

There was a decal on the back window of the minivan, the stick-figure caricatures of a happy family, showing a man, a woman, a boy, two girls, and a cat, all exhibiting anatomically impossible smiles.

A sickening stab of uneasiness pierced his gut. The two kids he'd downed on the hallway were Allen's oldest two, a boy and a girl. Now, staring at that ominous decal, he realized he'd barely given the third kid a decent look before he'd pulled the trigger and returned downstairs. The room was dark. The kid's chin rested on her folded arms, near the floor. Her hair... he didn't remember. Allen's youngest had long, blonde curls. But now, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't remember seeing the kid's hair. Just the stupid blue pajama with the *Cars* themed design. The bluish halo. No curls.

That was a big problem. Or was it?

He crouched closer to the ground and groaned, rubbing the deepening frown on his forehead furiously, as if that friction would solve any problems or hold any answers.

"Think, think!" he whispered angrily, staring at the offending decal.

It had to have been Allen's youngest. Everyone else was accounted for, including the cat, whose threatening, phosphorescent eyes had followed his moves from the top of the kitchen cupboard as he'd dealt with Rachel. He'd let the cat live; it wasn't worth a bullet, because cats can't talk.

But this? This made no sense, he kept thinking, his eyes still glued to the decal. It clearly depicted two girls about the same age, because the respective stick figures were almost identical, down to the double pigtails with bows. The boy figure was a little larger than the girls' sizes. What was Rachel doing? Replacing the damn stickers every year? Probably.

Then, what was going on there?

Something was terribly wrong. He could feel it.

He listened some more, trying to pinpoint the location of the approaching police cars. Had someone called the police on him? He was sure the gunshots had been quiet enough, but maybe someone had seen the flickers of light through the windows. Maybe the neighbor returning the cordless drill had seen Watson's body through the open curtains. Maybe.

But perhaps there was still time to set things right.

He stared for a second at the back of his hand, slightly shaky in the dim light of dusk, then he decided to do what he had to do. He sneaked back inside the house, closing the door gently, quietly. He went straight upstairs and into the last bedroom. Then he started searching the house, moving quickly, room by room, gun held tightly in his sweating hand.

Back to Work

Present Day

Special Agent Tess Winnett leaned forward, closer to the mirror, studying the circles under her eyes with a critical, disappointed glare. Unforgiving and dark-hued, the subject of her disdain circled her eyes generously, tinting her eyelids and making the blue of her irises appear hollow and lifeless. She looked pale and her face drawn, her skin taut and almost translucent against the high cheekbones.

Makeup wouldn't hurt. Too bad she wasn't into that stuff.

It was her first day back at the office, after taking three endless weeks to recuperate after injuries suffered in the line of duty. A dislocated shoulder. Torn ligaments. A couple of broken ribs that still stabbed her side with every breath. But she was back, unwilling to spend another single day bored out of her mind, counting the hours, and pacing the floor between the 300 channels of crap television and the stack of novels she just didn't have the patience for.

It wasn't the physical injuries she thought to be the source of her pallor; it was the monsters that lurked inside, in the deepest recesses of her weary brain. The memories she wanted gone forever, but which refused to fade, the raw memories of that one terrible night, more than ten years before, when her life took an abrupt turn for the nightmare. A night when she was the powerless victim fighting for her life, not the fearless FBI agent she had become.

Those wounds were still painful, still making her go through life in a constant state of hypervigilance, although her assailant couldn't hurt her anymore. Those wounds hurt much worse than a bunch of cracked ribs could ever hurt.

Focused on her physical fitness and most likely oblivious to the rest of her baggage, her doctor had prescribed six weeks off, with the last two spent in daily physiotherapy sessions, strength building, and mobility exercises. She had pleaded and threatened, but he'd already spoken with her supervisor, FBI Special Agent in Charge, or SAC Pearson, as she liked to shorten his title, advising him she couldn't return to duty for medical reasons. When she'd heard that, she'd flipped, turning on the doctor with the full force of her irrational anger, and accused him of everything she could think of, from violating patient confidentiality to simply being an inconsiderate, selfish, cover-your-ass kind of jerk, the type who shouldn't be allowed to wear a doctor's badge at any time in his life.

That didn't get her too far. The doctor scoffed hearing about patient confidentiality violations, and reassured her he'd only shared the six weeks' rest order with SAC Pearson, and none of the details. Yet, miraculously, later that same day, he agreed to let her off with three weeks, if she were to perform only light duties, as in sitting behind a desk and doing paperwork.

Hell, no.

But at least she could set foot inside the federal building again; the FBI had restored her credentials. The rest was up to her, right? A crooked smile appeared shyly in that bathroom mirror, then extended to a full-blown grin, engulfing her eyes and making her dark circles almost disappear.

She was back. That was all that mattered.

"Welcome back, Winnett," a woman greeted in passing, then slammed the door of the last stall behind her.

Tess jumped out of her skin. She hadn't heard the woman come into the bathroom; she just heard the voice behind her, too damn close when she thought she was alone and safe. Her heart raced and her hands shook a little. She focused for a few seconds on her breathing. In. Out. In. Out.

"Thanks," she finally replied, a little hesitant, then let out a long breath, steadying herself some more.

Was she really ready to be back? She'd better be. *Wake the hell up, Winnett.*

She stared at herself a little more, building confidence for the meeting with SAC Pearson. She'd come in that morning to find a sticky note on her desk, with a quick message, "See me first thing." The message was signed by Pearson, his scribbled name evolving from block letters to a pseudo-signature, overall illegible. But she knew who it was, anyway.

SAC Pearson. Ugh. Her boss, who'd put her on notice a few times already, and who wasn't going to take any more crap from her. A man who'd completed twelve years of service as a profiler with an enviable case record, a case record only she exceeded. He scored 98 percent; she scored 100 percent. Tiny difference, great meaning. She was sure the two percentage points were front and central on her boss's mind, at least some of the time. But, most of all, Pearson was an experienced profiler who would take one look at those black circles under her eyes and send her packing, out for three more weeks of going nuts in her apartment.

She pursed her lips, considering her options, then cleared her throat quietly.

"Hey, Colston, would you happen to have any makeup on you?"

"Uh-huh, here you go," the woman replied, offering her purse under the stall door. "Knock yourself out."

"Thanks," she replied.

She took the offered purse and put it on the counter, but hesitated a little before unzipping it. She struggled invading someone's privacy like that, despite being invited to. How different other people were. How... unsuspicious, and trusting, and open. Calm. Caring. Unassuming. As she unzipped the purse, she felt a pang of envy. She just wished she could be like that, like everyone else out there who shared, trusted, and let their guard down every now and then.

Colston's purse held a treasure trove of makeup items, and she stared, puzzled at the pile of little objects, unsure what to use.

"This is what you'll need," Colston said, picking up a concealer from the pile. Her hand dripped water into the open purse, but she didn't seem to care.

Tess's breath caught, but she swallowed and managed to thank her. How come she hadn't heard Colston flush, or seen her wash her hands? She'd definitely washed them, seeing as she was now drying them thoroughly with a paper towel. What kind of field agent lets people creep up on them like that? She needed to get a grip.

She hid her frown and applied the concealer quickly, with her finger, and smiled with gratitude.

"I'd also put on a little bit of blush. You're too pale. Here, let me," Colston offered, and quickly touched up Tess's cheeks with a thick brush, bringing color to her alabaster skin. "Perfect, there you go. Much better."

They walked out of the restroom together, but then parted ways, as Tess swung by her desk to grab her notepad before heading toward Pearson's office.

There he was, sitting at his desk, with his completely bald head lowered, as he read through the pages of a dossier, flipping through it impatiently and pressing his lips together, a definite sign of annoyance. He'd taken off his jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves, which meant he was going to be in the office for at least a few hours.

She knocked on the doorjamb and waited silently. He waved her in, without lifting his eyes from the pile of paperwork. She stood and let her eyes wander on the few items adorning Pearson's office. Behind him, taking a shelf in a half-empty bookcase, a cluster of three framed pictures showcased Pearson's family. His wife, a little overweight, was a warm, affectionate woman who held his hand with confidence in a family picture that included their two children.

The other two images were college graduation portraits of his sons, the professional type that higher-end colleges offer on the day of the ceremony. Both boys had their mother's kindness in their eyes; they were younger, milder versions of their father. She wondered if the harshness in Pearson's features was genetic or acquired. She studied the two vertical

ridges that flanked his puckered lips, the permanent frown lines on his tall forehead, and the tension in his jaw. Probably his nature.

Finally, Pearson looked up and frowned a little deeper.

"Sit down, Winnett."

She obliged.

"So, you're back. Early."

"Sir."

"Welcome back. Are you up for it?"

"Thank you, sir. Yes, I am."

He rubbed his forehead and pinched the bridge of his nose where glasses had left reddish marks on his skin. Then he leaned back in his chair, deep in his thoughts.

"I have a few things for you," he finally said. The tone of his voice didn't promise anything good.

She nodded, but didn't say a word. She shifted in her chair nervously, but then willed herself to sit still.

"First, there's the issue of your latest case. There will be a formal review of that entire development. It's scheduled to start in two weeks."

"A formal review? May I ask why?"

"My question is, do you really need to ask why?" He drilled his eyes into hers until she lowered her gaze and stared at the floor. "Yes, you've closed the case. Yes, you added one more notable notch to your belt. But the review committee has become aware that some of your stats are not that good."

"Which stats?" She knew she had an impeccable case record, so it couldn't be that. Then what?

"Your kill ratio's higher than everyone else's. You have been cleared in every shooting, but there was something about your last case that got their attention."

"Sir, I—"

"Let me finish, Winnett. I suggest you let the committee finalize the formal review and make their recommendations. Like I said, you've already been cleared in each shooting, so you're fine."

She waited for a full second before speaking.

"Sir, with all due respect, I'm not fine. A formal review can be a career killer."

He stood abruptly, started pacing the floor, and buried his hands deep inside his pockets.

"There's nothing you *can* do, Winnett. There's nothing anyone can do. Let things happen, and don't rock the boat. But it wouldn't hurt you to arrest a suspect for a change, instead of shooting them."

She stared quietly at the floor, feeling the sting of frustration.

"Understood," she eventually replied, managing to refrain from disputing everything that was wrong with the system.

Pearson sat back at his desk, and his frown deepened.

"Second item on the list is definitely not helping you with the upcoming review." He cleared his throat, then continued. "I would like you to work with a partner for a while."

"Oh?" she said, looking at Pearson with poorly hidden annoyance. She didn't want a partner, but she knew it was bound to happen, sooner or later. Pearson had been clear about it. But still. "We're not required to have permanent partners in the FBI, so I was—"

"Don't quote statute on me, Winnett. I still get to decide who does what here, and with whom. That clear?"

"Yes, sir. But that means you actually want me supervised, rather than—"

"Winnett!"

She froze. She didn't want to push him too far, but she didn't feel she deserved it either. Where could she draw that line, between taking direction from her boss and standing up for herself?

"For now, there isn't anyone available to work with you," he said, then glared at her as her relief must have been too obvious. "But I want you to consider having a partner as a next step in your career. It will help you a great deal, and it will help with people's perceptions about you."

"What perceptions?"

"That you're not a team player. That you don't care about how others feel, or about their results; just about getting case after case solved, as fast and as good as possible."

"Umm... and what's wrong with solving cases fast? That's my job!"

"The perception is that you don't care who you hurt in the process. You have to fix this perception, Winnett. You have to, and I'm not kidding. Regain the trust and respect of your colleagues, and make sure you can demonstrate you belong on this team. There's no room for solo artists here, Winnett, regardless of your case record. We're all part of a team, and we have to act like it."

She bit her lip. How the hell was she supposed to do that? Interactions like she'd just had in the bathroom with Colston were so rare, they only proved the rule by being the exceptions. They were enjoyable though, she had to admit.

"I worked just fine with Mike. I think I demonstrated that. But Mike's gone. He's dead."

"Listen, Winnett," Pearson continued, loosening his tie with a frustrated sigh. "No matter what you, or I, or anyone else would be willing to do, Mike's not coming back. No matter how much you blame yourself, or how much you decide you can't work with anyone else. It's time to move on, Winnett. Don't let it destroy your career." He fell silent for a second, letting his loaded gaze say the words he didn't speak.

She lowered her eyes again, not sure what more she could say.

"Then, there's the problem with the governor," he continued.

Tess sighed quietly and refrained from visibly rolling her eyes.

"He called with your name, twice, while you were working your latest case. Twice!"

"He gets calls from all the ritzy people I happen to bother during my—"

"Winnett!" he snapped. "Don't you think I know how the wheels turn? But you have to be smart about it! At some point, he could call and ask me formally to make you another governor's problem! No other agent in this branch has your kind of track record. They all solve cases, maybe not with your record of achievement, but definitely with less noise and disruption. With fewer complaints." He paused for a little while, as if trying to figure out what to do with her. "Be smart about these things, Winnett," he eventually continued. "Don't allow your behavior to cast a shadow on the reputation of this team, internal and external. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly," Tess managed. She was going to have to figure out how to get people to like her, to accept her. She had to change, and that was never easy. She needed to soften around the edges a little, but somehow still be able to do her job, maintain her edge. She had no idea how to do that, or where to start.

"I'm giving you an assignment," Pearson moved on.

She lit up, feeling anticipation and excitement elevate her gloomy spirits.

"There's a serial killer on death row at Raiford; Kenneth Garza."

"Ah, The Family Man," she added.

"Yes, The Family Man," Pearson confirmed. "His execution date is set and it's approaching. It's in three weeks or so, on the twenty-second. I'd like you to study his file, and go there for an interview. Make sure everything rings right, that we've

crossed every T and dotted every I, and we're not going to have any surprises in his final hour. Are you familiar with his case?"

"No, just with his reputation. It was before my time."

"Jeez, Winnett, you're something else. Before Winnett and After Winnett, is that it? How arrogant can you get?" The irritation in Pearson's voice was discernible, almost physical in the unusually elevated pitch.

"No, sir. I meant I am familiar with all the serial killer cases closed during my tenure."

"Of course, you are," he scoffed, "because you closed them!"

"No, sir. I meant I'm familiar with all serial killer cases closed by the Bureau, regardless of who closed them, since the day I joined the FBI ten years ago."

Pearson's jaw dropped a little, but then he regained his composure, apparently unperturbed. She felt the urge to smile, but knew better and didn't.

He continued, "Okay, so get familiar with Garza's file, and go have a chat with him before he fries."

"Yes, sir," she said and stood, ready to leave.

He pointed at a stack of boxes, already loaded on a dolly and parked in the corner of his office, near the door. She raised her eyebrows.

"Garza's file," he said, then resumed reading the documents he was studying before her arrival.

She grabbed the dolly's handle and winced. Sharp pain stabbed her side. She shifted the handle to her other hand and managed to roll out of there without hitting the walls or denting any furniture.

Relieved, she focused on pulling the dolly awkwardly on the thick carpet, looking behind her at each step to make sure the stack of boxes still held on. Then she ran into someone, head-butting into a muscular chest, white shirt clad, and boasting a colorful necktie. She gasped, as the impact sent a wave of pain into her shoulder.

"What the hell, Winnett, watch it," Donovan said. He was the best and brightest on their analysis team. An analyst, not a field agent, despite his numerous applications, and his solid, unwavering enthusiasm.

She tightened her lips and swallowed a long, detailed curse.

"Sorry, Donovan. Are you okay?" A hint of sarcasm seeped in her voice. He shook his head.

"And to think you wield a weapon for a living. Huh... I wonder who approved that," he replied with biting humor.

That stung, and, within that angry split second, she felt the urge to tell Donovan it was the same people who'd denied him *his* application to become a field agent. But then she remembered her commitment to herself and Pearson and swallowed that angry comeback.

"Um, once again, sorry," she said softly, then turned to leave.

Donovan's face dropped, seemingly unsure how to react. The Tess Winnett he and everyone else knew would have ripped him to shreds for far less. He stood there, riveted in place, watching her wince while she struggled to pull the loaded dolly.

"By the way, in case you want to know: you push the dolly; you don't pull it with loads that high," he offered, then turned away and resumed his course toward the elevators.

Gah... She closed her eyes for a second, trying to envision a space where she could let the angry cuss words she felt like shouting at Donovan's broad shoulders actually be articulated, to let off some of the pressure she felt. No such place.

She turned the dolly around and started pushing it, suddenly seeing how easy it was to make it across the wide floor to her desk. She smiled, almost forgetting about the review committee and the weight of the thousands of pages detailing the many gruesome murders perpetrated by The Family Man.

She was back. That was all that mattered.

A Letter

The recipe for pasta primavera can be tricky for those who don't spend enough time in the kitchen. Laura Watson didn't aim for culinary perfection; she just wanted a quick meal for Adrian and herself, something to be a little different from the monotonous sandwiches grilled in the toaster oven, or the long list of microwave dinners gulped down in front of the TV.

Typical youngsters, the two of them shared an apartment that reflected Laura's financial well-being, but also her chosen profession. At least twice the usual number of lamps and light fixtures adorned the place, every single one of them bearing the WatWel Lighting logo.

A particular wall sconce in the shape of a stylized seashell held special meanings. Laura had designed that lamp when she was fifteen, and her adoptive father/business partner had built the prototype. A year later, that particular model sold like hot cakes to hotels and resorts on both coasts. On her apartment wall, seemingly out of place, the prototype wall sconce was rarely turned off. Looking at the lamp's gentle light reminded Laura of her family legacy, the company her biological father had started with her now adoptive parent, Bradley Welsh.

Brad held a special place in her heart; he'd been a terrific adoptive father, who'd broken all the rules and had not placed her legacy in a trust; rather, he'd involved her in decisions at a very young age; he'd been there to kindle her interest for the light fixture manufacturing processes, teaching her how to lead, letting her sit in high-level meetings and big-dollar client negotiations. Together, the two of them had become media darlings.

There were pictures of them on the apartment walls, the oldest going back to when she was seven or eight years old, and he took her to the inauguration of the new manufacturing facility. She'd cut the ribbon herself, struggling with the huge scissors, but knowing she had him by her side. On a special place above the fireplace was the only photo of her long-lost family, five happy faces that shared one of many moments of closeness together, hiking in Yosemite. On the opposing wall, there was another cherished photo, of her father and Brad Welsh, taken the day they'd incorporated WatWel Lighting.

That's why, following the family tradition, she'd chosen a degree in electrical engineering, a difficult specialty that suited her future role with WatWel Lighting. She'd raced through the curriculum in a hurry, and she was bound to finish her degree early by several months. Yet following a simple pasta recipe posed issues for her.

Laura read the instructions again, and groaned. The recipe was marked "easy" or "beginner" on two of the most popular online recipe sites, yet she didn't have the necessary patience to execute all the things that needed to be done to achieve the colorful bowl of pasta. She let out another frustrated groan and decided to cut corners, the corners she had the most issues with. Zucchini? She didn't have those and wasn't about to leave the house and go shopping. Adrian wouldn't know the difference anyway. The surviving red pepper in her fridge had endured in there for a long time and was mushy in places; definitely a candidate for the trash can, not her glamorous Saturday lunch.

She checked the time, throwing a worried glance at the digital clock hanging on the dining room wall, and decided not to waste any more of it. A little nervous, she ran her fingers through her long, sleek hair, tugging a few rebel strands behind her ears. Adrian's workshop was about to be over, and she wanted to be done with the meal. Okay... she was going to cut a lot of corners.

She drained the pasta, mumbling something unintelligible as a few rogue farfalle made it past the drainer and plunged down into the garbage disposal. She put the drained pasta into a large pan just as the phone chimed. She shot a quick glance at the phone's screen and saw a message from Adrian, saying, "On my way, be there in ten." Then she opened a small pack

of frozen, mixed vegetables, and poured it on top of the pasta. She added olive oil without measuring it and turned on the stove.

Laura loved gizmos of any kind; maybe a trait inherited from her father's technical brain, or an acquired preference, she wasn't sure. Her apartment held an entire collection of small appliances and electrical tools of various kinds. Her best friend and adoptive sister, Amanda, teased her by saying that everything in her apartment had to have a power cord, or it didn't belong. For the task that most people endure without thinking, the part of the recipe that reads, "Cook on the stove, stirring constantly," she had a new device, an automated stirring machine that clamped on top of the pan and did the stirring for her. At least that helped a little.

She cleaned the table quickly and set the placemats, then plugged in a small electric grater and threw in a chunk of fresh Parmesan cheese. She was about done, when she heard the key in the lock.

"Hey, baby," Adrian greeted her with a smile, then pecked her on the lips. "Mmm... smells good in here!"

Boo, their tabby cat, circled his legs with his tail straight up, like a banner.

She chuckled lightly. All the cut corners were going to remain her secret; Adrian wouldn't know. He was an orphan, a kid who'd lost his parents to drugs and various prison systems, then grew up in street gangs and juvenile crime until someone took him in. A stranger... a neighbor who was willing to put up with the troubled teenager and had brought him to his senses before he could completely ruin his life.

They had that in common, the two of them, losing their parents early in their lives. Laura had the better deal though. She hadn't seen one day of street living, of poverty, or of foster care at the hands of the state. Her father's business partner and his family had been there from the moment her parents were so tragically taken from her, when she was only five years old. She had been the fortunate one in that respect, having grown up with the love and care of a family that left nothing to be desired.

Adrian, on the other hand, still had that ruggedness, that fierceness of the street survivor, of the boy who was forced to grow up overnight and fend for himself, when others his age still wrote letters to Santa. His heart was in a good place, but he could become overbearing and too protective at times, his fears and inner monsters fed by who knows what nightmarish experiences he had lived through. It drove her crazy.

That's why Laura averted her eyes as much as she could that day; she couldn't bring herself to tell him she was pregnant. She'd confirmed it earlier that morning. She'd waited for him to leave for school, then rushed to the corner drugstore to get a test, and came running back home. She'd only been a few days late, and she still had hope. She was taking her birth control pills every morning like clockwork, so she expected to see one line on the test, the one line that would put her fears at ease.

She saw two. She didn't believe it; couldn't. She waited for another hour, then ran another test. The same two lines that confirmed the unwanted truth: she was pregnant. In shock, she rushed to her laptop and typed exactly what she was feeling. She searched, "On birth control and pregnant. How is it possible?" Then added several question marks after her search phrase, not for any rational reason; only so she could refrain from breaking things.

The search results returned various possible causes that didn't quite match her case, but the fourth one on the list sent shivers down her spine. Apparently, if you take antibiotics when you're on the pill, it could reduce the pill's effectiveness. Then she recalled the strep throat she'd had three or four weeks earlier, and the full regimen of antibiotics she had taken. Someone should have told her!

Swallowing her tears, she weighed her options. She wasn't ready to start a family, to get busy with diapers and everything. She wanted to get her bachelor's degree, followed by her master's, then join her adoptive father at the helm of WatWel Lighting and open the new line of digital, LED fixtures. There was no room for a baby in her life plans. And Adrian?

Probably not the best father material. Not the worst either, but someone so overbearing can drive a kid, and its mother, completely nuts. Still, abortion was not an option; she couldn't even bear the thought.

By mid-morning, it had become simply too hard to swallow her tears, and she just let the floodgates open. She cried herself out, then decided to cook a special meal, just so she could have something different to prevent Adrian from seeing something was, in fact, different about her. A decoy, a culinary smokescreen. As for her pregnancy, she needed to think and decide what to do. She suddenly missed her mother, her real one, the one she could barely remember. She wished she could run to her and ask her what to do, and cry some more, curled up in her lap.

She touched, in passing, the antiquated voicemail system on the counter, a system that worked with cassettes. She held on to it, because it was one of the very few relics she had from her real parents. They had touched that very machine, some fifteen years ago. She swallowed with difficulty, then turned around and faced Adrian.

"How was school?"

He scoffed. "You know... some of these folks can be so damn arrogant, it takes away from the material. I keep daydreaming about kicking their asses back into reality."

She smiled, a crooked smile filled with tenderness. That was her Adrian. Two parts engineer, two parts teddy bear, one part mule, and one part street thug.

"Simpson, huh?" she asked, referring to the electromagnetic fields professor.

"Uh-huh," he said, then sneaked his hand into the pasta pot and stole a couple of farfalle covered in fresh-grated Parmesan. She slapped him across the buttock.

He still held on to a bunch of mail with his other hand. No way had he washed his hands before touching the food.

"Ouch!"

"Hands off," she said, "it's not ready yet. And wash your hands."

"Looks ready to me," he replied, then dropped the pile of mail on the table.

"Take that away, I just cleaned the table. Anything interesting?"

"Just this," he replied, sorting through the mail above the trash can that ended up receiving most of the mail items, unopened.

He handed her a white envelope that bore her name and address in handwritten, cursive letters. She wiped her hands against her jeans and took the envelope, studying it on both sides before opening it. The letter was postmarked locally, in Miami. She opened it and took out a one-page typed letter.

She read the first few lines, then had to sit down, overwhelmed by a wave of emotion. She leaned her forehead into her hand.

"What's wrong, baby?"

She struggled to speak. She took a deep breath and cleared her throat a little.

"Um, it's a letter from a Dr. Austin Jacobs, a neuroscientist. She's conducting some studies in memory, um... here goes, 'cognitive memory recovery and memory distortion in childhood trauma,' and she'd like to speak with me."

"Why the hell would she want to do that?"

"She says I make a great candidate for her study. She says she could help me remember. I will call her on Monday."

"The hell you will," Adrian snapped and stood up abruptly. "It's over, baby, that part of your life is over. Let it go."

She bit her lip, swallowing the biting response to his outburst. She didn't like it when he tried to run her life like that.

"I will call her on Monday, Adrian. It's my only chance to remember. I want to remember... I need to."

They both fell quiet, each deeply immersed in their own internal turmoil and too troubled to want to speak. The silence between them felt heavy, uneasy, like a foreboding.

Laura folded the letter and stuffed it in her jeans back pocket, then stood and put the bowl of pasta on the table. Then she continued setting the table, adding plates, cutlery, and glasses.

"I'm not hungry anymore," Adrian said, pouting and gloomy. Sometimes he behaved like a spoiled child.

"Don't be silly," she replied calmly, yet firmly. "Whether you eat or not, I am calling Dr. Jacobs on Monday morning."

Reflections: First Kill

I remember the night of my first kill as if it were yesterday. I remember preparing for it in detail, getting ready for it, from both a tactical point of view, but also emotionally. They say killing is hard; it can break a man. It can destroy him forever.

It liberated me.

But let's not get ahead of my story. The first thing that happened was the *need* to kill. You see, with me it wasn't an urge; not at first, anyway. Or, maybe, to be completely honest, I'd felt the urge to kill before, but I didn't understand it. It felt like waves of restlessness, of suffocating anger without a precise, well-determined object, that I didn't act on because I simply didn't understand what I needed to do. Not until that first kill.

Yes, so I had the dire *need* to kill Allen Watson. The reasons were many, too many, yet irrelevant to what I want to share with you. But, please, believe me when I say I tried everything I could to avoid having to kill him. He didn't give me much choice. I was backed into a corner, with no other alternative but to end the bastard's sorry life.

Once I understood I had no other choice, I started to think about how I should do it. You see, going to prison wasn't—and still isn't—an option for me. I kept thinking, looking for a solution that wouldn't land me in a cell. As I was tossing and turning for nights in a row trying to create the perfect murder, something happened. Fate intervened and opened a door for me.

A serial killer, dubbed by the media with the ridiculous name of The Family Man, had murdered a family of four, just miles away from Watson's neighborhood. I learned about it on the news. I saw everyone on TV fretting about the killings, calling it a gruesome repeat of some other murders, done in about the same way, in about the same area, that I'd somehow missed hearing about.

What an opportunity!

I remember sleeping like a baby for the rest of that night. The next morning, refreshed, I started researching everything there was to know about that serial killer. I was careful not to leave a trail. That's what libraries are for; to research things anonymously, protected by a hoodie and some thick-rimmed glasses, and looking so grimy my own mother wouldn't recognize me. If I knew who invented the hoodie, I'd send them a check. On second thought, no... I'd be leaving a paper trail; big mistake. I'd send them cash instead.

Soon I knew everything there was to learn about The Family Man from the media and the Internet. Of course, police probably had held on to some details, to prevent perfect copycats from happening, but I didn't care. Maybe police had even lied about some of the details they released; I still didn't care. Copycatting The Family Man was still my best shot. I studied his handiwork and noted all the factors, taking them at face value: how he killed his victims, how he gained access to their properties, what kind of gun he used, what caliber and what brand, how he went about doing it. Every little thing.

There was only one problem with copycatting The Family Man: I had to kill Allen Watson's entire family. Oh, well... That was going to be on him, not on me. He's the one who pushed me to do it anyway.

Getting the right gun was tricky. I needed to buy a Beretta 9 mil, unregistered, of course, and from a reliable street vendor. Getting to the right street corner near Liberty Square proved more challenging than acquiring the actual gun. I couldn't drive my own car. Cabs have cameras onboard these days, so there I was, using public transportation for the first time in years, with my phone turned off and my hoodie zipped up, despite an early heat wave. I kept my face hidden behind a newspaper the whole time, and once I was in the neighborhood, I chose to walk the last leg of my trip.

The first person I asked about a gun sent me to hell. He was a well-built black man, who took my question personally and assumed immediately it was because of his race that I was asking him about contraband weapons. Honestly, it was, but I didn't admit that to him; I just apologized profusely and didn't stop until he said, "Whatever, man," and moved on. I'd learned a lesson.

I walked around Liberty Square for a while longer, then approached another young man, a white guy this time; well, at least the skin under his tattoos had been white at some point. He made these quick, twitchy movements with his entire body; he was probably a meth head. But he knew someone, and for a twenty he said he'd point me in the right direction.

He did, and a minute later, a third man approached us and led me to a car, whose trunk held a variety of firearms. He had the exact pistol I was looking for, and swore it hadn't been used for anything nasty before. Sure, like I was going to believe that... or maybe he spoke the truth, who knows?

He asked for two hundred. Unfamiliar with the street rate of illegal weapons, I'd come prepared to pay two thousand, and there I was, struggling to extract the two Benjamins he wanted, without them noticing how thick my roll of cash really was. Delighted I didn't bargain, he offered two boxes of 9-mil ammo, and I made a mental note to wipe the prints clean off each and every bullet. One can never be too careful.

I was ready, and I couldn't delay anymore. Allen Watson wasn't going to go away or learn to shut up; he was becoming a big liability for me. I went there and parked on the street parallel to his cul-de-sac, hidden behind a bush. I waited patiently for him to come home from the office, and then waited some more for dusk to set in. Then I made my move.

He let me in, just as I'd expected, and I didn't even let him finish his question. There wasn't any point to it. The time for conversations had come and gone. I pulled the trigger twice and watched him collapse against the wall, leaving a thick smudge of blood against the caramel wood paneling.

The thrill of the kill hit me like a shot of heroin to my vein, going straight to my brain and reverberating into every cell in my body. Whew! What a rush! I remember inhaling the metallic scent of fresh blood with flaring, lusty nostrils, and feeling the exhilaration of the adrenaline surge turn me into something else, a superhuman, a predator set on the scent of blood. You see, I'd expected to feel sick after killing Watson, because that's what I heard others feel; I'd even brought along a plastic bag to barf in, just in case I needed to. But no, that wasn't my case.

I heard the kids shriek, and I didn't want Rachel Watson to barge in and turn things messy. I leapt up the stairs and caught up with them easily. I didn't mind doing the three kids, but didn't enjoy it either. I felt... nothing. But again, I had no choice, being that The Family Man killed entire families, not just the adults.

I'd saved the best for last, and it was time for me to find Rachel. A neighbor came by and gave me a scare; I hated that. I hated feeling the fear gripping my throat and twisting it, choking me. Real predators don't feel fear, so why did I? I shrugged it off and went looking for Rachel Watson, feeling a forgotten, yet familiar feeling arouse me, making me eager.

When she saw me, she dropped some dishes and screamed, walking backward until she hit the kitchen counter, then begged me. "No, no," she kept saying, much like her husband had said, moments before dying. But I couldn't pull the trigger; something wouldn't let me. I wanted to; I *wanted* her dead, and I *needed* her dead. But not like this... it felt like a waste, a terrible waste of what could be an intoxicating experience, an exhilarating memory to cherish for years to come.

I put the gun down on the counter and grabbed a large knife from the wooden knife block, then took one step closer to her. Her eyes, rounded with fear, stared at the large blade. She gasped and continued to cry, louder and louder, "No, no!" Right... Like that was going to change my mind. Seriously, what did she expect? That I'd suddenly drop the knife and say, "Well, if you don't want it, I'll just go home." How ridiculous.

Yeah, thinking back, I didn't expect to enjoy killing that much. I remember seeing Rachel in a pool of blood at my feet and feeling exalted, thinking that I had to do this again sometime. Soon.

Then I heard the sirens.

I didn't care that The Family Man spent days with his victims; I wasn't going to do that, copycat or no copycat, although I had to admit, I would've wanted to take more time with Rachel. I rushed outside and hid behind Rachel's minivan for a short while. Then my whole world came apart. The stupid decals... Did I miss a kid? Did I leave a witness? You've got to be kidding me, right?

You see, I don't pay much attention to kids; not ever, not even when I should. To me, they simply don't exist. They're a source of noise and nuisance and disease, and I can't even bear to look at them. They just irritate me, regardless of age and gender. In that case, I should have paid more attention, at least to Watson's, considering what I was there to do. At least that one time, right? Not too much to ask of myself?

Well, apparently, it was.

I went back inside and found a boy, not a girl, lying on the floor in that last bedroom, when I knew for certain Watson had one boy and two girls. Even the damned decals showed it clearly.

That meant I'd made a mistake. Something I couldn't explain, but needed to fix.

I didn't know who that boy was. Nevertheless, I rushed and looked everywhere, checked under every bed, and opened every closet. Nope, there was no one else in the house. With the sirens blaring closer, I had to leave, but I felt confident that I didn't leave any loose ends.

It wasn't until the next morning that I learned just how mistaken I'd been.

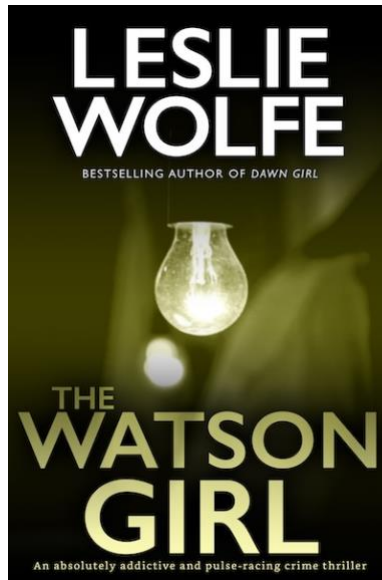
Laura Watson had somehow survived. Damn her! The press called her The Watson Girl, and that somehow became the moniker for the sole survivor of yet another horrifying Family Man attack.

How the hell did I let that happen?

In hindsight, considering the inherent stress of killing someone for the first time and how dark it was in that bedroom, it sort of makes sense that I rushed through the job and had to see the decals on Rachel's car to realize something was off. I can find some excuse for the way things went down.

But still, what a screw-up.

**The man on death row says he didn't kill her family.
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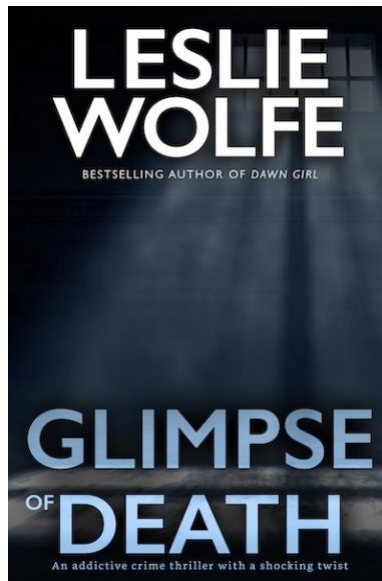
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FREE PREVIEW: *GLIMPSE OF DEATH*

**Before they disappear,
he shows them how they'll die.**



Your free preview begins on the next page.

Taken

He watched her from across the street as she left the coffee shop. She was beautiful, this one. Her long, wavy, brown hair coiled and bounced in thick, silky strands around her shoulders, dancing with every step she took. Her smile was dazzling, even from a distance, and her eyes were half-closed, the way they get when laughter touches them and lends a glow of happiness.

He licked his lips and swallowed hard. Soon enough, those eyes would be looking at him. He felt a twitch below his waist, and a crooked smile curled the corner of his mouth.

She stopped right outside the coffee shop and turned around to look at the man who'd held the door for her. Then she reached out and took his hand, weaving her fingers through his, and her smile widened. The man leaned forward and kissed her on the lips, lingering a little, then turned away and quickly disappeared around the corner. She unzipped her purse, her eyes still following him as he vanished, and took out her car keys.

That was his cue. Time to move.

He ran his sweaty palms against his thinning, blond hair and arranged it into place, although not much could be done with the few remaining strands, pushed backward by an aggressively receding hairline. He straightened his posture and arranged the knot of his tie, then buttoned his jacket. He scrutinized the reflection in the tinted car window and saw a moderately attractive, professionally dressed man, looking the part he was about to play.

He quickly crossed the street and caught up with her just as she was about to get behind the wheel. He delayed his arrival long enough to give her time to be seated, but caught the doorframe before she could close it.

"Dr. Katherine Nelson?" he asked, flashing a wallet with his fake police ID.

The young woman didn't bother to check his credentials. They never did. But even if she checked, the fake he carried was quite good; it could probably pass for the real thing with most uneducated civilians. He'd paid good money for it, worth it to the last dime. It made things so much easier. He didn't have to lurk in the shadows anymore, worrying about muffling their screams and getting kicked, bit, and scratched. He could go out in broad daylight and get the job done.

"Yes, that's me," the young woman replied, her voice trembling a little.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. Your husband, he—"

"What happened? What's wrong?" she almost yelled, panic instilling a crystalline, high pitch in her voice.

He didn't even have to be creative. They never let him finish his damn sentence anyway.

"It's better if you come with me, Dr. Nelson. It's faster that way."

She grabbed her purse and slammed her car door, then trotted quickly behind him, as he crossed the street and headed toward his car. The rhythmic sound of her high heels hitting the asphalt made it unnecessary for him to look over his shoulder to make sure she was still coming.

He led her to a black, unmarked Crown Victoria he'd bought at a police auction a couple of years before, and held the door open for her. Then he took his seat behind the wheel and shoved the key in the ignition.

"Please," Katherine said, turning toward him, "tell me what happened to Craig. Is he okay?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a syringe, then quickly removed the cap. She watched him with bewildered eyes, turning pale, faltering. She pushed herself backward as far as she could, flailing desperately for the door handle, but unable to take her eyes from the approaching needle. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out.

"Your husband is in a world of trouble, Dr. Nelson." He grabbed her shoulder with a steeled grip and shoved the needle into the side of her neck, swiftly pushing the plunger, before she could react. "You see, his cheating wife was kidnapped today."

Waiting Room

The three men knew one another well, but barely exchanged glances. The occasional word was muttered under their breaths, almost whispered, although no one else could hear them talk. Other than that, they waited.

Hospital waiting rooms are all the same, no matter where they happen to be. Fluorescent lights, with undecided hues of bluish purple, and the nonstop humming of the ceiling-mounted lamps. A vending machine, also humming every now and then, holding the typical offering of junk food, rich in chemicals and empty calories. A few wide chairs in green, faded fabric, and a wall-mounted TV, with the sound set on mute.

At least they had their privacy.

Hospitals tend to be courteous to law enforcement, probably due to the repeat business the profession tends to deliver. Passing, or even enduring, relationships are formed among officers, agents, and their family members on one side, and nurses and doctors on the other. They cross paths, unfortunately, much too often. In their case, the small, private, waiting room was the least the hospital could do.

The three men had been waiting for a while—a few hours now. Not a word.

FBI Special Agent in Charge Alan Pearson had loosened his tie an inch or two, then crossed his arms at his chest. That had happened more than an hour earlier. He hadn't budged since, although somewhat irritated with the restlessness of Detective Todd Fradella, from Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office. The young detective couldn't sit still; he paced the floor like a caged animal, annoyingly running his hands through his shoulder-length hair, randomly stopping in front of the window, as if something of any interest could actually be seen through it, in the late-afternoon sunlight.

As for Detective Gary Michowsky, he didn't move much either; but his lips did. He sat in the same chair, his hands clasped together tightly in his lap, and stared into emptiness. His jaws clenched spasmodically, and he constantly bit his lips, munching on them from the inside, angrily. He tried to stay calm and quiet, but his anguish showed.

Fradella stopped his pacing in front of Pearson.

"It's taking a while," he said, breaking the tense silence.

The two men stared at him disapprovingly.

"I hope she's okay," he continued, almost apologetically. "I mean, when it takes so long—"

"Shut it, Fradella," Michowsky snapped.

Pearson unfolded his arms and sighed. "Come on, guys, take it easy," he said, staring at Michowsky.

Michowsky fidgeted in his seat, then gazed at the shiny floor, following the random design of the cement mosaic tiles.

"It's on me," he eventually muttered. "All this. On me."

Pearson frowned, and Fradella turned to look at his partner.

"How d'you figure that?" Pearson asked.

Michowsky remained silent, biting his lips some more.

"Did *you* stab her?" Pearson pressed on. "Was that you, detective? Or was it a psychopath you two eventually put in the morgue?"

Michowsky shot Pearson an angry glare, then lowered his eyes again. There was nothing to say, and he didn't want any consolation coming from any of them.

"When this is over," Pearson continued unfazed, making a gesture with his hand, "I'll need a statement from you. I know it was a good shoot, but she's under internal rev—"

Michowsky glared at Pearson again, just as briefly, interrupting him.

"Yeah, I heard about that nonsense. I'll give you my statement anytime you want. *It was a good shoot.*"

The door opened and a tall man dressed in a surgical gown walked in. The three men gathered around him, all talking at the same time, asking the same question, but with different words.

The doctor raised his hands in a pacifying gesture. "Hello, I'm Dr. DePaolo. We met earlier, I think," he said, locking eyes with Pearson and then Michowsky. "She's strong and she's a fighter; she has a good chance to make a full recovery," he said, and smiled encouragingly, while wiping his brow with his sleeve. Tiny beads of sweat had accumulated there, and the edge of his surgical cap was moist.

"It was a close call for a while," he continued, "but I believe she'll pull through. The next few hours are still critical. She waited too long." He cleared his throat, then continued in a stern tone. "XStat is designed to stop the bleeding while help is on the way, officers. You can't get stabbed, XStat the wound, patch it up with a bandage, and go back to work like nothing happened."

The three men looked at one another, then, one by one, lowered their eyes.

"She lost a lot of blood," Dr. DePaolo continued. "She's in ICU now, still sedated. I'll show you where that is, if you follow me."

He walked briskly and quietly on the endless corridors, then led them to a room on a restricted part of the floor. The room had a glass wall and a French door, also made of glass. Inside the room, surrounded by stacks of beeping equipment and digital screens, a tiny figure lay immobile on the bed.

Tess looked thin and pale against the white bed sheets; Gary almost didn't recognize her. By her side, a nurse took readings from the machines and jotted notes onto a chart.

Pearson frowned and tapped gently on the glass. The nurse quietly opened the door.

"Why is she restrained, Miss... Henderson?" he asked in a curt tone, reading the name off the ID tag she was wearing.

Gary hadn't noticed the restraints, but now that Pearson mentioned them, he frowned as well. Her wrists were tied to the bed rails, and she constantly shook her head, slowly, without opening her eyes, moaning.

"She's very restless, although she's heavily sedated. We can't risk her moving too much and tearing her sutures."

"I'll place a uniform at the door," Fradella said. "Just in case."

That wasn't a case Gary could think of, but he didn't find it necessary to disagree. After all, it was Tess Winnett in there, fighting for her life.

"Are you family?" the nurse asked.

"Work family," Michowsky replied, earning himself a curious look from Pearson. "Why? Need anything?"

"She's worried about her cat. She keeps mumbling something, I can't understand what, but it's something to do with a cat. Can someone check her home and make sure her cat's okay? Maybe then she'll be able to sleep better."

He stared at Tess, puzzled for a few seconds. He wished he could ask her what she needed. Cops had turned her apartment upside down, and he'd been there too; it was still an active crime scene. No one had mentioned a cat, and he didn't remember seeing food bowls or cat toys anywhere.

Then he remembered something else.

He pulled out his phone and said, "I think I know what that's about."

He dialed 411, then requested the information, "I need the number for a Media Luna Bar and Grill, or something like that. Yes, in Palm Beach. Yeah, connect me; I'll hold."

A few seconds later, Michowsky broke the silence again.

"Yeah, um, hey, Cat, you might want to know that Tess is in the hospital." He stopped talking for a split second, then continued. "Miami University, third floor, room 3104."

The call ended without any additional words. Michowsky had expected a few questions, but none came. All for the better. He felt exhausted, the exhaustion brought by feeling some relief, after a long period of tension.

The nurse smiled and nodded a silent thank you in his direction. He sat on a vinyl chair across the hallway, and let out a long breath of air.

"She won't be up for a while," the nurse said. "Why don't you go home? I can call you when she wakes up."

"I'm not going anywhere," Michowsky replied, resuming his earlier posture, with his hands firmly clasped in his lap and his shoulders hunched forward. Pearson nodded and did the same, leaving an empty chair between them and taking the one next to that. Fradella resumed his pacing, including the occasional stops in front of a nearby window, now completely engulfed in darkness.

A few minutes later, a uniformed officer arrived, quietly greeted Fradella and Michowsky, and pulled a chair for himself right next to Tess's door. The nurse frowned when she saw him sit there, but then got absorbed in her work and her frown vanished.

Michowsky's phone chime raised disapproving eyebrows everywhere on the hallway, even from passersby. He took the call immediately, shooting apologetic glances in all directions. A minute later, he stood up, ready to leave.

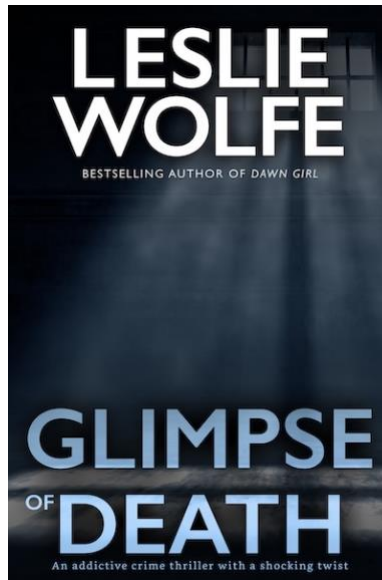
"Fradella, I've got to go. They found Lisa Trask, the missing person from last week. She's been dead for at least a day. You stay here; I'll do this solo. Call me as soon as Tess wakes up."

"You got it. Where did they find the body?"

"You're not going to believe this... in her own backyard."

He nodded an acknowledgment toward Pearson and hurried out, not noticing the worried look that appeared on Pearson's face the moment he'd mentioned where the body had been found.

**She's seen what happened to the woman before her.
Now she's waiting her turn.**



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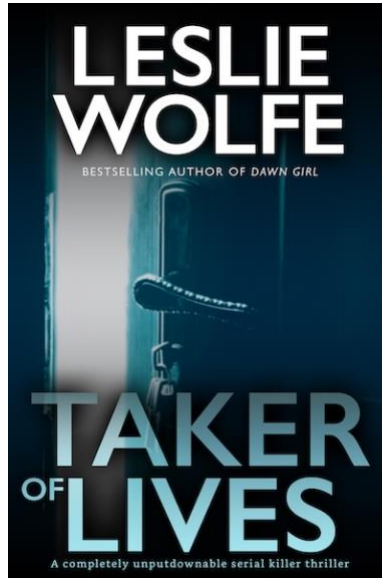
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FREE PREVIEW: *TAKER OF LIVES*

**Their fame made them targets.
Now their nightmares are going live.**



Your free preview begins on the next page.

Nightmare

She woke with a start, her heart instantly racing when the raw memory of strange, gloved hands on her body invaded her consciousness. She could still feel the cold latex on her skin, touching her, stripping her naked, manipulating her limbs, sending shivers of fear and aversion through her veins. She remembered feeling paralyzed, wanting to scream but staring powerlessly at the face of a monster hiding behind a mask, laughing in quiet, raspy gurgles that only she could hear, glaring at her with merciless, hateful eyes.

She rubbed her forehead with frozen, trembling fingers and forced herself to breathe, gasping in deep, long breaths of air to wash away the memory of the troublesome nightmare. Must've been a nightmare... she was in her own bed, wearing her favorite silk jammies, and she could hear her mother's rushed footfalls as she was getting ready for work. Nothing was out of place.

Just a night terror, that's all it was. The worst she could remember, a vivid one she won't be forgetting any time soon, still, just a nightmare. Her eyes fell on Pat's photo, framed on her night table, and she focused on his loving smile for a moment, imagining his strong arms wrapped around her body, making her feel safe again.

Better.

She stood, feeling a little weak at the knees, but pushed herself to walk out of the bedroom, heading toward the kitchen. Her throat was parched dry, as if she hadn't had a drink of water in ages. She filled a glass at the sink and gulped it down avidly, then breathed again.

"Good morning, sweetie," her mother greeted her, then grazed her cheek with a warm hand. "Feeling better?"

She frowned, a bit confused. What was her mother talking about?

Her mother stopped her morning get-ready rush and gave her a head-to-toe scrutiny, then a tiny smile stretched her lips.

"You were a little dizzy last night, and your blood pressure was lower than what I like to see."

"Ah," she reacted, still frowning, realizing she didn't remember much of the night before.

"Christina, we discussed this," her mother said in her clinical voice, the tone she reserved for her most disobedient patients. "You don't eat much, these photo shoots are a resource drain, so you have to pace yourself. You'll burn out. Vogue won't go bankrupt if you take a day off every once in a while."

It was the eternal conflict between the two of them. Her mother meant well but failed to realize a model's career span only lasted a few short years, and she couldn't afford to waste a single day. She was twenty-four years old, already on her way to becoming old news. Soon, the agencies would start sending her templated emails, saying stuff like, "After careful consideration, yadda, yadda, we have decided to proceed with a different candidate who suits our needs better at this time." Free translation? "You're too old for this game, sorry. We've got someone younger; find something else to do with yourself."

But that day hadn't arrived yet; she was still one of the most sought-after models in the industry, and her photo shoots took her around the globe, adorning her in designer clothing that she got to keep after showing on coveted catwalks under the incessant flicker of thousands of flashlights. Dizzy or not, she had a schedule, and she intended to keep it. Her pickup limo was due at nine, and she wasn't going to be ready in time.

She toughed it out and pushed her mother's concerns aside with a beaming smile and a hand gesture.

"I'll be fine, Mom, don't worry. I'll even do some blood tests if you'd like, but not today. Any coffee left for me?"

Her mother gestured toward the Keurig machine. "Got you some vanilla pods, the ones you like."

"Hazelnut too?"

"Hazelnut too, sweetie," she smiled, then placed a smooch on her cheek and rushed out of the house, jingling the car keys in her hand. "Have a safe flight! And get some rest."

"I will," Christina replied to the empty house, suddenly as cold and quiet and scary as her nightmare had been.

Still shivering, she threw the coffee maker a regretful glance as soon as she realized it was a quarter to nine. Not nearly enough time to put on makeup and get dressed. She forced herself to move quickly, although it felt like she moved in slow motion, the air thick as if it were water, opposing too much resistance for her weakened body to overcome.

She entered the bathroom and turned on the vanity lights, then gave her face a critical overview. Dark circles under her eyes that would require concealer, a pallor that asked for more blush than usual and maybe a darker foundation tone. Hollow, haunted eyes that needed a touch of eyeshadow to bring their faded color forward.

She turned on the shower and began undoing her buttons, still examining her face, but her fingers hesitated; she looked in the mirror and her breath caught. Her pajama top was buttoned wrong, the lowest button fastened through the second lowest buttonhole. Trivial.

Then why did she feel her blood turn to ice when she looked at the uneven hems?

She felt a new wave of dizziness wash over her and took a step back. A strangled whimper came out of her mouth as faint memories invaded her mind.

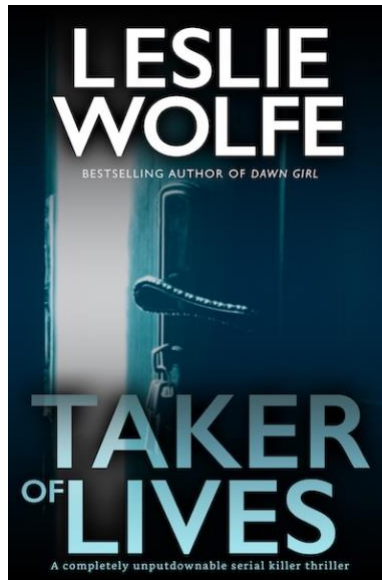
Cold, latex-gloved hands touching her, stripping her naked, manipulating her body. A piercing, evil stare from behind a mask, and a raspy, terrifying laugh, a stranger's snicker, yet eerily familiar. The sound of a camera shutter, over and over, in a familiar rhythm of rapid bursts. Her own skin, turning to goose bumps when those strange hands invaded her. The same hands dressing her, putting on her pajama top, grazing against her breasts while doing the buttons.

She wrapped her arms around her body and took faltering steps back until she ran into the wall, her eyes riveted on the mirror, on the image of her unevenly done buttons.

"Oh, God, please..." she whimpered, as tears rolled down her pale cheeks. "Please don't let it be true."

The nightmare was real.

**Millions are watching.
And bidding for her death.**



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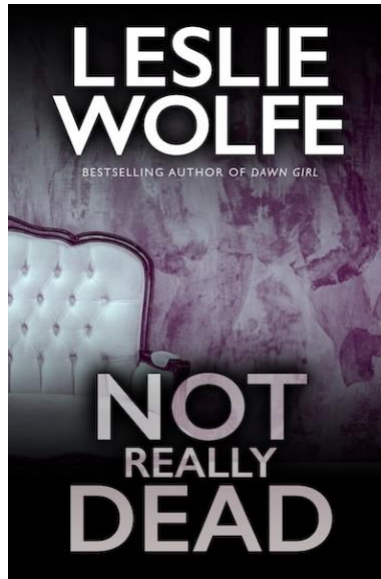
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FREE PREVIEW: *NOT REALLY DEAD*

**She survived a killer who leaves no survivors.
And she won't go to the police.**



Your free preview begins on the next page.

Chapter 1

The touch of his warm fingers still sent shivers through her body, although she felt a knot in her throat, threatening tears and a ruined end to the evening. She tried to paste a smile on her face and squeezed his hand, hoping he wouldn't sense how sad she really felt.

"Danielle, we talked about this," he whispered, while the limo took the exit heading for her house.

She nodded, not trusting her voice enough to say anything.

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and somehow that made things a little better. She craved his presence like an insatiable addict, wanted to share every waking moment with him and fall asleep in his arms at the end of each day. She'd fallen for him hard, beyond repair, beyond any of her wildest dreams.

And she was being unreasonable. She blinked away the tears, willing herself to remember Stephen belonged to her; they were engaged, soon to be married, and the engagement ring on her finger stood testimony to that. She counted the days until the wedding, set for October 19.

Set by others, not by them.

The most important date of her life had been chosen after several days of arguing and meetings and negotiations among Stephen's father, his campaign manager, and his countless advisors, publicists, and media experts.

Her future father-in-law was running for president, in one of the most heated races for the White House in the history of the United States.

The moment Stephen had proposed to her, after a fabulous dinner followed by champagne served in tall flutes on a gold tray, her life had started spinning out of control.

She'd known who she was saying yes to. The love of her life, true, but also a man who was going to be at the center of media attention for the next few months, or even years, if his father won.

Secretly, she hoped he'd lose. She wanted to marry Stephen the lawyer, the one overwhelmed by student loan debt just like her, not the president's son with everything that statement entailed. Somewhere between the day she met Stephen and the day he proposed, his father had emerged from the ranks of anonymity and shot all the way into earning a Democratic nomination almost overnight.

She wanted their old life back; but what she wanted no longer mattered that much. Except for Stephen... she could still marry him, but even that came at a cost.

She'd known every inch of her background would be examined under a magnifying glass by investigators who wanted to dig up any speck of dirt before it could cause real problems for the man they already called "Mr. President" in private. She cringed when she recalled her high school flings, her first frat party, the first time she drank a little too much; they would find out about it, in every sordid little detail. Her fiancé would read about all that in a report.

She'd known that their schedule would be set by others, and the moments alone with Stephen would become treasured gems, difficult to find but even more gratifying as their scarcity increased their value.

She'd known all that and she'd said yes, with a swelling heart full of love and a slightly trembling voice.

Yet she had no reason to feel so sad, so needy, just because he had to leave her side a few nights a week to help with his father's campaign efforts. The man sitting by her side on the leather backseat of that limo was every woman's dream and deserved better than a clingy, tearful drama queen.

"Danielle," he whispered, then kissed her hand, their fingers intertwined, their heads close together.

"Yes, I know you have to leave. I just wish you could spend the night with me, that's all," she pleaded, unshed tears coloring her voice, untrue to her own commitment to show him the support he deserved. "Tonight, more than ever."

"Not tonight, my love," he replied, searching her eyes with a worried glance. "I'm really sorry, I can't. I have that early morning flight with everyone on the team. But tomorrow, when I get back, I'm coming straight here."

The driver pulled up at the curb in front of her house, the second on a small Palm Beach street tucked behind the parking lot of a bar, one of those old-style places with the owner's living quarters on the second floor.

"Can you forgive me?" Stephen asked, his voice only a hint louder, getting ready to say goodbye.

She nodded again, then gently pulled her hand out of his, regretful when their fingers parted. She wanted those fingers to rip the clothes off her body and explore every inch of her skin, while she begged for mercy.

The driver held the door for her, waiting patiently. She turned toward Stephen, and he didn't hesitate. He cradled her face in his hands and pressed his lips against hers, tasting her, building a sense of urgency inside her that made her entire being shiver with desire.

Then he let go.

She pulled away reluctantly but managed a smile, then walked the short distance to her door and unlocked it. She turned toward the car one more time, smiled and waved, and saw Stephen waving back.

The limo driver closed the door and took his place behind the wheel.

By the time she reached the living room window and looked outside, the limo was gone.

Silence and a sense of dread, of inexplicable angst, overwhelmed her. The house she'd decorated with so much enjoyment seemed cold and unwelcoming, as if shadows were lurking in every corner, ready to pounce.

She shrugged off her fears and checked the thermostat. It was the south of Florida, but she didn't care. If it felt cold, she needed heat. She switched it to heating and added a few degrees on the setting, then rubbed her hands together to warm them.

She poured herself a glass of red wine, took a sip, but didn't feel any of the warmth she was hoping for. Instead, the wine seemed sour and cold. Disappointed, she abandoned the glass on the counter and took out her phone, searching for some music to play, to lift her spirit. Between browsing playlists, she texted Stephen, "Miss you already."

A chime came immediately after. "Me too. Sweet dreams, baby."

Then Adele's vibrant voice broke the silence, sharing rumors with anyone who wanted to listen, an older song Danielle loved since her heydays in high school.

Better.

The thought of a shower seemed appealing, the warmth from the water jets promising to soothe her and deliver a good night's sleep in the bed that now seemed too large for only her. She went back into the living room and unbuttoned the turquoise blouse that matched her eyes, then slid off the tight, black pencil skirt. Both items landed on a nearby chair, followed quickly by her lacy underwear. She slipped on a sateen robe she'd dropped on the couch that morning and started walking toward the bathroom, the distance too short to be worth tying the sash around her waist.

She never made it that far.

She sensed him before she saw him, a rise in the hairs on the back of her neck, primal fear unfurling in her gut, a scream emerging from her throat that never reached her lips. The unfamiliar smell of a stranger, the barely audible sound of approaching footfalls muffled by the music, a sense of impending doom urging her to run for her life.

Then she felt his hands on her body, grabbing her and slamming her down to the floor so hard it knocked the air out of her lungs. She thrashed, kicking and hitting the man as best as she could, but her gasping efforts only brought a grin to his face. She managed to push herself away from him a little, sliding on the hardwood floor, and started to get up, but he

caught her with one hand, while with the other he pulled out a knife, the 6-inch blade reflecting the lights coming from the chandelier. He seized her neck and started squeezing, slowly, his face closer to her inch by inch, the coldness of the blade burning her skin.

Darkness drew closer as his fingers tightened around her neck. She gasped, desperate for air, while thoughts whirled through her head. Stephen... she'd never see him again.

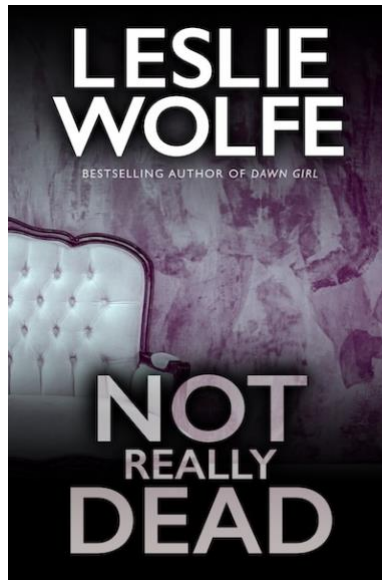
She was going to die.

"Not yet," the man hissed, then cackled loudly after licking his lips, his pupils dilated with loaded anticipation. "You and I are not done yet." He let go of her throat and drove his hand lower. "I promise you'll love it."

She drew gasps of air, filling her lungs over and over again, desperately thinking of a way out. She lunged for the door but felt the blade slicing against her side and hesitated. The man raised his hand, and the blow came down hard across her face, sending her tumbling across the floor, seeing stars.

Everything turned dark.

**He's looking for his next victim.
Tess Winnett is making sure she's his next target.**



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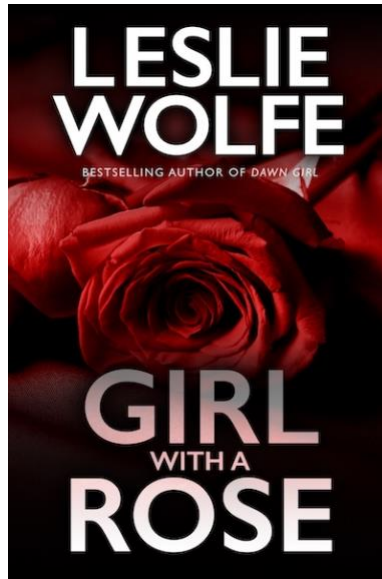
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FREE PREVIEW: *GIRL WITH A ROSE*

**His paintings make girls eternal.
His models never live to see them.**



Your free preview begins on the next page.

She was thrilled she'd agreed to pose for him.

She almost hadn't made it past the imposing gates of the mansion, the likes of such she'd only seen in the movies. But the man had left a four-digit code scribbled with his address, and after fidgeting in place in front of the twelve-foot high, wrought-iron entrance, she noticed the keypad on a stand at the edge of the driveway, at the right height to be accessed from the driver's seat of a car. She'd entered the four digits with slightly trembling fingers, and the wrought iron set in motion, opening without a sound.

Mom would kill me if she knew where I'm at, she'd thought excitedly, her rebellion putting a spring in her step.

She'd walked the long, curvy driveway in a daze, taking in the beauty of the landscape with its fantastic rose bushes, each of them a different, exotic variety. She'd stopped a couple of times and buried her face in the dew sprinkled blooms, taking in their aroma, savoring their intoxicating scent.

Then she rang the bell while butterflies swarmed in her belly, and he opened the door almost immediately. He wore tight, worn-out jeans and a white T-shirt, both stained with paint as were his arms, and even his smiling face. She followed him inside, too intimidated to articulate a single word, her eyes riveted on the paintings that covered the walls of the living room. Beautiful girls, some sad, some playful, all young and innocent, their beauty enhanced by a single rose bloom.

Her step slowed and faltered as a strange sense of foreboding chilled her blood. She gazed quickly at the paintings again, this time searching the girls' eyes, looking for something, for a clue into what was to come, but their expressions remained mysterious, almost grim. The chill in her body turned to icicles streaming in her blood, and she let a quiet whimper escape her lips.

He turned and smiled, his smile warming up the room. "What's wrong, my dear?"

She felt like an idiot. Posing for such an artist was a huge opportunity for her, and she was screwing it up as only she could. "Um, nothing, really," she managed, wringing her hands nervously and avoiding his deep, blue eyes. "All this," she gestured towards the walls covered in luxuriously-framed canvases, "I—I don't know what to say."

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" he said, his voice filled with warmth as if the girls immortalized on canvas were all long-departed friends he dearly missed.

Then he turned toward her and widened his smile. "But they're gone... and you're here. You're even more beautiful, Kaylee."

Blood rushed to her cheeks, warming them quickly.

"When we're finished, I'll make room for you right here, above the mantle. You'll be my *pièce de résistance*," he added, the French words lending their charm to his already charismatic voice. His fingers brushed against her cheek for an instant, in a featherlight touch. "Your beauty is unique."

The last shadow of foreboding coldness left her body under his electrifying touch. She smiled timidly, painfully aware of how out-of-place she looked, of how childish her behavior was. She desperately wished she could instantly be a few years older and the kind of girl this man could fall in love with.

And she didn't even know his name.

She breathed and decided the woman he would like for more than model for a painting would have the courage to ask his name.

"What, um, do I call you?" she managed, blushing again at the sound of her voice, strangled by emotion.

"David," he replied, searching her eyes and still smiling. "You can call me David." Then he turned to leave, looking at her over his shoulder. "Come on, we got work to do, and we'll lose the light in a few hours."

She followed him eagerly through another couple of rooms, then entered his studio. An entire wall was made of glass panels, letting the sunshine in without restrictions. Through the large windows, she could see the exquisite garden in the back of the house, intricate alleys weaving between rose beds with blooms in various colors and shapes. Here and there, wooden benches under the shade of secular oaks or a fountain springing crystalline water on top of carefully arranged boulders.

It was as if she'd left the modern age at the wrought iron gate and had entered the mansion of a nineteenth century royal.

Surreal.

And it would make one hell of a story to tell Alice tomorrow. She'd have to share some of her adventures with her best friend, in return for her commitment to cover for Kaylee at school and with her mother, in case things would run late here and she'd call, all freaked out like Mom always got when she was even a minute past her curfew. School was easy, knowing how the Catholic prudes rushed to change the subject when any mention of cramps or other period-related issues were brought up, especially by a freshman. But her Mom was another thing altogether; no mention of cramps would fly with her. *Being a teenager sucks*, she thought bitterly. *All day in school, then rushing home or else Mom throws a fit and grounds me forever, when I could be hanging out here, with a guy like that.*

"Don't," David said gently, touching her chin briefly as to invite her to look at him.

"Huh?" she reacted, taken by surprise.

"You're frowning," he said, a tinge of disappointment in his voice.

She smiled apologetically and looked around for a place to sit.

There were a few pieces of furniture in the studio, scattered loosely on the vast floor in front of an easel holding a large canvas, all upholstered in black leather. A large armchair Kaylee could've easily curled up in, with her legs folded under her, and taken a nap. An inviting lounge chair that looked cozy and comfortable, the kind she'd seen only in fashion magazines. A bed, covered in red satin sheets and littered with pillows of all colors, the sight of which brought fire to her face. And a wide bench without backrest, long enough to seat three, maybe four people.

A new smile tugged at the corners of David's mouth as he followed her gaze.

"Let's seat you over here," he said, pointing at the bench.

She obeyed and sat, amazed at the softness of the leather under her touch.

"I brought some different clothes," she said, taking off her backpack.

"No need," he replied, his smile gone, replaced with an intense, scrutinizing look.

Her frown returned promptly. "You're painting me in my school clothes?" Her disappointment was raw, carrying the promise of tears.

"No, my dear," he replied, almost absent-mindedly, ambling around her, studying her in detail. "This will be a head portrait."

"Oh," she whispered, feeling intimidated again under his scrutiny. Was her skin perfect? How about her hair?

"Did you remember to turn off your cellphone, like I asked? I don't like being interrupted while I work."

"Yes," she replied quickly, pulling it out of her pocket and showing him the dark screen.

"Good," he replied, then moved the easel a few feet to the right. He peeked from behind the canvas to look at her and then disappeared again for a few moments.

She heard his footsteps leaving the room, but she stayed in place, unsure of what to do. In his absence, the sense of foreboding returned, chilling her blood once again. There was a half-finished canvas leaned against the wall, the portrait of a girl holding a rose blossom to her lips, but her eyes looked haunted as if life was leaving her body. Her skin prickled with goosebumps, and she wrapped her arms around herself, shivering.

"It gets cold in here in the mornings," David said, startling her. She'd not heard him return, but he was there by her side, holding a steaming cup of tea. "The studio doesn't have heating, but the sun will do the trick." He offered her the cup. "It's chamomile with a touch of honey; it will help you relax."

She took the cup and, under his commanding gaze, took a sip. It was delicious, warming up her body and scaring the apprehension away. She thanked him and sipped again, letting the thin vapor touch her face.

He walked over to a small table and brought back a tray, setting it on the bench by her side. Laid neatly on the tray were hairbrushes and combs, several fancy hairpins and accessories, and a few rose blooms in different shades of pink.

"May I?" he asked, picking up a hairbrush.

She shrugged. "Sure." She bit her lip, trying to hide her nervousness at the thought of him touching her. Yet strangely, she was disappointed he'd chosen pink blooms for her when the garden held stunning shades of crimson, purple, even blue with a yellow center. Pink was so banal.

He was gentle, removing her scrunchy without pulling her hair. Then he brushed it until it crackled with electricity, stopping a few times to evaluate the results of his work. Kaylee wished there was a mirror in the room, where she could see what she would look like after he was finished. She'd probably have to wait for the painting to be done to see her new image.

He set the hairbrush down and whispered, "Good." Then he lifted her hair up, strand by strand, weaving and arranging it in a high, braided updo pinned in place with a sophisticated, diamond-encrusted clip. Then he loosened a few thin strands around her face and arranged them carefully with his fingers, his face so close to hers she could feel his breath on her cheeks, sending shivers through her body.

He took a few steps back to admire his work, then let a quiet whistle sum up his conclusions.

She smiled widely. "Is there a mirror—"

His frown returned, digging deep ridges in his forehead. "No mirror, no. Please be patient."

She lowered her gaze and took another sip of tea, a touch of uneasiness unfurling in her gut, a feeling she couldn't name, a warning she couldn't read.

He picked up a rose, then removed all its thorns. He trimmed the stem to four or five inches, then slid the stem behind her ear and secured the heavy bloom in place with two hair clips.

"We're ready," David said, rubbing his hands together, satisfied. "Finish your tea so we can get started."

She was happy to oblige, her throat feeling parched for some reason. She felt weak, almost trembling, and hoped the honey in the tea would pick her up a little and give her a touch of sugar rush.

She set the empty cup on the bench near her, seeing more than feeling how badly her hand shook. His eyes lingered on her trembling hand, but he said nothing. He disappeared behind the canvas for a few moments and returned pushing a small cart with paint tubes, a small bowl, and a makeup kit like she'd never seen before. Only artists and musicians must've had one like that, a silver suitcase that arranged in three levels when opened, holding everything she could ever need if she were a star.

Dizzy and a little nauseous, she took her frozen hand to her forehead, hoping that the cold touch would make her feel better.

"Don't touch your hair," David commanded, his voice strong, almost angry.

She let her hand fall back into her lap. She tried to speak, but only a faint whimper came out. "I—I can't—"

"Here, lie down," he invited, supporting her head carefully with his hand until it touched the soft cushion of the bench. He slid a pillow under her head, then put her legs up on the bench with gentle, thoughtful moves.

He wasn't asking the right questions, wasn't calling an ambulance. Her prior sense of foreboding had returned as sheer panic, but she couldn't scream, she couldn't move. She could still focus her eyes somewhat and watched every move he made while terror took over her heart, knowing what he'd done when he'd spiked her tea, but not understanding why.

"You must feel dizzy and numb right now," he explained patiently as if talking to a small child, "and that's normal. Well, maybe not to you, but I can assure you it's quite normal to me." He caressed her cheek, removing a rebel strand of thin, blonde hair. "I know you'd like me to say that everything will be all right, and it will be, but not for you, my dear. Not for you. Although you might enjoy what's coming."

He picked up a small porcelain bowl and held it above her face. "Do you know what this is? Bone ash porcelain. Human bones, burned to ash, are mixed in with the kaolin, to make the finest pieces of china there can be. The bones make the material stronger so that the porcelain can be thinner, almost translucent. See?"

She couldn't say a word. She tried, but no sound came out of her mouth, as panicked thoughts raced through her mind. What time was it? When would her Mom freak out and call someone? A tear rolled down her cheek and disappeared in her hair. *Mom, she called in her mind, please find me. I promise I'll be good. I'll never lie to you again.*

She felt a pinprick in her arm and watched as David pierced her vein with a thin needle attached to a small plastic tube. Unable to lift her head, she could barely see what he was doing, but he'd elevated her arm on a couple of pillows, and she could catch a foggy glimpse.

Her blurry eyes locked on the blood leaving her body, in a steady string of droplets, collecting in the bone china bowl engraved with intricate gold leaves. She drew breath and let out a shriek that no one heard, not even her; no sound came off her parted lips.

He grinned and wiped her tears off with cold fingers. "You mustn't cry, my dear. I'll apply your makeup next, and you're going to ruin it all."

Her heart fluttered frantically against her rib cage like a trapped bird fighting for its life, willing to smash itself against the bars rather than die at the hand of its captor. But all she could do was watch every move he made, unable to fight, unable to resist.

He mixed a few droplets of blood with paint from various tubes, adjusting the composition until it seemed perfect to him. Then he applied the paint on her lips, checking the crimson hue against direct sunlight and shade. He added a few droplets to some scrapings of eyeshadow on a tiny plate stained with dried paint, tinting the powder's hue to match the lipstick. She felt the applicator touch her eyelids gently, while his finger forced her eyes shut, one at a time.

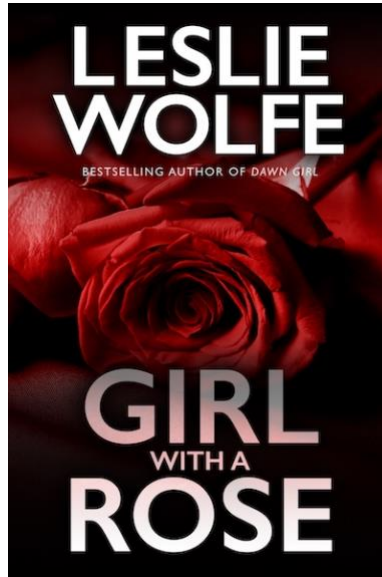
"That's it," he exclaimed happily. "You're ready, my dear, and you are absolutely exquisite." He chuckled lightly, but then groaned and rushed to tap her cheek with a napkin. "No more crying, you hear me? You'll ruin everything."

He stared at her and licked his lips with anticipation, his charismatic smile turning into one filled with lust. He removed her clothing with ease, careful not to pull the needle out of her arm, then gave her young body one more appreciative look.

She tried to scream again; her desperate efforts, visible only in her eyes, bringing a lascivious smirk on his face.

"Scream all you want, my dear. I like you more when you're feisty."

**She can't move. She can't scream.
And he isn't finished with her.**



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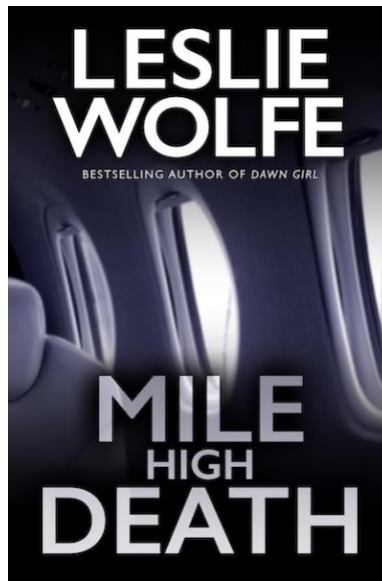
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FREE PREVIEW: *MILE HIGH DEATH*

**She thought his private jet would take her home.
She was dead wrong.**



Your free preview begins on the next page.

FLIGHT

Her heart swelled as she stepped on the heated tarmac. She almost didn't look at the cabbie, while the old and disapproving crab handed her the wheelie with the laptop bag affixed on top. His watery eyes shifted from her beaming smile to her slim figure and then to the slick Gulfstream G650ER waiting with the cabin door open. The sight of the business jet brought out a scoff, followed shortly by a clucking of his tongue, none of which he made the tiniest effort to disguise.

Her smile withered just a tiny bit. She hated being judged by anyone, more so by this cog in the transportation machine, someone who, if he didn't watch it, risked forfeiting his tip.

"Anything wrong?" she asked, ready to give him a piece of her mind in a tone he'd remember for a while, even if it seemed he'd already started grappling with senility.

He just scoffed again and extended his hand, anticipating payment for his service. She obliged, shaking her head slowly, and deciding she wasn't going to let him ruin her mood. Who did he think he was, judging her like that? How did he know that jet wasn't hers to begin with?

She breathed with ease the moment he drove off, leaving her alone on the tarmac, wheelie handle in hand, only some forty yards from the idling plane.

Her beaming smile returned in full force.

She couldn't believe what was happening to her. Experiences like these never happened to girls from Rapid City, Iowa. Only yesterday, after yet another endless sales presentation conducted under the fierce eyes of her boss and the initially indifferent looks of the client, she'd thought she'd have to return to Miami crammed in an economy seat by her boss's side, enduring crappy conversation, spiced with occasional lewdness and permanent halitosis.

But no . . . a late-night delivery of flowers and champagne, delivered in white gloves straight to her hotel room, had accompanied a handwritten note on luscious white cardstock.

"Experience life my way," the note read, and she mused over each letter, breathing in the words that brought butterflies to her stomach.

The white-gloved man waited respectfully by the door, and when she looked up from the note, he delivered his instructions.

She was invited to fly home to Miami in Richard's personal jet, departing from the Houston Executive Airport at noon, or whenever she'd like. Due to concerns for his privacy and to keep the media vampires at bay, she was kindly asked to wear a hat and sunglasses on her way to the airport and refrain from speaking to anyone about the invitation. Mr. Sanford would be delighted to share Miss Lambert's company. He was also regretful he could not join her for dinner that night. Nevertheless, he had made arrangements for her and would be thrilled if she would say yes.

She couldn't find words; her throat, constricted by emotion, barely allowed her to nod and utter her approval. Then she quickly grabbed her purse and checked her looks in the mirror.

Enchanted, she followed the young man downstairs to the restaurant, stepping quickly and quietly on her stilettos, the sound of her heels smothered by the plush carpeting of the luxury hotel. She was surprised that Brad, her boss, had sprung for such a nice stay; probably he'd matched their travel budget with the size of the prospect he was trying to impress.

The man held the door for her as she entered Mastro's Steakhouse, an exquisite culinary landmark she didn't have a travel budget for. It didn't seem to matter, when she was led directly by a smiling hostess to an entire area that had been cordoned off, keeping curious guests at bay.

A single table was set on an impeccable, white damask cloth, a white rose in a tall, crystal vase marking its center. Another card leaned against the thin, tall cylinder.

"Myra, have dinner with me," the card read, *"at least in spirit if not in person. Until tomorrow, we can only dream."*

Her moist eyes lingered on the letters spelling her name. He had a way with words, she had to admit. He was unparalleled at making a girl feel special, and she'd almost forgotten she'd overheard Richard order three dozen roses for his wife as a wedding anniversary gift. Okay, so he wasn't going to be hers forever; he was married. Bummer . . . but still.

She stopped reminiscing and filled her lungs with the hot and humid air, loaded with hints of jet fuel and exhaust, and the scent of sweltering asphalt under the summer sun. She approached the jet, wondering what the trip would be like. How Richard would be.

She was ten yards from the plane's door when he appeared at the top of the steps, as breathtaking as she remembered him from yesterday's excruciating overview of Southeast Chemical and Paper product offering and special terms for high-volume contracts.

There was a ruggedness to his handsome features, an intensity in his eyes that brought butterflies to her stomach, anticipating the moment he'd touch her skin, leaving searing traces where his fingers would wander. When their eyes met, a spark traveled through her entire body and stretched her lips in an excited smile. She playfully tilted her head to the side and stopped, waiting for him to close the distance.

As he did, his eyes tensed, while traveling her body from head to toe and back. He lingered a little where the hem of her tight skirt touched her thighs, then found the curves of her full breasts, where the silk of her white blouse exposed her tan skin.

Without a word, he grabbed the handle of her wheelie, his eyes locked with hers, intense, a sense of dire urgency conveyed in the directness of the gaze, so dire it prickled her skin with goosebumps and brought a flicker of a frown to her forehead.

She followed him, nevertheless, her hand melting in his firm grip, letting him lead her aboard the idling aircraft.

"Where would you like me to sit?" she asked, finding herself flustered and hesitant all of a sudden, an unfamiliar feeling for her. She'd always been brave, unyielding, determined. That's how she made it out of Iowa and had built a life for herself in Miami, as an account executive for a Fortune 500 company. But this man had a perplexing effect on her. She seemed to be subdued entirely to his will, as if she'd lost the ability to think for herself somewhere between the flower and champagne delivery last night and the solo dinner that had followed.

He closed the aircraft door and locked it, then laughed, turning to face her. He grabbed her hand with a playful smile that didn't reach his tense, dark eyes.

"It's just the two of us, so, wherever you like."

She swallowed, feeling wary, as a chill traveled down her spine.

"How about the pilot?" she asked.

"You're looking at him," he replied, his low voice eager, the same urgency coming across in the way the words were spoken. "Why don't you join me in the cockpit?"

Her full-bloom smile returned, while her uneasiness dissipated. She'd never seen the inside of a jet's cockpit before.

She followed his lead and took a seat by his side. He fastened her seatbelt, his hands brushing against her body and sending waves of excitement through her heated skin. He helped her put on her headset, his fingers getting caught in her

long, wavy hair. Not by accident, she was sure, and the thought of that brought another round of butterflies, just as he was getting cleared for takeoff by the Houston Executive Airport tower.

"You've completely ruined commercial flying for me," she said playfully. "How will I ever be able to do my job, flying economy at least two times a week?"

He just grinned, looking at her for a long, loaded moment. Then he refocused on his controls, flying the plane without a word. Tension had tightly clenched his jaws, muscles knotting under his skin. She wondered why. There was something off about him, his reactions to seeing her, to her being there with him, in that tight space, all alone with him in the sky.

He touched a few controls, and then released the buckle of his seatbelt.

"Autopilot's on, and we're free to move around the cabin," he said, his voice a bit colder than she'd heard him speak to her in her dreams.

She followed him toward the back of the plane and managed to smile when he offered her a glass of champagne.

She dipped her lips in the chilled liquid. "How long is the flight?"

He abandoned his glass on the small table and touched her hair. "Long enough," he replied with a waning smile. He took the glass from her hand and led her to the back of the plane, her hand numb in his tight grip. When he stopped and looked at her, his gaze chilled the blood in her veins. His eyes were cold, dark, and lusting with an intensity she hadn't seen before. For a brief and illogical moment, she thought of screaming and running away, but who would hear her, and where would she go?

Somehow, between yesterday's magic and today's reality, her dream had turned into a nightmare.

She forced her lungs to draw air and her hands to stop shaking.

He opened the door to a rear compartment that had been lushly decorated as an inflight bedroom and led her inside, his grip on her hand just as merciless, his gaze intensifying with unspoken menace.

She tried to pull back, but he easily held her in place, not releasing her wrist. The corners of his mouth flickered with a smirk as his left hand gently caressed her long, dark hair, softly playing with the curls, while his eyes drilled into hers.

"Please," she whimpered, too scared to think straight. "I—"

He grabbed a fistful of her hair and pulled down forcefully, forcing her head back. Then he ripped her blouse off with a quick gesture, leaning over her with a grin of lustful and merciless anticipation.

She screamed until her lungs were empty of air, then drew breath and let out another shriek, her wails covered by the jet engines and his laughter.

"You and I are going to have so much fun, my darling Gen," he said, undoing his zipper. "You'll finally get what you really want."

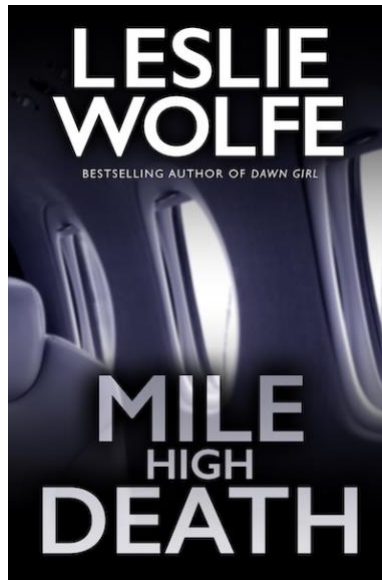
Stunned, she stared into his deathly eyes. "My name's not—"

He slapped her hard across the face. He licked his lips as he watched her eyes tear up and the blood stain her swollen mouth. He tasted that bit of redness while his hands traveled lower on her body, unyielding.

"Oh, my darling, *darling* Gen," he whispered in her ear, his voice menacing, an evil foreboding that chilled her to the bone. "I've been dreaming of this moment since the day I met you."

Against all reason, she screamed.

**She can scream all she wants.
The only man who can hear her is enjoying it.**



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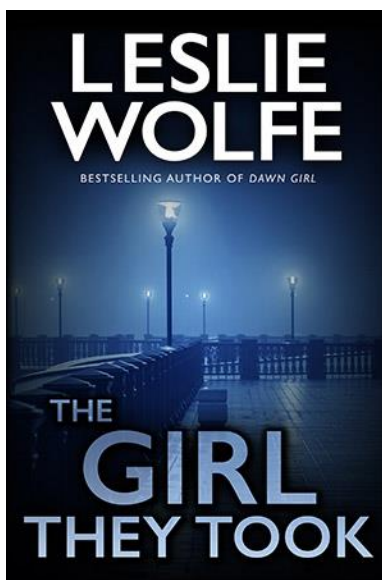
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FREE PREVIEW: *THE GIRL THEY TOOK*

**Onstage, her little girl was playing Gretel.
Offstage, real monsters were waiting.**



Your free preview begins on the next page.

Gone

Seven minutes before curtain raise, her daughter Paige had the worst case of the hiccups.

The small cast of the school play was gathered around her, and that only made things worse. Her Paige wasn't one to love an audience, especially when she wasn't up to par for the task. She'd hid her glittery face against Miriam's jeans and refused to leave the comfort of her mother's leg.

"I'm so sorry," Miriam had said, looking at the teacher, Mrs. Langhorne. The woman smiled, feigning understanding and compassion, when her eyes glinted with impatient irritation as if it were Miriam's fault Paige had the hiccups. Or Paige's even. "I tried everything. I gave her water, the other teacher, Mr.—"

"Mowrey, yes," Mrs. Langhorne replied, shooting her wristwatch another concerned look.

"Yes, he tried to talk her out of it." Mrs. Langhorne sighed, tapping her heel impatiently against the scratched, wooden floor of the theater backstage. "This is not exactly a Broadway show if you know what I mean," Miriam pleaded in a lower voice. "We can be a few minutes late if need be."

The woman rolled her eyes, a quick gesture she tried to hide under her long lashes and a quick turn of her head to the side. "This is the Universal Stage Theater." She sounded as if she was about to choke on her own indignation. "The school went through a lot of trouble to secure this venue on a Saturday evening, Mrs. Welsh. We might as well behave accordingly and be on time."

Miriam pressed her lips tightly together, gently caressing her daughter's curly, red hair and counting the seconds between hiccups. She wished she could tell that woman everything that was crossing her mind at the time but couldn't. Not if she wanted Paige to continue to attend the classes of the exclusive St. Moritz school. Even at the ridiculous tuition they were charging, the waiting lists were a mile long, and kids had their names on them since birth. That was, of course, if parents could make the commitment to pay fifty grand a year for their offspring's exclusive education.

Two other children, including the little boy who played Hansel, whispered something and giggled, shooting her daughter amused looks. Paige whimpered against her leg, the barely noticeable sound interrupted by a loud "Hic."

"Let me try something, if I may," a man asked in a low whisper, approaching from a dressing room. He was dressed for the stage and wore a mask and woodworker's coveralls with fake stains applied with stage makeup. Through the holes of the mask, his eyes seemed like anthracite.

Miriam looked at her watch and groaned. Two minutes until curtain raise. "Sure."

The man took Paige's hand gently and waited until the little girl look at him. "Wanna get rid of these hiccups so we can do the play and go home and watch TV?" He still whispered, no one else but the three of them privy to their conversation.

Paige nodded. "Hic."

The man held his hands in the air and looked at Miriam briefly as if asking permission again. "Hiccups are nothing but spasms of the diaphragm. Sometimes," he touched Paige's stomach right under her sternum with one expertly placed finger, "all you have to do is push the right button." He held his finger pressed against Paige's diaphragm for a few seconds, then took a step back. "Done." He grabbed both Paige's hands into his. "I'm willing to bet you one dollar you won't be hiccupping again today." There was laughter in his whispered voice.

Paige seemed disappointed. Maybe it was the thought of the dollar she wasn't going to earn, or perhaps she had stage fright like Miriam suspected.

Crouching by her side, Miriam arranged her long, auburn curls and straightened her costume. She'd inherited Miriam's hair and complexion. She quickly wiped a fleck of glitter off her nose and put a swift kiss on her freckled cheek.

"Mom," Paige protested, shooting the other kids an embarrassed look.

So soon. She was only eight.

Mrs. Langhorne clapped her hands in typical foreman-on-the-floor style, steering the kids toward their places for curtain raise.

Rushing to her seat and trying to step on the balls of her feet to keep the clicking of her high heels to a minimum, Miriam barely got there in time for curtain raise. She had an aisle seat, and the one next to her was still empty. Max, her husband, wasn't there yet. She checked her phone and saw a text message apologizing for a work-related delay that couldn't be avoided.

Across from the aisle, another empty seat caught her attention. Paige's father, Darrel, hadn't arrived either. Miriam swallowed a bitter sigh. Tonight, Paige would learn how to act in front of a sizeable audience and how to deal with disappointment.

The theater was large, equipped with comfortable plush seats spaced to leave plenty of legroom. Miriam sunk in her seat, happy to be off her feet after what had seemed an endless day. She'd worked a few hours that morning, dealing with a staffing shortage at the pharmacy, then had rushed home to fix lunch and get Paige ready for the performance. They'd rehearsed lines together the entire week, to the point where Miriam had dreamt she was Gretel herself one night. She was beyond ready to be done with the school play, but it had been a wonderful opportunity for her to spend more time with her daughter. Thankfully, all she had to do after lunch and a quick nap for Paige was her hair, her nails with plenty of glitter, and another fitting of her costume, with last-minute sewing of hidden clasps required to keep the darn thing in place.

But Paige looked beautiful as Gretel, her long hair brought forward on her shoulders, her freckles picture-perfect, her starched white apron shining over her burgundy gathered skirt with ruffles, her smile beaming, full of confidence. Of course, that was at home, in the sanctity of her own bedroom. As soon as they'd reached the majestic theater, everything changed. She started trembling at first, then she needed the restroom three times in twenty-five minutes. Then the hiccups came.

But it was all sorted out now, and Miriam could rest for a few minutes. Thankfully, Paige's appearance on the stage was flawless, her first lines perfectly articulated, her voice strong, fearless. Whatever stage fright monsters had plagued her were gone as if they'd never existed.

Her little girl was a natural.

Mouthing the lines as Paige acted them, Miriam held back tears. Something tugged at her heart seeing her little girl there, vulnerable and brave in front of all those people, elbows locked with the boy who played Hansel, playfully jumping and walking in circles on her thin legs as if the whole world was hers. She was growing up so fast... too fast. Soon she'd be gone, a young woman with a life of her own, a house of her own, children of her own.

Among enthusiastic cheering from the gathering of parents, a gentle tap on her shoulder got her attention. "Excuse me, ma'am?"

She turned. A man leaned toward her to keep his voice down and still be heard while speaking with her. "Yes?"

"Do you have a red Subaru, with the tag number, um," he read from a note in his hand, "GHR-G12?"

She frowned. She'd never been able to remember her tag, but she'd driven her burgundy Subaru Forester tonight. "Yes, what's wrong?"

The man straightened his back, but not completely, still hunched forward, his hands clasped together. "I'm so sorry, ma'am, but I'm afraid I caused it some damage when I pulled out of the lot." He threw a look over his shoulder. "The usher told me where to find you."

She sighed, screwing her eyes shut for a brief moment. One minute of peace, and it had to be shattered by this klutz who couldn't drive straight for the life of him. Son of a bitch. At least he'd had the sense to own up to his crap, instead of disappearing and leaving her with a dent or whatever, to fix on her own. That much deserved some respect.

She threw Paige a regretful look, wishing she didn't have to leave the play to deal with the car nonsense. At least Paige wasn't paying attention to her, engulfed in her act, spreading confetti as breadcrumbs from her cute little brown satchel.

Miriam stood and followed the man who kept walking with his shoulders hunched forward and his head lowered as if begging forgiveness with every fiber of his body. It was rare to see someone acting like that these days when people didn't have decent morals anymore.

She turned toward the theater exit, but the man gently touched her elbow. "Follow me; it's shorter this way," he said, pointing toward a half-lit corridor that led to the now-closed coffee shop. Frowning, she tried to remember where she'd parked. By the time they arrived, the front parking lot was full, and she'd parked on the side, but which side? Torn between wanting to get back into her seat and some unnerving gut feeling, she hesitated but eventually gave in. The man, wearing a dark jacket zipped up to his chin, seemed kind, humble even, deeply embarrassed to find himself in that situation. He wore a ball cap that shaded his eyes in the dim light, but Miriam could tell he was smiling apologetically, showing two rows of teeth slightly stained by tobacco use. His beard was trim and dark, not a strand of gray in it. He must've been young, maybe even younger than her.

As they approached the door, her footsteps resounding loudly on the marble corridor, he fell behind a little as if getting ready to hold the door for her and let her exit first. "After you, ma'am," he'd said in a strangely excited voice.

That was the last thing she remembered before everything went dark. The half-baked question about that nuance in his voice. Why the excitement? What was he—

Then the blow to her head that had sent shards of light in her skull before darkness took ahold of her mind.

When she came to, she was lying on the floor in what must've been the theater's janitorial closet, the smell of Pine-Sol and chlorine bleach unmistakable. Pitch dark except for a faint sliver of light coming in under the door, it was enough for Miriam to get grounded. Ignoring the thumping in her skull, she rose to her feet and tried the door handle, silently praying.

It opened without any resistance.

A thought zapped like lightning through her mind, leaving her breathless, her heart beating hard and fast against her rib cage.

Paige.

She ran all the way back through the corridor, noticing things were slightly different. Most lights were off now. There was an eerie silence, where before, there used to be music coming from the stage, the high-pitched voices of the children, and the rhythmic clapping of the audience. Now the only rhythm she could hear was the frenetic beating of her own heart and the clacking of her high-heeled boots against the marble as she was rushing to find her little girl.

When she finally reached the auditorium entrance, she gasped. The doors were wide open, and the auditorium was shrouded in darkness.

Where her daughter had played Gretel in front of a cheering audience, only two faint stage lights remained. The theater was deserted and eerily silent; the only sound she could hear was her own heart, pounding in a frenzy against her chest.

"Paige," she called loudly, and the echo of her voice reverberated in the wide, empty space.

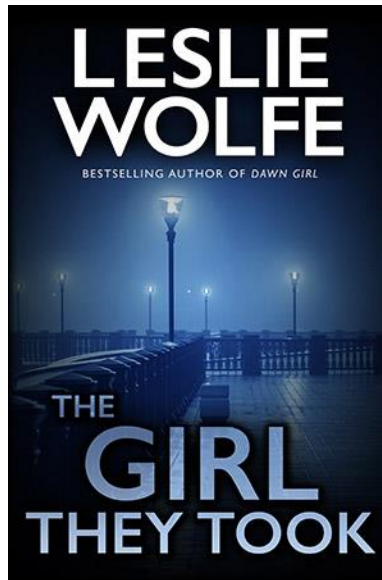
For a moment, she considered searching the backstage area where she'd last been with Paige before the play had started, but it made no sense. Those rooms were a mere curtain away, and not a sound came from there.

She rushed toward the main entrance and pushed the massive glass door. It opened after opposing a brief resistance, and an alarm sounded. She stepped outside and stopped sharply at the top of the stairs, stunned, her blood turned to icicles. Darkness had fallen, thick and filled with ocean mist, lampposts like ghosts sprinkling yellow haloes against the sky.

The place where she'd parked her car was deserted, as was the entire parking lot. She was the only one there.

Paige was gone. They'd taken her little girl.

**They don't need her father to be willing.
They just need him to hear her scream.**



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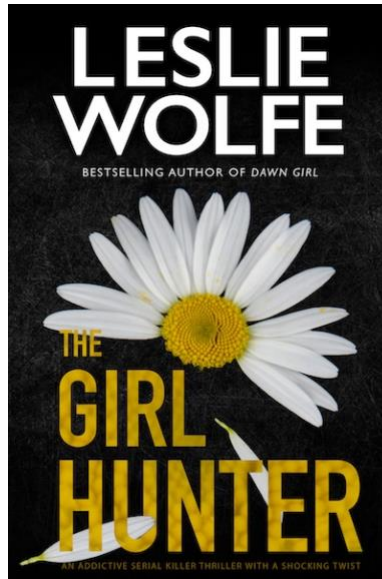
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FREE PREVIEW: *THE GIRL HUNTER*

**For seven months, he made her life hell.
Now she's begging to go back.**



Your free preview begins on the next page.

Run!

The swamp falls quiet when I scream.

My clipped cry, quickly smothered as my shaking hand rushes to cover my gaping mouth, leaves the stage open for the concert of crickets, frogs, and countless other critters that call the Florida Everglades their home. Within half a heartbeat, the cacophony of sounds is back in full force as if I wasn't even there.

Gasping for air, I lean against the thick trunk of a bald cypress covered in Spanish moss and listen intently. Not too far behind, I pick up the sound of a twig cracking. My hand touches my chest in an instinctive attempt to soothe the panic of my thumping heart when I sense his approach, drawing closer with every step.

"Where are you, sweet little Daisy?" His voice, coarse and lewd and repulsive, seems tinged with laughter, but I know better. It's the anticipation of the hunt, the excitement that rushes through his veins at the thought of seeing me bleed, writhing in pain at his feet, begging for his mercy.

And he's drawing closer with every step, crunching rotting leaves and palm fronds under his boots, seeding unspeakable fear in my blood. It takes every ounce of willpower I have to not dash away from there screaming and running as fast as I can. I stand still, holding my breath, knowing that when I set foot out in the open, and he sees me, he'll strike me down mercilessly.

He never misses.

I have the scars to prove it.

My knees are shaking, and my breath, shallow and raspy and shattered, will soon let him know where I'm hiding. I have to move before he gets too close to me. Barely controlling the suffocating sense of dread that rises from my chest, I look for the next tree wide enough to provide some cover.

The closest one is at the edge of some stagnant water, and a gator might be lying in wait near its roots. There's another one, some fifty feet away, rooted entirely on dry land. But fifty feet seems like an unbelievable challenge when he's out there, just a few yards away, hunting for me.

Careful not to be seen, I pick up a fistful of dirt from the ground, then weigh it in my hand, waiting still for him to draw closer. I can hear the limp in his step, in the way he grunts when he puts weight on his left foot, muttering swear words at every step. Still, he's coming.

I catch a glimpse of him as he approaches. I see him only for a split second through the curtain of trees and waterfalling moss. His face is etched in stone, the anticipation of the hunt written in every feature and every line. The half-smile, half-grimace stretching his mouth is an omen of the fate he has in store for me. But my eyes are drawn to the crossbow he carries with ease in his right hand, a small, compact weapon that can send death my way without making the tiniest sound. Only slightly larger than a full-sized handgun, the thing from hell can fire multiple arrows without reloading.

I've seen the damage it can do.

I've felt its arrows ripping through my flesh.

Fear choking me, I shift in place without realizing it, crunching dry leaves under my feet. The noise, barely noticeable under the cover of a myriad critters bustling in the falling night, catches his attention from yards away. He freezes in place, searching for me, turning only his head and, with it, the sights of that wretched crossbow.

I hold my breath.

And wait.

Seconds go by, seeming like hours. Insects claim their blood meal from my skin, but I barely notice them. My eyes stay riveted on the silhouette I can barely distinguish beyond layered curtains of moss. The wind picks up just a smidge and shifts the moss chains near me gently, quietly. One tendril touches my face, and I nearly flinch, but I remain still, watching him, waiting for the right time to bolt.

An owl's hoot nearby makes him turn my head in my direction, but he doesn't see me. He looks right past me, licking his lips and grinning.

"Come on, dear girl, show yourself." His voice is almost convincing. "Can't let the night crawlers hunt you." A throaty chuckle. "You're mine."

He takes a few steps further down the path and stops again, his head slightly tilted, probably listening intently. I look at the dirt in my hand, planning my throw. Hopefully, the noise it will make when it hits the palmettos across the path will get his attention for long enough to allow me to run.

Seeing the black dirt on my skin chokes me. The smells of damp earth, of bog and mist and saltwater and death, snatch my weary mind and fill it with memories too painful to endure.

David.

My husband, the love of my life, is gone.

Images flash before my eyes. His pale skin covered in the dirt that I threw over his still-warm body. His hands, marked by a struggle that ended in blood, rest over his chest. His once vibrant, loving eyes now forever closed.

I am the one who consigned him to the damp earth of the Glades. With my own hands. And I should've been there, buried by his side. Not here, fighting to survive, clinging to a life that made no sense without him.

A sob climbs forcefully from my chest, demanding to be heard among other creatures' agonizing calls. I manage to stifle it, covering my mouth with the back of my hand and blinking away tears.

For a brief moment, I consider coming out in the open and waving my arms around until an arrow or two extinguished the pain in my chest. But I know what would happen if I did. I wouldn't find the craved relief of death, only the renewed purgatory of being that brute's prisoner.

I fill my lungs with humid, sticky air and find the courage to throw the fistful of dirt across the path, aiming at a cluster of thriving palmettos where I could've easily hidden.

The hunter freezes in place the moment he hears the sound. Slowly and quietly, he turns in place and takes two steps toward the palmetto brush, studying it intently.

That's when I bolt.

I try to move as silently as I can, but he still hears me. By the time he's ready to fire his arrow, I reach the cover of the big cypress, fighting to slow my breathing just a little.

"Sneaky, my little Daisy girl," he says. Some of the earlier excitement in his voice is now replaced with budding anger. "Enough games for tonight. It's getting late, and I have plans for you." His lustful, blood-curdling cackles silence the frogs for a moment. "Boy, do I have plans for you? You'll love every minute of it."

His words fill my heart with terror. Whatever he promises, he delivers tenfold. I've learned that the hard way. His words are paralyzing me like the stare of a deadly snake right before the lethal bite.

He starts coming toward me with a decisive, heavy-footed step, favoring his right leg. My heart thumps against my chest as I realize I can't stay put for much longer, and I'm not ready to bolt again. The last remnants of daylight are disintegrating quickly like gossamer blown in the wind, and I can barely see a few feet ahead of me. Moss tendrils wave gently in the calm breeze like ghosts haunting the forest from hell.

My knees suddenly weak, I hold on to the tree trunk and steady myself. "Snap out of it already," I tell myself, an angry whisper between clenched teeth.

I'll make it. I know I will.

I have to.

He's almost close enough to grab my arm when I run as fast as I can, zigzagging between trees, holding my breath and willing myself to not look back.

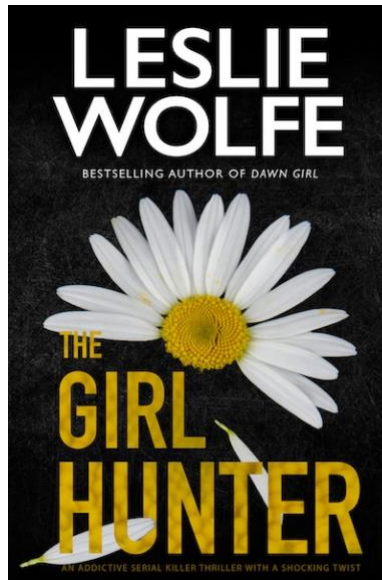
"Ah, there you are," he says, sending shivers down my spine.

He follows, closing in despite his limp. I don't look back; I just hear his breath and heavy footfalls as I dash desperately left and right, knowing it's my only chance to escape his arrows.

The sound of a cord snapping taut rips through the air like a whip.

I shriek and fall to the ground, breathless.

**He doesn't want her dead.
He wants her back.**



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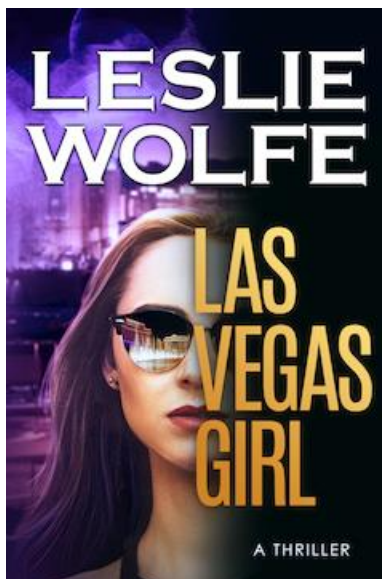
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BAXTER & HOLT SERIES

FREE PREVIEW: *LAS VEGAS GIRL*

She stepped into the elevator with a stranger. Only one of them was coming down alive.



Your free preview begins on the next page.

ELEVATOR RIDE

Her smile waned when the elevator doors slid open and her gaze met the scrutiny of the stranger. She hesitated before stepping in, looked left and right uneasily, hoping there'd be other hotel guests to ride in the elevator, so she wouldn't have to share it alone with that man. No one came.

Her step faltered, and her hand grabbed the doorframe, afraid to let go, still unsure of what to do. The hotel lobby sizzled with life and excitement and sparkled in a million colors, as can only be seen in Vegas. Nearby, clusters of gaming tables and slot machines were surrounded by tourists, and cheers erupted every now and then, almost covering the ringing of bells and the digital sound of tokens overflowing in silver trays, while the actual winnings printed silently on thermal paper in coupons redeemable at the cashier's desk. That was Las Vegas: alive, filled with adrenaline, forever young at heart. Her town.

The elevator had a glass wall, overlooking the sumptuous lobby. As the cage climbed higher and higher, riders could feel the whole world at their feet. She was at home here, amid scores of rowdy tourists and intoxicated hollers, among beautiful young women dressed provocatively, even if only for a weekend.

She loved riding in those elevators. Nothing bad was going to happen, not with so many people watching.

She forced some air into her lungs and stepped in, still hesitant. The doors whooshed to a close, and the elevator set in motion. She willed herself to look through the glass at the effervescent lobby, as the ruckus grew more distant with each floor. She didn't want to look at the man, but she felt his gaze burn into her flesh. She shot a brief glance in his direction, as she casually let her eyes wander toward the elevator's floor display.

The man was tall and well-built, strong, even if a bit hunchbacked. He wore a dark gray hoodie, all zipped up, and faded jeans. He'd pulled his hood up on top of a baseball cap bearing the colors of the New York Mets. A pair of reflective sunglasses completed his attire, and, despite the dim lights in the elevator cabin, he didn't remove them. The rest of his face was covered by the raised collar of his hoodie, leaving just an inch of his face visible, not more.

She registered all the details, and as she did, she desperately tried to ignore the alarm bells going off in her mind. Who was this man, and why was he staring at her? He was as anonymous as someone could be, and even if she'd studied him for a full minute instead of just shooting him a passing glance, she wouldn't be able to describe him to anyone. Just a ghost in a hoodie and a baseball cap.

Then she noticed the command panel near the doors. Only her floor number was lit, eighteen. She remembered pressing the button herself, as soon as she'd climbed inside the cabin. Where was *he* going? Maybe she should get off that elevator already. Maybe she should've listened to her gut and waited for the next ride up.

A familiar chime, and the elevator stopped on the fifth floor, and a young couple entered the cabin giggling and holding hands, oblivious to anyone else but each other. She breathed and noticed the stranger withdrew a little more toward the side wall. The young girl pressed the number eleven, and the elevator slowly set in motion.

That was fate giving her another chance, she thought, as she decided to get off the elevator with those two, on the eleventh floor. Then she'd go back downstairs, wait for the stranger to get lost somewhere, and not go back upstairs until

she found Dan. She'd call him to apologize, invent something that would explain why she'd stood him up. Anything, only not to go back to her room alone, when the creepy stranger knew what floor she was on.

A chime and the elevator came to a gentle stop on the eleventh floor. The young couple, entangled in a breathless kiss, almost missed it but eventually proceeded out of the cabin, and she took one step toward the door.

"This isn't your stop, Miss," the stranger said, and the sound of his voice sent shivers down her spine.

Instead of bursting through that door, she froze in place, petrified as if she'd seen a snake, and then turned to look at him. "Do I know you?"

The stranger shook his head and pointed toward the command panel that showed the number eighteen lit up. Just then, before she could will herself to make it through those doors, they closed, and the cabin started climbing again.

Her breath caught, and she withdrew toward the side wall, putting as much distance between herself and the stranger as she possibly could. She risked throwing the man another glance and thought she saw a hint of a grin, a flicker of tension tugging at the corner of his mouth.

With an abrupt move, she reached out and pressed the lobby button, then resumed leaning against the wall, staring at the floor display.

"I forgot something," she said, trying to sound as casual as possible, "I need to go back down."

On the eighteenth floor, the doors opened with the same light chime and quiet whoosh. The stranger walked past her, then stopped in the doorway and checked the hallway with quick glances.

She was just about to breathe with ease when he turned around and grabbed her arm with a steeled grip, yanking her out of the cabin.

"No, you don't," he mumbled, "you're not going anywhere."

She screamed, a split second of a blood-curdling shrill that echoed in the vast open-ceiling lobby that extended all the way to the top floor. No one paid attention; lost in the general noise coming from downstairs, her scream didn't draw any concern. It didn't last long either. As soon as the man pulled her out of the elevator, he covered her mouth with his other hand, and her cry for help died, stifled.

He shoved her forcefully against the wall next to the elevator call buttons and let go of her arm, pinning her in place under the weight of his body. Then his hands found her throat and started squeezing. She stared at him with wide-open eyes, trying to see anything beyond the reflective lenses of his sunglasses, while her lungs screamed for another gasp of air. She kicked and writhed, desperately clawing at his hands to free herself from his deathly grip.

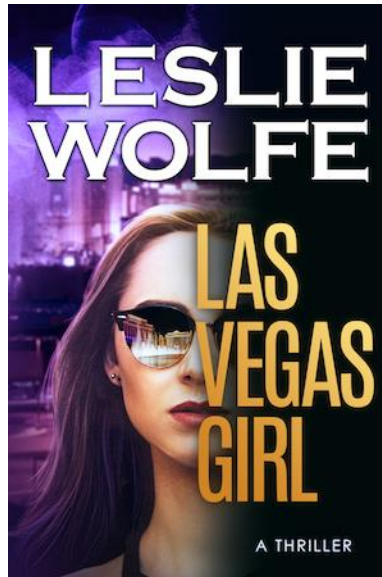
With each passing second, her strength faded, and her world turned darker, unable to move, to fight anymore. The man finally let go. Her lifeless body fell into a heap at his feet, and he stood there for a brief moment, panting, not taking his eyes off her.

Then he picked her up with ease and carried her to the edge of the corridor that opened to an eighteen-floor drop, all the way to the crowded lobby below. Effortlessly, he threw her body over the rail and watched it fall without a sound.

The noises downstairs continued unabated for a few seconds more, then they stopped for a split moment, when her lifeless body crashed against the luxurious, pearl marble floor. Then the crowd parted, forming a circle around her body, while screams erupted everywhere, filling the vast lobby with waves of horror.

His cue to disappear.

**She thought someone would notice if she screamed.
They noticed when she hit the floor.**



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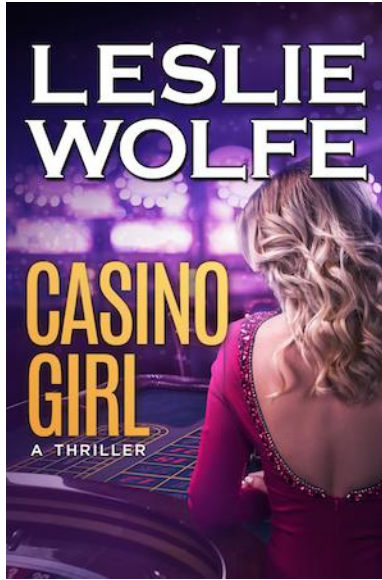
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FREE PREVIEW: *CASINO GIRL*

She was paid to make men watch. Not one of them saw her dying.



Your free preview begins on the next page.

ODDS

They're called quasi-strippers.

They don't really bare it all, like real strippers do behind the darkened glass doors of specialty adult clubs, but they aren't exactly fully dressed either while they perform.

Crystal preferred the term exotic dancer. Five nights a week she took the small stage at the center of the high-limit blackjack tables, in the glamorous Scala Casino. Five nights a week she danced and smiled and undulated her perfect body to the rhythm of sultry songs, carefully chosen to lure the gamblers' attention away from the cards and the ever-diminishing stacks of their chips. In the background, nothing is more Vegas than the Scala Casino floor, filled with a million noises, dazzling lights, and excess adrenaline. Nothing is more alive.

That's where she belonged, among the glitter and the gold, the glitzy and the rich.

She wore strappy lingerie with black and gold lace accents on beige silk, designed to trick the mind's eye into believing she was naked. Black, knee-high stiletto boots completed her attire, her black, garter-belt straps attached to them, sexy and kinky and fun. The appreciative looks she basked in that night told her she'd chosen her ensemble well. It was going to be a profitable evening.

The familiar music seemed a bit too loud, making her wince, a little dizzy. She grabbed the pole tighter, aware she was dancing out of rhythm, but knowing the customers were too far gone to notice. It was almost four in the morning, and by that time, most of them were pleasantly inebriated, high on their own excitement and maybe more, living the Vegas dream.

The only danger was that asshole, Farley, a fat, lewd pig who liked to scream at the girls, giving them a hard time for everything they did, right or wrong regardless. Two minutes of being late or changing clothes mid-shift and she'd get pulled inside the pit manager's office for another scolding session.

But she held her head up during those moments, aware they were going to pass and even more aware they were meant to intimidate her into offering sexual favors in return for a privileged work atmosphere.

Oh, hell, no.

Not ever. Not even if the prick turned blue in the face from too much screaming, or his waiting-to-happen stroke knocked him dead right before her eyes.

But even Stan Farley was looking away that moment, focused on a newly arrived high roller who'd taken a seat at one of the blackjack tables with a view of the stage. She didn't know that one, but judging by the way Farley fawned over him, he must've been someone important.

Someone rich.

Someone who didn't care that the odds at his blackjack table were stacked higher against him, just because the table came with a view of full inviting cleavage and tight little buns.

Hers.

She felt beads of sweat bursting at the roots of her hair and forced some stale air into her lungs. Maybe the air conditioning was off, or something. The cigar smoke made it almost unbreathable, but it was an acceptable tradeoff for being allowed to work the high roller pit, not some fifty-cents-minimum roulette floor, where the tips were always Washingtons, never a Franklin and rarely a Lincoln, and not a whole lot of them to count at the end of a shift anyway.

No, she'd been lucky, and her luck had started to play in her favor about a month after she'd been hired. For that she probably had Devine to thank.

Her sweaty palms made it difficult for her to get a good grip on the shiny, chrome pole, but she managed a back hook spin and landed facing Devine. Her best friend danced some 30 feet away, on a small, elevated stage set among four, high-limit, roulette tables.

She waited until she could make eye contact with Devine and waved discreetly at her best friend. Just seeing her smile back made her feel less lonely, less vulnerable. Maybe she was going to be okay. Maybe things would work out after all.

Without realizing, she put her palm on her belly in a soft, caressing gesture, aimed to comfort the tiny sparkle of life growing inside her. She wasn't showing a baby bump yet, but soon that would change, and with it, her entire life as she knew it.

She skipped out of rhythm again, but soon snapped out of her trance, motivated by Farley's mean glare. She focused on her customers for a while and, within a few minutes of smiling provocatively and wiggling her rear, a crisp fifty-dollar bill landed under the thin strap of her thong, delivered by long, hairy fingers that reached lower and lingered longer than was necessary.

Sometimes she was happy the payout was 6:5 instead of 3:2 on a blackjack at the tables facing her; those jerks deserved to pay.

But she smiled at the man who'd delivered the tip and mocked a reverence without letting go of the pole. Then she let herself fall into a back bend and frowned when she saw Farley was approaching.

"What the hell is wrong with you, huh?" he snapped, after grabbing her arm and pulling her close. The music was loud, and no one could hear his words; not that anyone would care if they did. "Could you be bothered to do your job tonight? A deaf penguin has more rhythm than you."

"I'm working it, Stan, what the hell? I haven't taken a break in two hours."

"The hell you are, bitch. You see those bozos? If they're looking at their cards instead of your ass, you ain't earning your keep."

He let go of her arm and disappeared before she could say anything. He was a two-faced creep; with her and the other girls he showed his real charm. For all the patrons and the rest of the Scala staff, he was a perfect gentleman, always dressed in an impeccable suit and starched, white shirts, pleasantly smiling and accommodating.

She knew better than to let him get under her skin.

But her head was spinning, and she held on tight to the pole, not as part of her routine, but for much-needed balance. The music changed, and she welcomed the new beat, one of her favorites. She knew the playlist by heart; the casino had a limited supply of premixed tracks, but the customers didn't seem to care.

Cheers erupted at the table in front of her, and one of the players lifted his arms in the air, beaming. The croupier pushed an impressive pile of chips in front of the man, and she quickly flashed her megawatt smile and made lingering eye contact. He didn't disappoint; he picked one of the chips and sent it flying her way. She caught it gracefully, then placed it on the floor, next to the pole. Her barely-there panties weren't made to hold casino chips.

When she looked up, she startled.

It was him. It was Paul, and he was furious, by the angle of his eyebrows, by the deep ridges flanking his mouth.

He stood right there, next to her stage, glaring at her with a loaded gaze filled with such hatred that her breath caught. He beckoned her to come closer without making a single gesture. She approached him hesitantly and crouched to bring their eyes on the same level, aware not even Farley would dare say a word. She shot a quick glance toward Devine's stage, but she was gone, nowhere in sight.

His eyes drilled into hers, close enough she could see his dilated pupils. Without a word, he shoved a purple and white chip deep inside her bra, then grabbed the thin strap, pulling her closer to him. He said something, keeping his voice low and menacing. She couldn't make out his words but didn't dare to ask. She wanted to explain herself, wanted him to understand her motives, but she couldn't find her words.

She didn't want his money, and she didn't deserve his anger.

When he finally let go of her strap and pushed her away, she almost fell. Her knees were shaking, and she felt the urge to sit for a moment, to catch her breath. She grabbed the pole tightly and did a clumsy back slide against the shiny surface, landing hard on her butt, then folded her legs to the side. She let her head hang low, and her long, wavy hair covered her face, hiding the fear in her eyes until it subsided a little.

Then she wrapped her hands around the pole again, planning to stand and do a pirouette, but her arms and legs felt numb, listless. She tried to breathe, but air refused to enter her lungs. Frantic, she looked around, searching for someone, anyone, who could help. Only one man was looking at her, but her desperate and silent plea was misunderstood.

The man licked his lips, arranged his crotch with a quick gesture, then looked away at another dancer.

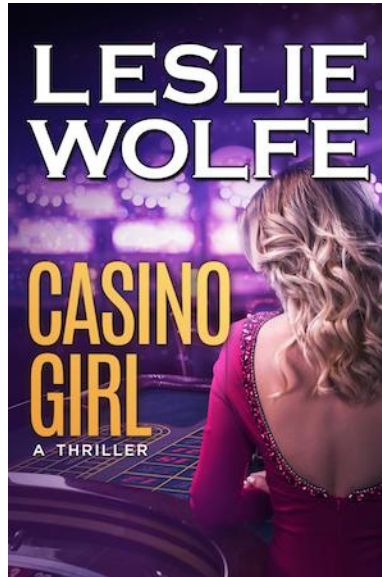
She gasped for air a couple of times, then the bright lights of the casino seemed to dim, inviting darkness to engulf her view of the lively floor. Silence came, heavy, palpable. Against it, not even her own heart beats could be heard.

Defeated, she let go. Her body landed on the stage floor with a loud thump that no one heard. Unnoticed, a white and purple casino chip fell out of her top and rolled onto the floor, stopping under a table.

For a long moment, Farley thought the immobile pose was part of Crystal's routine, some new dance move that she was trying. Customers really enjoyed seeing girls crawling on the stage; it made the viewers feel powerful, superior, in control. By the time Farley realized he'd been wrong, she was already gone. His chubby fingers felt for a pulse and found nothing.

Now he'd have to call the cops and close the pit. His worst nightmare.

She wouldn't take the money and disappear. Someone found another way to silence her.



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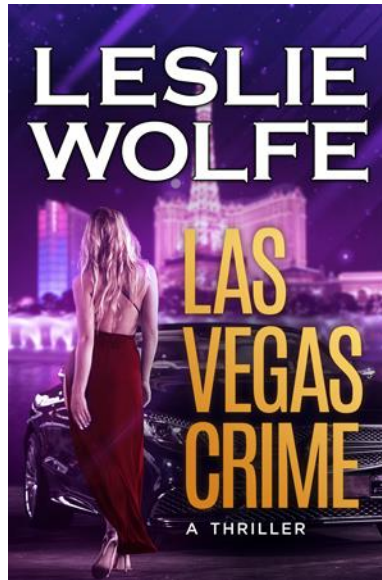
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FREE PREVIEW: *LAS VEGAS CRIME*

She thought the men in uniform had come to help. They'd come to collect her.



Your free preview begins on the next page.

Silent Screams

She struggled to control her sobs but failed miserably. With every mile the man drove into the dark desert, her fear grew, panic overtaking her sense of reason, making it impossible for her to sit still and be quiet like the man had ordered.

"No, please," she whimpered, "I'll disappear. I won't say a word to anyone. I swear," she added in a high-pitched plea, her voice trembling badly.

She stared through a blur of tears at the man's intense eyes, reflected in the rearview mirror. He rarely looked at her, not even when he spoke to her, but when he did, his eyes were ice cold, feral.

She couldn't tell how long they'd been on the road, or how far away from the city they'd traveled. Far enough for darkness to engulf the dazzling lights of Las Vegas, left behind at their brightest and now gone from view. Far enough to know that no matter how loud she'd scream, no one would hear her desperate cries for help. She sat silently, petrified, unable to fight anymore, knowing what Homeboy did to those who disobeyed him.

They had entered the desolate vastness of the Mojave Desert, cold and bleak at night.

Her breath shattered as raw memories swirled in her head, repeating over and over like a broken record.

"Get rid of her," that terrible man had said, "this bitch ain't good for nothin'." The one they called Snowman had curled his lip in disgust and ran his fingers across his throat in a clear gesture, sealing her fate.

She was to be killed.

She remembered how her knees gave and she folded onto the cold, grimy floor, half-naked and barefoot, shaking, sobbing uncontrollably, while the other man, a brute she got to know only as Homeboy, smiled and licked his lips. Then he'd grabbed her arm and dragged her out of that place, mumbling, "Sure, boss, whatever you say."

She'd seen that look on Homeboy's face before.

Maybe she was better off dead than having that animal's hands on her again. Her body still ached from the hours she'd endured at his pleasure. The thought of peace soon to be found, even if in death, calmed her taut nerves. Soon she'd be free, one way or another.

No one dared defy Snowman's orders.

Her mind wandered, numb and absent for a while, as Homeboy drove fast into the night, mile after mile, without saying a word.

A slight chime came from the GPS and he braked, although there was no intersecting road crossing the highway, no available turn to take, just desert dunes, covered in shrubs and cacti, and trolled by scorpions, snakes, and coyotes.

He turned off-road and drove carefully into the desert, climbing over a hill then descending behind it. He didn't immediately stop; he kept on going, putting more and more distance between them and the road, eliminating any chances that someone could see her, could hear her screams.

She felt her heart thumping against her chest, the sound of its terrified beats deafening against the deathly silence of the desert. Fresh tears started rolling down her cheeks and her pleas were left unanswered.

She gasped when he cut the engine, bringing the SUV to a stop. Trembling, she didn't fight back when he grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the vehicle.

"Please," she mumbled, "I'll do whatever you want. Please let me go."

"Can't do that," he replied, his lips stretched in an evil smile that exposed crooked, yellow teeth. "You heard the boss man."

He let go of her arm and reached inside his pocket. Panicked, she bolted in a desperate attempt to save herself. She ran toward the highway, now hidden behind a hill, not feeling the cactus thorns tearing at her flesh, not minding the sharp edges of the desert stones bloodying the soles of her feet.

She'd run a few yards and he hadn't caught up with her yet; hope gave her wings, and she sprang uphill clawing at the stones with her bare hands, desperate to put more distance between the two of them.

She was almost at the top of the hill when his steeled grip bore into her arm, stopping her in place so abruptly that her bleeding feet sent pebbles and sand in the air. Angered, he dragged her back to the SUV and slammed her against the cold metal.

"Nice try, bitch. There's nowhere to go."

She was starting to understand that, to accept it, although every fiber in her body screamed its fear, urged her to fight, to run, to survive. She drew breath hastily and let out a blood-curdling shriek.

Homeboy laughed. "Sure, go ahead, scream. You're giving me a hard-on."

Her scream died, stifled by a sob.

He dug into his pocket and pulled out a small bottle fitted with an eyedropper. With a lewd, sickening smile, he took his time unscrewing the cap and carefully extracted two drops of the clear liquid. Then he grabbed her jaw and forced her lips open.

"No, no," she whimpered, fighting desperately to free herself.

Homeboy just smirked, ignoring her feeble kicks, and squeezed the eyedropper, releasing the liquid into her mouth. Then he held her lips sealed under his heavy hand, forcing her to swallow.

She couldn't detect any strange taste; he'd barely used a drop or two. It couldn't be too bad, she thought, gasping desperately for air as soon as he released his grip.

She felt her tongue becoming numb, then her lips. Panic opened her eyes widely and made her lungs scream for more air. She gasped, feeling an evil numbness taking over her body, reaching her extremities, weakening her knees. A strange sense of dizziness overtook her, making her reach for support, finding none until her body hit the ground. No matter how much she willed herself to move, she lay still on the cold desert dirt, feeling every stab of pain where sharp-edged rocks cut into her flesh.

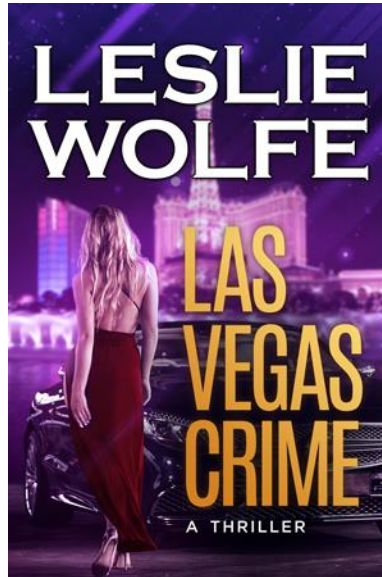
Homeboy crouched near her body with a satisfied grin. He pushed aside a few locks of her hair, clearing her face, touching her frozen lips.

"You won't die," he said, while his hand fumbled with his belt buckle. "Not now, anyway. Not until I'm bored with you."

She forced her lungs to draw air and screamed, then drew another raspy breath and screamed again.

She listened but couldn't hear her own screams. The desert was completely silent, except for the brute's rhythmic grunts.

The cage keeps her locked in. It doesn't keep them out.



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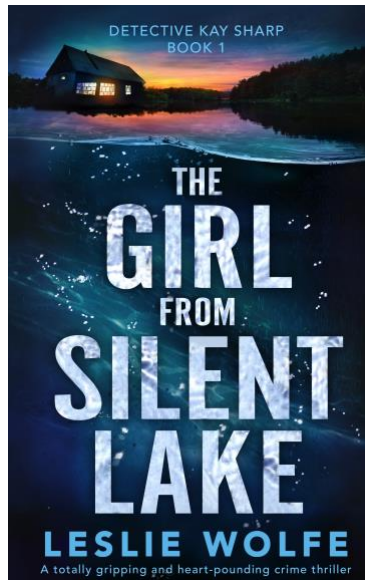
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DETECTIVE KAY SHARP SERIES

FREE PREVIEW: *THE GIRL FROM SILENT LAKE*

He took her and her little girl. Now she's begging him to leave her daughter's room.



Your free preview begins on the next page.

Silence

She watched him through a blur of tears, her heart thumping against her ribcage, plastic ties cutting into her flesh as she struggled to free herself. The man's back was turned to her while he arranged some objects on a tray, the soft metallic clinking a surreal omen that froze her blood and threw her thoughts into a whirlwind of sheer, mindless terror.

She threw her daughter a quick glance, forcing herself to put hope and courage in her tear-filled eyes. Her eight-year-old daughter Hazel was bound on a chair only a few feet from hers. She whimpered, her little chest heaving with every shattered breath. When they locked eyes, Hazel's sobs became louder, muffled by the scarf he'd tied over her mouth, yet still loud enough to get the man's attention.

"Enough with it already," he ordered in a low voice. He turned and took a few determined steps toward Hazel, then stopped, his menacing eyes inches away from her little girl's.

Alison froze.

The man grabbed a strand of Hazel's long hair and played with it, coiling it around his fingers, then leaned closer and inhaled its scent. The girl's terrified gaze seemed to be amusing to him. He let go of her hair and wiped a tear off the child's cheek with his thumb, then licked the salty liquid with a satisfied groan.

"Don't cry," he whispered, "your mommy loves you so much, doesn't she."

Hazel fell quiet, as if too scared to make another sound, but her tears flowed freely down her cheeks, soaking the fabric of the scarf. There was something eerie in the man's voice, in the way he'd whispered those words, a sense of foreboding that sent uncontrollable chills down Alison's spine.

"Please," Alison said, "she's just a little girl."

A lopsided smile tugged at the corner of the man's mouth. "She is, isn't she?" Then he added, sounding almost bitter. "They always are."

Then he turned his back to them, and the clinking of objects being placed on a tray resumed against the cold silence.

He wasn't the woods-dwelling, rags-wearing monster one would imagine capable of kidnapping a mother and her daughter and holding them hostage in a remote cabin. He was clean-shaved and smelled of expensive aftershave, well-dressed with new, expensive clothes, and the cabin where he'd taken them was clean and large. If there was something off about it, that had to be the complete absence of personal objects, although the cabin had clearly been lived in for a while.

He seemed comfortable and habitual about his activities, as if he'd done it many times before. No hesitation in his movement and no fear in his dark eyes when he looked at her, when he seemed to be studying her like he would a piece of furniture or art he'd want to acquire.

From the man's broad shoulders and raven-black hair, Alison's gaze moved on to the spotless white walls and tiled floor. In the far corner of the room, next to the door, the cement grout was stained, something reddish-brown discolored the light gray, porous material. She couldn't take her eyes off that spot, where intersecting grout lines shared a stain that had to have been larger, like a pool of liquid advancing through the seams between the granite tiles and stopping at the wall.

He must've cleaned the tiles, but the liquid had permanently discolored the cement, in testimony of what had happened on that floor.

Blood.

Alison felt a new wave of panic taking over her brain. She willed herself into controlling it, into retaining some shred of command over her racing thoughts. She breathed slowly, holding the air inside her lungs for a few seconds before exhaling it.

The memory of her mother invaded her mind, the smell of cinnamon and the soft tones of her voice telling her, "Why go all the way to the Pacific Coast for a vacation? All by yourself, with a little girl, that isn't safe, sweetie. Not these days. Not anymore. Why don't you and I take Hazel to Savannah instead?"

The sound of her mother's voice resounding in her memory burned her eyes with fresh tears. Had she known what was going to happen? Maybe she'd seen one of her uncanny warning signs, a bloody moon or a stained sunset, signs Alison had always waved off indifferently, attributing them to her mother's Cajun roots, nothing more than baseless superstition.

Oh Mom, she thought, do you see a sign of us coming back home?

She inhaled forcefully once more, steeling her will. She tugged against her restraints, wincing from the pain where the zip ties had cut her skin around her wrists. She sat on a wooden chair, her hands bound behind the straight, narrow back of it. Her ankles had been secured against the square, thick legs of the chair, and no matter how much she forced herself to bend her ankles and snap the ties, all she did was cut even deeper into her flesh.

When he turned and approached her, she whimpered and shook her head, despite her decision to maintain her calm for as long as possible, for her daughter's sake. Panic roared through her body with every step the man took toward her, her eyes riveted on the silver tray he carried, then on the four-legged stool he pushed between her chair and Hazels, setting the tray atop it.

She looked straight at him, trying to read the expression in his dark pupils, the meaning behind his cold smile. As she started to understand, uncontrollable sobs shattered her breath, while the terror flooding her body turned absolute, merciless.

He was never going to let them go. Death was written in his eyes, a silent sentence he was about to execute, welcoming it with a blood lusting smile and the casual demeanor of a man engulfed in a pleasurable Sunday afternoon activity.

My poor baby, she thought, this can't be happening. I can't let it happen.

She frantically fought to free herself. She threw herself to the floor, hoping the chair might break under her weight.

She fell hard, the fall knocking the air out of her lungs for a moment. He pulled her back up with ease, grabbing her with unforgiving fingers that crushed her flesh.

"No, no," she pleaded, choking on her own tears. "Please, let us go. W—we won't say a word, I swear."

He didn't reply; his only reaction to her words was the widening of his smile. Alison fell silent.

Grabbing a bone-colored comb from the tray he combed her hair, taking his time, until it crackled. Her mind raced, trying to anticipate what would come next, grateful he was focused on her and not Hazel.

If he'd only let her go, she thought, clinging to the surreal hope like a drowning man to a straw.

He parted her hair on the middle, from the front all the way to the back, and separated her long strands into two equal sections. Every time his fingers touched her hair or brushed against her skin she shivered, her teeth clacking, her entire being revolting, not knowing when the blow would come, and how. She only knew it would. Soon.

He started braiding her hair, slowly, patiently, seemingly savoring the activity, quietly humming a lullaby. Watching him move, seeing him transposed by the experience, feeling his fingers against her scalp was a living nightmare, one she'd stopped hoping she'd ever wake up from.

"Why?" she whispered, slightly turning her head to face him.

He tugged at her hair to keep her head in place. "Stand still. We're almost done."

When he finished braiding, he secured it with an unusual, hand-crafted hair tie made from what seemed to be leather and adorned with tiny feathers. Then he moved over to her left side and started braiding again, humming the same familiar tune.

For a while, she didn't recognize the tune, only that she knew it. But then her frantic mind started imposing lyrics over his hums. Following her gut, she swallowed her tears and started singing softly.

"—that mockingbird won't sing, Mama's gonna buy you a dia—"

She froze, seeing his reaction to her singing. Instead of softening him up, like she'd hoped, his features had turned to stone, rigid muscles knotting under his skin, his stare intense, burning, his knuckles cracking as he clenched his fists.

"Sing," he ordered, but only a whimper left her lips. "Sing, damn you," he shouted, grabbing her half-finished braid and forcing Alison to turn and face him.

Hazel screamed; a short, muffled scream quickly drowned in tearful sobs.

Alison's voice trembled as she sang out of tune, but he didn't seem to mind.

"If that diamond ring turns brass, Mama's gonna buy you a looking glass," she managed, then sniffled and whimpered, "Please, I'm begging you."

"Sing," he shouted.

She quivered, the lyrics she knew so well suddenly gone from her memory.

"Sing," he repeated, his voice uncompromising. He was almost done braiding her hair; then, what would he do?

Please, God, don't let him touch my baby, she prayed silently. Then, her voice more a whimper than a song, she sang through the rhyme. "And if that looking glass gets broke, Mama's gonna buy you a—"

She stopped when he wrapped the hair tie around the end of her braid. She was shaking badly and felt cold, frozen, despite the late afternoon sunshine coming through the window. In the deathly silence, she heard the birds sing outside the window, oblivious to the nightmare contained between the walls of the isolated cabin.

He looked at Hazel for a long, loaded moment, then reached out and touched the little girl's hair. He seemed to be thinking what to do next.

Alison held her breath, her thoughts frantic. *No, no...*

As if hearing her plea, he walked over to Alison and stopped right in front of her. He studied her face for a long moment without saying or doing anything else.

She swallowed, her throat constricted with unspeakable fear, and forced herself to sing some more. "And if that cart and bull fall down, you'll still be the sweetest little baby—"

Without warning, he ripped open her blouse. She gasped, trying to pull herself away from him by pushing with her feet against the floor, but he held her in place, his hand searing against her bare skin.

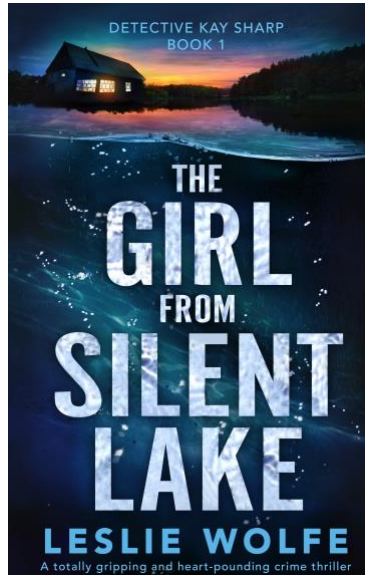
"Please, not in front of my daughter," she pleaded. "I'll do anything you want."

If only Hazel didn't have to witness what was going to happen. If only she didn't have to see her like that.

His laugh reverberated against the empty walls. He leaned closer to her face, so close she felt his heated breath on her face. "I know you'll do anything I want," he replied, still laughing. "Are you ready?"

The blue jays that had been filling the valley with their chirping fell silent all at once when her scream ripped through the clear mountain air.

She can hear her daughter through the ceiling. She's terrified of what the silence will mean.



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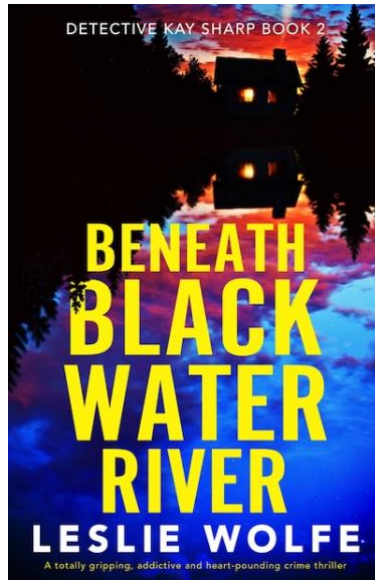
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FREE PREVIEW: *BENEATH BLACKWATER RIVER*

A murdered girl. A missing child's locket. Fourteen years no one can explain.



Your free preview begins on the next page.

Falls

Malia wore a flower in her hair.

Not just any kind of flower; she'd gone through online shopping hell to get the plumeria blossom delivered to the hotel that morning, just in time for her planned trip to Blackwater River Falls. She'd paid a fortune for it, worth every cent.

She wore the scented bloom over her left ear, a Hawaiian custom that told the entire world her heart was taken. By a twenty-seven-year-old, good-looking, and slightly awkward computer nerd from San Francisco named Tobias Grabowsky, who'd probably miss the symbolic meaning of the plumeria, and that was if he even noticed it in the first place.

She didn't care. She still wanted the flower to be just right, her hair perfectly shiny, the scent of the petals surrounding her like a mist from heaven, bringer of love and good fortune. But she wished she could've worn something else for that special occasion. She cringed at the thought of being proposed to in cream-colored stretch shorts and a red tank top instead of a breezy, white, ruffled gown that bared her shoulders. But if Toby wanted to take her to Blackwater River Falls that morning, she had to pretend she didn't know why and wear the appropriate attire for hiking.

But she knew, and the excitement had overwhelmed her since she'd first found the diamond ring in his jacket pocket.

She'd been worried about his strange behavior the night they'd arrived in Mount Chester. Soon after dinner, expertly served by a blond with cleavage so deep it should've been restricted to adult audiences only, she'd noticed that Toby kept touching his right pocket as if to make sure something precious was still in there, tucked safely. That pocket was where he'd shoved the change and check from dinner, and Malia feared that Miss Cleavage might've sneaked in her phone number. Anxious for the rest of the evening, Malia could barely wait to get back to their hotel room. There, she lingered with the patience of a hungry spider for Toby to get into the shower, then plunged her hand into the pocket and found it.

That 1-carat beauty was definitely not for Miss Boobs.

Before Toby had come out of the shower, she had her plan in place. She'd make sure it was one to remember, and even if she had to wear shorts, at least everything else would be perfect.

Blackwater River Falls was a one-hour hike from their hotel, climbing at a gentle rate on the western versant of Mount Chester through a stunningly beautiful, fall-tinged forest. As they gained elevation, oaks and maples gave way to a variety of pines and firs, their cones littering the paths. They held hands and hiked with enthusiasm, her impatience causing Toby to ask, "Why the rush?" a couple of times. She'd just smiled in response and slowed down a little, even stopped to press her lips against his for a quick moment, before rushing uphill again.

They were a good ten minutes away when the whooshing sound of the falls started to be heard, faint and distant, yet precise, melodious, echoing against the rocky slopes of the mountain.

"I can see it," Malia announced cheerfully, letting go of Toby's hand and sprinting ahead. "We're there."

"All right," Toby replied, panting heavily. "It will still be there in a few minutes, you know," he quipped, stopping for a moment and looking around.

She rushed back to him and grabbed his hand, then pulled him ahead on the trail.

"Come on, you'll rest when we get there," she said, and he followed her with a resigned sigh. "You need to work out more," she added. She was barely out of breath, the fresh air filling her lungs with pure energy. "All day long you sit in front of a screen," she started, then bit her lip. Maybe she should wait until after the wedding to start criticizing him. She burst into laughter instead, imagining herself as a nagging wife, hands propped on her hips, tapping the tip of her slipper against

the gleaming hardwood floors in their future home.

"What?" he asked.

"Ah, nothing, I'm just happy," she replied, lifting her arms in the air and turning in place like a dervish. "Whoo-hoo," she cried, and the mountain promptly echoed back. "Did you hear it?"

"Yeah, and so did half the state of California."

A punch to his side was quick to follow, and she burst into crystalline laughter as he feigned injury and collapsed to the ground, holding his side and groaning as if he were about to die a wretched death. Now he would have dirt and pine needles on the white T-shirt he was going to propose in, but she didn't care as much as she thought she would. She just loved hearing him laugh.

When he stood, he touched his pocket briefly, and then brushed some dirt off his shoulders. She ran her hands over his back, wiping away whatever stuck to the cotton fabric, then they joined hands again and sprinted ahead.

In a few minutes, they cleared the forest and stopped, hand in hand, to admire the tall, narrow falls against the blue sky, flanked by rocks tinged rusty red. Still panting, Toby gave her a long, loving look, as if trying to figure out what to do next, and then crouched to undo his laces and remove his shoes.

"What are you doing?" Malia asked, her voice filled with disappointment, after her heart had promptly stopped thinking he was going to take a knee and propose in front of the majestic falls, only to see him preoccupied with the entangled shoelaces on his left sneaker.

He kicked off both his shoes, then invited her to do the same. "Let's go in there," he pointed at the waterfall, "behind that water curtain. I read there's a cave, not too big, and the water's only a few inches deep."

She hesitated as she imagined dipping her bare feet into the freezing water. She forced a smile and took off her shoes and socks, then tiptoed, faltering on the sharp-edged gravel that littered the path to the fall's basin.

He jumped in first, without hesitation. "Yup, it's freezing, but you won't feel it," he reassured her, once he had caught his breath. "Come on." He tugged gently at her hand. "Take the leap with me."

Her face lit up in a beaming smile. She was ready to take a leap with him, the biggest leap of all, for the rest of her life. She put one hesitant foot into the icy water, then the next. He was right. After a few moments, she stopped feeling the cold as badly.

They splashed toward the water curtain, and she winced at the thought of wading through a shower of freezing water to get to the cave, but that wasn't the case. There was a narrow opening to the side, enough to allow them to sneak in. Inside the almost dark space, the loud sound of the waterfall was dimmed and seemed distant, as if the silence of the cave absorbed the screams of the crashing cascade. Filtered and powerless, the light that came through the torrent barely touched the glistening walls.

She studied her surroundings for a quick moment. The walls were stained in hues of green and rusty red, with off-white blotches here and there, where calcareous stone interlaced with the granite. She dipped her hand in the freezing water, and cupped her palm to collect some. She wanted to taste it, but Toby stopped her hand before it reached her lips.

"I wouldn't do that," he said. "You never know what's in it."

She looked at the water still pooled in the cup of her hand. "It looks like it has a pink hue, or is that just the light?"

"Could be what stained these walls." He looked around briefly, then smiled widely, visibly nervous. "But I'm not here for spelunking." He lowered himself on a bent knee, dipping it in the freezing water, while his hand revealed the ring nestled in its black velvet box. "I wanted it to be just you and me, my lovely Malia, when I ask you, will you marry me?"

Her eyes widened in feigned surprise and sincere delight, while her smile broadened. She clasped her hands together in excitement, then extended her left hand toward Toby. He took out the ring from its box and slid it onto her finger. She

looked at him grinning, sealing every detail of the image in her memory, to always remember, till death did them part.

Then she screamed, a long, searing shriek of pure terror.

A pale hand with long, narrow fingers grazed Toby's calf, shifting slowly into the rippling water.

Toby jumped to his feet and rushed to her, grabbing her shoulders. "What? What is it?"

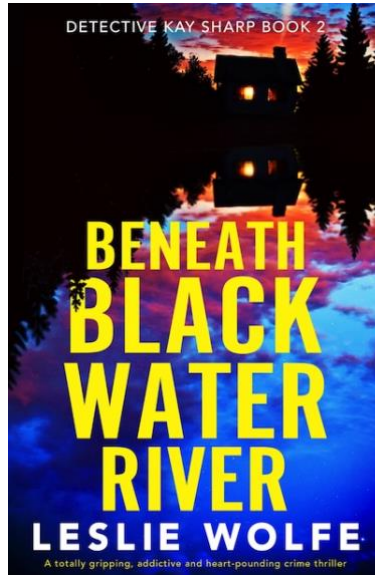
Speechless, she pointed at the body moving slowly back and forth under the water surface, barely visible in the dim light.

In the flashlight coming from Toby's phone, she saw a large boulder held the girl's body in place, pinning it to the bottom of the cave. Her long black hair and her right arm had surfaced, the water only a foot deep, brought forward by the constant pounding of the cascade.

She looked alive, her hair drifting freely in the water as if flowing in the wind, her beautiful face pristine, her red lips gently parted, as if to let her final breath escape. Her eyes seemed to stare at them, surprised, aghast, the terror of her last moments still alive in her irises. A small red locket floated right by her face, still attached to her neck with a silver chain.

She couldn't've been more than seventeen years old.

He offered her a place to stay. He never said she could leave.



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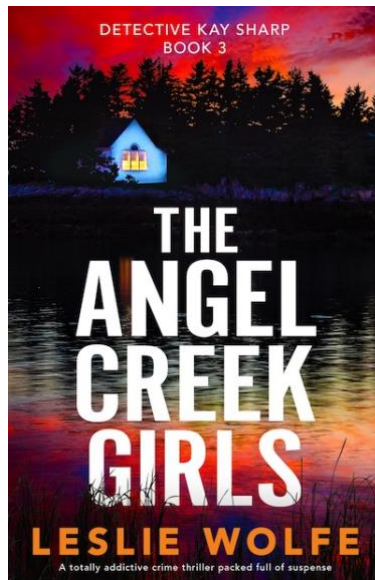
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FREE PREVIEW: *THE ANGEL CREEK GIRLS*

Her mother died trying to save her. Now Julie is alone with the man who killed her.



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The Guest

A quick rap against the dark window startled Cheryl.

The knife veered sideways in her trembling hand, stabbing the flesh of her finger right where it held the carrot in place on the cutting board.

She whimpered quietly and put the throbbing finger in her mouth, easing the pain, while she stared into the pitch blackness outside the window.

Was Julie finally coming home? What in the world had possessed her to let her sixteen-year-old daughter go out when they should've been long gone by now? She'd told Julie she needed to come home early, but nothing stuck to that child, regardless of what had happened. Where could she be on a stormy night like that? Probably with that new boyfriend of hers, making out in his truck somewhere, completely forgetting everything they'd talked about. And still, she couldn't be too mad at her; the poor girl had been through hell over the past two days. She just hoped she wasn't sharing too much with that boyfriend of hers.

Another rap against the window, lifting hope in her chest only to send it plummeting a moment later. It was just rain, falling harder, heavier, large droplets smashing against the windowpanes under the strength of gale-force gusts of wind.

It would be senseless to leave now. The drive to San Francisco was long, a good four hours on the highway. She couldn't see herself pulling that off with three children in the car when she couldn't even see twenty yards in front of her. What if something went wrong? What if the car broke down? No... she'd have to live through one more night of terror, then leave first thing tomorrow.

She forced herself to breathe, containing the flood of worry-fueled tears that threatened to burst out in the open. Heather, her eight-year-old, lifted her eyes from her phone for a split second and gave her one of those penetrating stares that Cheryl had grown to expect from her daughter whenever she was upset. It was as if the child had an uncanny ability to read her mother's mind.

Cheryl took her finger out of her mouth and forced a smile. "Are you hungry, baby?"

"Uh-uh." Heather frowned, then returned to whatever she was doing on her phone, probably playing a game. She sat on the white sofa with her legs folded underneath her, dressed in oversized pajama pants and the sweatshirt she'd worn to school that day, her latest favorite she would've worn to bed if she had a chance. Her Mickey Mouse socks were scattered on the floor, discarded minutes after Cheryl had made her put them on.

"Mommy?" her youngest called from behind a spoonful of Cheerios dripping milk all over the table. The four-year-old girl had learned to use a spoon but still wielded it like a weapon, her tiny fist clutching it as if it were King Arthur's sword, sending food flying through the air. Her pigtails bounced around with every move she made, held in place by green hair ties that were starting to slide loose.

"Yes, Erin, what is it?" Cheryl asked, unable to take her eyes off the blackness lining the kitchen window, droplets of rainwater making it seem more menacing than any other night. In the distance, rolling thunder struck an ominous vibration through the air, sending a chill down Cheryl's spine.

"Heather is eating her hair again," Erin reported proudly, her high-pitched voice teeming with laughter as her older sister shot her an unforgiving glare.

"You weasel," Heather whispered under her breath after promptly removing a long strand of dark hair from her mouth. She liked twirling her hair into ropes and then chewing on them mindlessly while her fingers tapped her phone's screen, or Julie's tablet, or whatever device she could get her hands on. "Tattletale."

"No name-calling your sister, Heather," Cheryl intervened. The darkness outside suddenly vanished under a robust set of beams as a truck pulled up. Through the window, covered in a web of water drops creating shards of rainbow-edged light, she saw Julie throw the young driver a tear-filled smile, then rush out of the truck and toward the door, splashing carelessly through the puddles lining the driveway. The truck pulled away, and darkness regained its ownership of the land.

Cheryl's chest swelled with relief. Still angry at her eldest's recklessness, she returned to the pile of vegetables waiting on the cutting board. In the time it took Julie to unlock the door and step inside, she'd chopped the rest of the carrots into uneven pieces and dumped them in the pot, instantly bringing the boiling stew to a mild simmer.

"Hey, mom," Julie greeted her from the doorway with a tiny, guilt-ridden smile, ready to bolt toward her bedroom. "Smells good in here." Her wet chestnut hair was pasted on her face, dripping onto her cheeks and her chest. Her clothes were soaked, small pools of water starting to form at her feet.

"Not so fast," Cheryl tempered her. "You're going straight into the shower, you hear me? You'll catch a cold. It's freezing out there." She shuddered as she remembered how, only two days ago, it had felt to be outside in that weather for hours, and wiped her hands against her apron nervously.

The girl's smile withered. "I don't need to. Brent's truck was warm enough."

Cheryl swallowed a long sigh. Youth. Fueling everything, from high hopes to the body's ability to endure the cold and humid October weather on the slopes of Mount Chester. "And how old is this Brent, anyway? Should he be driving at night in this weather?"

Julie's eyebrows converged above the root of her nose. "He's eighteen, mom. I told you that already." She shifted her weight from one leg to the other and removed a sticky strand of hair from her face with long, pale fingers, tucking it behind her ear. "Can I go now?"

As the darkness outside seemed to fade again, Cheryl's gaze veered to the window. Maybe it was a passing car or something. "Dinner will be ready in half an hour," she replied, fear traveling through her blood, tension grinding her teeth. "You know we should've left today. We talked about it. I can't believe you did this to me, Julie."

Julie raised her hands in the air, then let them drop against her jeans-clad thighs with a loud splat. "I know how you feel about this entire thing, but I'm not afraid. Call me crazy, but I'm not. I want to stay. Please... you can't be serious about it. We have nowhere to go."

The escalating pitch of her daughter's voice mirrored Cheryl's deepest fears. Where would they go? How would they live? Life on the run was no walk in the park for a widowed mother of three. But there was no other choice, not after what had happened on Saturday night.

"I'm dead serious, Jules," she replied sternly, her hands propped firmly on her thighs. "We're leaving tomorrow first thing. We should've left today, but you and your boyfriend decided otherwise, now, didn't you?"

Julie shot the pile of suitcases lining the hallway a guilty, sideways look. "I'm sorry, mom. I just can't believe this is real. Stuff like this doesn't happen to people these days. We would've heard about it on social media."

"Social media has nothing to do with it. Now go clean yourself, dry your hair, and come back down for dinner." The tension in her voice must've piqued Heather's attention, because her eight-year-old had abandoned the phone and was staring at her with her mouth slightly open, seeming frightened. *Damn.*

The sound of the doorbell startled Cheryl. A faint whimper left her lips before she covered her agape mouth with a wobbling hand. She looked out the window and thought she saw a truck on the driveway, its head beams off. The white paint of the vehicle reflected back whatever light escaped through the kitchen window, its appearance spectral in the falling rain.

Julie rushed to her mother's side and grabbed her arm with both her hands. "Don't answer it, mom," she whispered, her voice shaky. All her stated courage had vanished without a trace.

Cheryl gave the idea a moment's thought. Whoever was at the door had already seen them through the window. Had seen the lights were on, had heard their voices through the closed door. She threw a rushed glance at the clock on the wall, right above the fireplace. Nine twenty-seven. The unexpected guest surely was bad news, but bad news had to be dealt with.

"Who is it, mom?" Heather called, peeling her eyes off the phone's screen for a brief moment.

Cheryl made her mind up. She was going to face whoever it was like she'd done before, with courage and willing to do whatever it took to protect her family, and she'd be fine. They'd all be fine, and come next morning, they'd be gone from this horrible place. Pushing Julie away, she approached the door. "Take your sisters upstairs, Jules."

"But, mom—"

"Just a second," Cheryl spoke loudly for the benefit of the late-hour guest. "Now," she whispered, in response to Julie's disobedience, her eyes drilling into her daughter's. She waited a moment until Julie scooped Erin in her arms and grabbed Heather's hand, taking them upstairs. When she saw them reach the upper level, she unlocked the door.

She forced air into her lungs, then opened the door just a little, without removing the chain. In the dim, yellowish light coming from the porch bulb, she recognized the guest's face. Not who she'd thought it would be, but still bad news, nevertheless. Thankfully, he was alone. "Oh, it's you," she said, closing the door just enough to remove the chain.

Inviting the man inside, she avoided his scrutinizing eyes. Seeing him had sent her senses into a frenzy, her fear raw, threatening to emerge in unwanted words. As she showed him in and motioned for him to take a seat at the dining room table, she could barely steady her hands, the pounding in her chest so strong it rattled her entire body.

From the top of the stairs, Julie watched the scene with eyes rounded in terror. She was leaning over the rail, evidently trying to catch every word spoken between the two adults.

"Glass of wine?" Cheryl asked, and the man nodded with a hint of a smile on his lips.

"I'll have some," he replied, then followed every move she made, setting the glasses, uncorking a bottle, and pouring the blood-red liquid. His piercing gaze curiously watched her as if she were an exotic species he was eager to dissect.

Cheryl sat at the table and took a sip of wine, almost choking on it, the knot in her throat unwilling to give way to the chilled, flavorful liquid. She set the glass back on the table, then rested her trembling hands in her lap, waiting. Whatever the man was there to do or discuss, it would soon happen. And then it would be over.

A loud, hissing sound made her jump. The stew had boiled over, the sauce sizzling where it touched the red, hot surface, sending whirls of smoke toward the range. She stirred the pot and cut the power to the burner, ignoring the splash that had reached the floor by the stove. Then she sat down again, playing nervously with the hem of her white-and-green checkered apron.

The man staring at her had cold, gray eyes, direct and unyielding, and didn't seem to be bothered by the water dripping from his short hair down his neck. He looked at her as if he knew everything. As if he'd somehow found out what she'd done.

But there was no way.

"You know why I'm here," he eventually said, his voice steady, matter-of-factly. "It's time."

His words seeded icicles through her blood. "No," she whispered, shaking her head and pushing herself away from the table. Her chair screeched against the tiles in protest. "No... leave us alone, please," she begged, her voice a trembling whimper. Standing, she faltered backward until she reached the wall. "You don't have to do this."

A quick smile twitched the corners of the man's lips. "It has to happen," he said, looking at her in that intense, merciless way. "You've known this all along."

"We were going to leave," she replied, gesturing to the suitcases in the hallway. "I was going to disappear. If you would've come tomorrow, you would've never found us."

The twitch had bloomed into a grin, the coldest one she'd ever seen. "But you're here," he argued. "One can never escape their fate. You know that, right?" He stood and took a few slow steps toward her. It took every ounce of self-control to not shriek in terror. "You know she must fulfill hers." He shoved his hands into his pockets. "Tonight."

"No," she shouted, bolting toward the front door. If she could escape the house, then maybe she'd make it to their next-door neighbor. Perhaps he could help her.

From the top of the stairs, she heard Julie shout, "Heather, call nine-one-one, just like mom taught you. Do it now! And don't come down." Then she rushed downstairs, her feet pounding as they landed on the steps.

That girl never listened to her. Not even when her life depended on it.

Cheryl couldn't bring herself to run for help and leave her daughter alone with that man. She froze in place for a brief moment, then turned back and stepped between Julie and him, sheltering her daughter with her own body. "You won't take her, you hear me? I won't let you," she said, adrenaline fueling the courage that somehow filled her voice. "Let us go."

The man took two more steps toward her. "Not going to happen. She's coming with me. Tonight. Like it's meant to be."

A stifled sob swelled her chest. Not again. This madness wasn't happening again. She thought she'd dealt with it. She'd thought they were safe. "I wanted to leave. Please let us leave. No one has to know." She clasped her hands together in a pleading gesture while tears sprung from her eyes. "Please, I'm begging you, let us go."

He didn't budge. There wasn't a flicker of understanding in the man's cold eyes. "I can't," he replied with what seemed like an indifferent shrug. "You know I can't. This has to happen, and you know it." A lopsided grin stretched his lips for a brief moment. "That's why you're still here; that's why you haven't left. It's her... her power pulling you back, holding you here. It has to be done."

Cheryl looked around for something she could use, a weapon, anything. By her side, on the counter, the knife block was within her reach. She lunged for a knife, but she wasn't fast enough.

He was faster.

She felt the blade ripping through her abdomen like a steel fist. She gasped and tried to scream, but no sound came off her lips. As she fell, she heard the knife drop to the ground, clattering on the kitchen floor by her side.

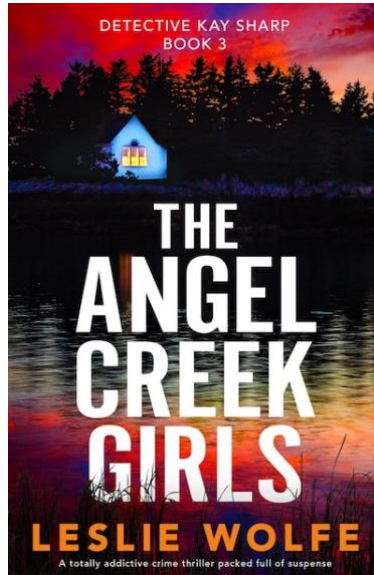
As her world was starting to turn dark, she saw the man pounce and grab Julie. Her baby screamed and called for her, kicking and writhing with all her might. Then the sound of a blow, and Julie falling, quiet and inert in the man's strong grip.

Then there was silence, darkness descending over Cheryl's mind, thick, impenetrable, although she fought it with every drop of life still coursing through her veins.

From the top of the stairs, Heather called with a quivering voice. "Mommy?"

No one answered.

She's praying someone will save her. He's praying her death will be enough.



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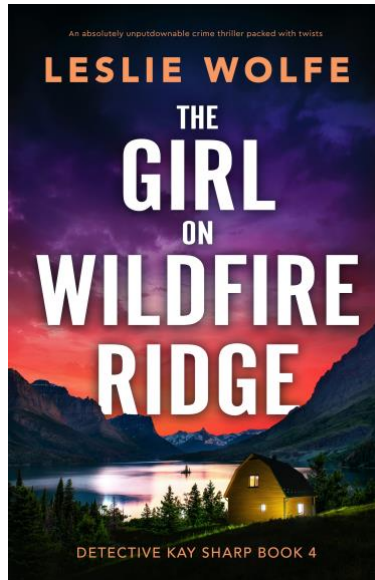
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FREE PREVIEW: *THE GIRL ON WILDFIRE RIDGE*

First they destroyed her reputation. Then someone ended her life.



Your free preview begins on the next page.

The Fall

It was finally over.

Shaking and whimpering, she could hear their voices, merciless and gutting in their indifference, sprinkled with bursts of laughter as they departed from the ridge. They climbed down hastily, probably to catch the thinning remainders of daylight before heading into the woods.

The chill of the evening air rattled her aching body. Even summer nights were cold on Wildfire Ridge, although snow melted every spring and didn't fall until late September. Slowly rolling onto her side, she hugged her knees as tears started falling again. Silent tears, of humiliation and defeat, of unspeakable shame. In the distance, the waning bouts of laughter felt like slaps across her tear-stained face.

She was alone.

No one had heard her screams. No one could help her.

The words they had said still resonated in her mind. The names they called her. The unspeakable things they did to her. All she wanted to think of was home, her mother's loving arms and healing touch. Feeling safe again. Hiding what had happened to her from her father because she couldn't imagine looking him in the eye if he ever found out. Only her mom would understand. She would keep her secret safe.

But home was far away, a three-hour mountain hike in the dark, by herself, coming down from the peak on rocky terrain and through thick woods, then fifteen miles or so on the road from the southwestern versant of Mount Chester to the small California town that bore its name. Might as well have been a hundred miles. The thought of crossing the woods in the dark gripped her heart with merciless, frozen fingers. Every forest sound she used to find soothing when the sun was shining, now spoke menacing whispers in rustling leaves and evergreen cones.

The night was falling hard on Wildfire Ridge, the last hues of orange, crimson, and red that had earned the peak its name fading quickly with the setting sun. The deep, menacing red vanished last, a blood-smeared reminder of the day that had ended, an unspoken threat of the day to come.

Still dizzy and growing weaker with each passing minute, she tried to sit up. Her body, aching and bleeding, put up a fight, and her willpower was quickly defeated. Setting her throbbing head down on the coarse moss-covered boulder, she resigned herself to face the cold darkness alone on the mountain.

The sound of a snapped twig sent her heart racing, thumping against her rib cage. Was it a bear?

"Hello."

The voice, a low, throaty whisper, startled her back to a state of disoriented alertness. The night chill had seeded icicles in her blood. Numb, shaky, and frozen, she found the strength to sit up.

Maybe there was hope. Soon she'd be home again, warm and safe. Confusion engulfed her brain like a persistent fog, clinging to every corner of her mind, fueling her fears. With a fleeting thought, she realized she'd been drugged. She had to have been, or she would've been on her way home already. Seeing the dark silhouette against the moonlight, she desperately wanted to run but knew she couldn't.

What was the stranger doing there? It was too late in the day for anyone to wander on Wildfire Ridge just by accident.

Her breath caught in her chest, and she took the hand offered, noticing in passing the warmth of the skin that touched hers. She stood and struggled for a bit to find her footing, then let go of the stranger's hand. Dizziness made the mountain

crest spin and dance against the star-filled August sky. Out of balance, she grabbed a thick hemlock branch and steadied herself.

Her eyes followed the stranger's cold, analytical gaze, failing to understand why she saw hatred in those eyes, hoping she was reading it wrong. Her clothes were a mess, torn and bloodied. With trembling fingers, she tried to cover herself as best she could, fresh tears of shame burning her eyes and blurring everything around her.

"Will you help me?" she whimpered.

A short cackle tore through the silence of the mountain night. "Help you? Dear girl, what happened to you today was entirely your doing and nothing short of what you deserve. You're nothing but a cocktease."

The words dropped onto her like tombstones, heavy, menacing, deadly.

Fear gripped her chest, paralyzing her. Her chin trembled, threatening sobs she didn't welcome. "Please... I'm not... I haven't done anything—"

The blow came unexpectedly, shattering her breath. Jenna heard it splitting the air before she felt it burning her face, bursting her lip, sending stars in a whirlwind dance inside her brain.

This wasn't happening. It had to be a nightmare. Something that couldn't exist in the light of day, only in the deep, troubled shadows of Wildfire Ridge. Yet the metallic taste of blood on her lips proved differently.

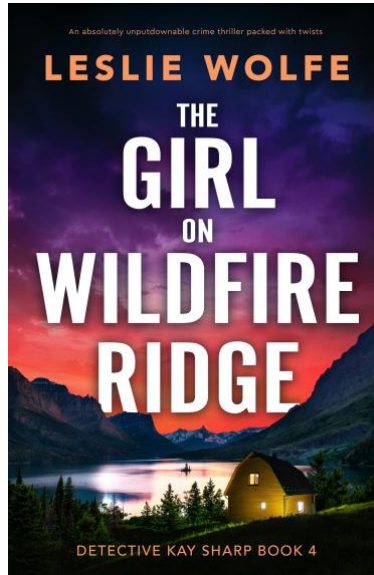
Afraid of another blow, Jenna took a step back, then another. With each step, she tried to put more distance between her and the assailant, but that distance was narrowing down instead. Slipping on a pebble, she lost her footing for a moment. She yelped, then continued feeling her way, stepping backward without looking, unable to take her eyes off the threatening, vengeful gaze inching closer to her.

Her faltering steps loosened a few pebbles and sent them over the edge of the cliff, rattling and bouncing against sharp rock edges until she couldn't hear them anymore. She was closer to the abyss than she'd realized. Afraid she'd fall, she stopped, willing herself to move away from the edge of the cliff and fight her way back to safety if she had to.

The stranger smiled and took one more step, eyes glinting like ice picks against the weak rays of the crescent moon.

She screamed as she fell, grasping desperately as the merciless hand pushed her firmly over the edge of the ridge. Then the scream stopped abruptly, inviting the silence of the night to take over once the echoes died.

She thought the nightmare was over. Then someone stepped out of the dark.



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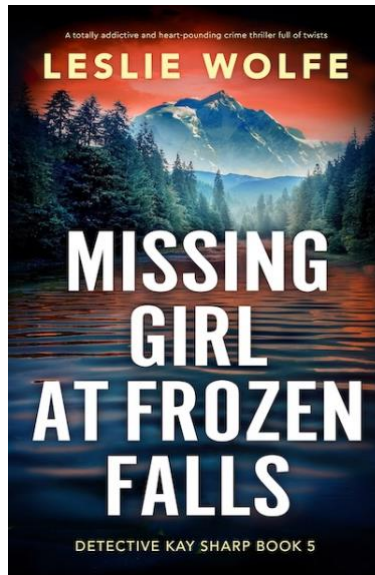
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FREE PREVIEW: *MISSING GIRL AT FROZEN FALLS*

Rachel had an affair with Kay's husband. Now she's dead, and whoever took her little girl isn't finished.



Your free preview begins on the next page.

Silence

There wasn't an ounce of deference in her daughter's blue eyes.

Lit up with defiance fueled by the fire that burned vividly inside her heart and gave its color to her long, tousled hair, Holly's eyes darted from her mother's face to the kitchen window. Outside, dusk hues were fading into darkness, inviting heavy shadows to the corners of the yard and seeding worry into Rachel's heart.

"Ten more minutes, Mommy, please," she insisted, fidgeting on the chair she'd taken with visible reluctance. "It's not night yet." Her fingers found the edge of the place mat and started tugging at a loose thread coming out of the seam. It would soon fall apart, like everything else that was in her way. "Please?"

Rachel bit her lip to contain a tense smile. "Dinner's ready, sweetie." After placing white, square plates on the table with quick, expert gestures, Rachel turned her back for a moment, long enough to retrieve the casserole from the stove and set it on the grate. When she looked up, content to see the roast had made it to the table without any spills or stains, Holly's chair was empty.

Testing the limits of her patience, her daughter hung by the back door knob. Her hands were squeezing the knob while slowly twisting it, her back almost touching the floor, her auburn curls sweeping the tiles. She stared at her mother with a wide, audacious grin on her freckled face as if to see if she could get away with turning the knob just one more bit until it gave under pressure, allowing the door to swing open.

Rachel's heart skipped a beat. That knob was loose, barely holding on even without an eight-year-old dangling from it with a vengeance. In Holly's mind, that rattling piece of hardware must've been the symbol of what held her captive in her mother's kitchen and deserved to be torn to bits. Even if that meant the little monkey could land hard on the floor while doing it, banging her head against the side of the cabinet. Or, more likely, she was just not thinking about any of that, in typical eight-year-old fashion.

Dropping the oven mitt on the table, she rushed over to the door and scooped Holly in her arms, using the opportunity to hold Holly tight for a brief moment before the child started squirming to get free.

Crouching, Rachel let her land safely on the ground while her eyes darted for a moment to the stove's clock. It was getting late.

With every passing minute, fear crept inside her like fog rolling in from the sea, swallowing everything in its path. She should've never said a word. She should've run, pretended like she was never there, and maybe they would've been safe. Holly would've been safe now.

Reluctantly, she opened her arms, breathing away the threat of tears. Without hesitation, Holly sprinted away from her, circling the table and filling the silence with laughter.

"Wash your hands before you sit down, young lady." The girl pouted, but Rachel didn't budge, pointing her finger at the sink. "Now." Then Rachel took her seat at the table with a long sigh, knife and fork in hand, ready to carve a couple of slices from the mouthwatering roast. The smell of buttery mashed potatoes and thyme-encrusted veal filled her nostrils, reminding her she hadn't eaten anything since morning.

Keeping her eyes on Holly's half-hearted effort to wash her hands while she typed a text message on her phone, Rachel almost missed the sound of a car pulling into the driveway. Yet the familiar noise sent icicles through her blood. In quick tiptoe, she went to the living room and looked outside through the sheers without turning on the lights.

"Oh, no," she whispered to herself. "Oh, please, no."

Rushing back into the kitchen, she grabbed Holly's jacket from the coat rack by the door, then stopped by Holly's side. "Remember what we talked about?" she asked her daughter in a low, intense whisper. She nodded, her eyes wide, her smile gone. "It's time. Here, put this on and go outside. Go hide in the toolshed, behind the tractor, like we discussed."

Holly's head bobbed again. She stood, hesitant, her earlier eagerness to go outside now vanished.

"Go." Rachel opened the back door quickly, and Holly slipped through. A gust of wintry wind blew inside with the scent of fallen leaves and the threat of November rain. "Stay there until I come to get you, all right?" Then she put her finger on her lips, pleading with her daughter to stay silent. "Breathe like I showed you, nice and slow, okay? Don't be afraid," she murmured, wiping a tear from her daughter's eye. "My brave little girl."

Holly whimpered and took a step back, sending her curls up in whirls as she turned to run barefoot on the frozen ground. Out of time for better options, Rachel took off her shoes and threw them over to Holly, then watched her stop just long enough to pick them up and slip them on before continuing to the shed. The sneakers were too large for her, but she bravely dragged her feet into the shed, pulling the door closed behind her with a rusty creak.

A sob climbed inside Rachel's chest, but she willed it gone as she closed the door and dealt away with Holly's plate, silverware, and place mat, shoving them quickly into the dishwasher.

What was she still doing there? It made no sense, but she didn't know where else to go. She'd wanted one more dinner for Holly and herself, one more day of normality before her entire life would be upended, maybe for good. But now she regretted it bitterly, only the latest in a slew of bad decisions she'd made.

She'd thought there was still time.

She'd been wrong.

The doorbell rang twice, seeming much louder than usual, sending ripples of fear through her veins. She slammed the dishwasher door shut and shouted, "Just a minute." Throwing the kitchen one last look, she braced herself and walked over to the front door.

For a moment, she considered not opening the door, blocking it with the back of a chair stuck under the handle as she'd seen in the movies. But she knew that would make no difference. It was better to try to talk her way out of it. Her only chance.

She opened the door and froze, suddenly at a loss for words, her throat constricted and dry.

The man stared at Rachel before coming in as if to gauge her intentions, as if expecting something more than the awkward smile she'd pasted on her trembling lips. He kept his hands inside the deep pockets of his trench coat, his shoulders broad, his expression stern, determined. The long flaps of his coat fluttered in the brisk wind like a captive bird trying desperately to flee.

"I—I know why you're here..." she said weakly. "But there's no need." The man continued to stare, his gaze cold, unyielding. "I decided it's better to let it all go and just disappear. I'll take Holly, and we'll just leave."

She looked at him briefly, then away. Her head hung low, her eyes shielded by wavy strands of silky red hair. His face seemed carved in stone, immobile, indifferent. It was the indifference that scared her the most.

"Is that so?" he asked. His voice resounded strangely in the quiet room. "You just decided to drop everything and run away? And I'm supposed to believe that?" His laughter reverberated in the deathly silence like shards of glass.

She nodded frantically, feeling her heart thumping hastily in her chest. "I don't remember much anyway. I—I was wrong. I thought I'd remember, but..." Tears welled in her eyes. He reached out and touched her face. Jolting under his touch, she willed herself still. "I promise you I won't say a word."

A crooked smile tugged at his lips. "Cross your heart and hope to die?" he asked, crushing a tear under his thumb.

His question brought vivid images to her mind. A black SUV driving by on the street where she was parked. That vehicle slowing as it almost reached the corner. The window moving down in the light rain. A flicker of light and the sound of a gun going off. Twice. The hand that held the gun and the way it jolted upward from the recoil. The thump of a body falling onto the rain-soaked sidewalk, a young man, maybe twenty years old, perhaps younger. Blood mixing with rain and slowly flowing to the gutter. The black SUV accelerating, turning the corner, disappearing. Her breath, caught in her chest, searing and agonizing.

She shook her head. "Not a word, I swear. I'm just shook up, that's all." She pulled away slowly, knowing she was lying so badly her eight-year-old would've done a much better job. "I've embarrassed myself with those people... in the heat of the moment, I guess. I've never witnessed a murder before." She choked on the word, and her voice broke. "I thought I could remember the tag, but all I can remember was a black car. Or maybe blue. There are millions of them out there. I didn't see anything, really. I swear I didn't. Please, let me go."

"I'm not buying it." His voice was level, matter-of-fact.

She shrugged and shook her head again, lowering her gaze to the floor. "I already called them; I told them I can't remember anything." Lifting her eyes and meeting his for a brief moment, she added in a low, strangled whisper, "But *they* might think differently. I—we—are in danger if they think I've seen something. You know, the, um, killer. I wish I could tell them I didn't see anything. I'm no danger to anyone." Wringing her hands together, she took another small step backward. "I was too far. It was dark, raining. How could I have seen anything, right?" She tried to fake a chuckle, but it came out guttural, choked, grotesque.

A stifled sob escaped her lips. Her knees were feeling weak and shaky, and she let herself slide into a chair near the door, then buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders heaved as she sobbed, fear and desperation spreading throughout her body relentlessly.

He drew closer and touched Rachel's shoulder in a gesture that made her jump out of her skin. Gasping, she looked at him through a blur of tears. When their eyes met, she shuddered. His decision was made, and nothing she could say or do could change what was about to happen.

Still, she bolted from her chair and fled into the kitchen, flailing desperately, feeling the table surface for the long carving knife she remembered she'd set out earlier.

The man walked toward the kitchen table slowly, unfazed, determined. "Where's the kid?"

"She's not here," she stuttered. "I left her with my mom."

"Uh-huh," he replied coldly, taking out a gun fitted with a small silencer and aiming it at her chest.

Grabbing the knife with trembling fingers, she pounced, raising her hand in the air and leaping across the floor to reach him.

The gun went off twice, in rapid, silenced sequence, ripping through her flesh and setting off flashes of lightning inside her brain. Her body fell to the ground as the world around her turned dark. The knife clattered against the tiles and slid under the stove.

The man stared at her body for a few moments, then circled around the table and fired another shot into Rachel's head. The shock jarred her upper body for a split second, then nothing.

Just silence.

The man slid the gun inside his pocket and grabbed a dishcloth from the oven door handle. Whistling a familiar tune, he wiped any surface he might've touched since his arrival. The back of the kitchen chair across from where the woman had fallen. The front door handles. The kitchen doorframe. And, just for good measure, sections of the counter and the table.

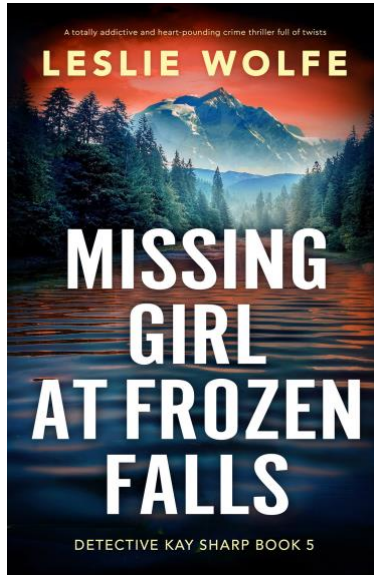
Before leaving, he stared at the woman's beautiful face, serene in death, at peace. "What a waste," he muttered. He turned toward the table and peeled off a bit of roast crust, then ate it hungrily, licking his fingers. "And she could cook too."

He was almost at the door when he heard some noises outside, in the backyard. A crack, a thump, a stifled whimper.

"Damn it to bloody hell," he muttered and stormed through the back door, not bothering to care about the fingerprints he left on the rattling knob.

There would be time to clean those off later.

Her mother told her to hide until she came back. But she's never coming back.



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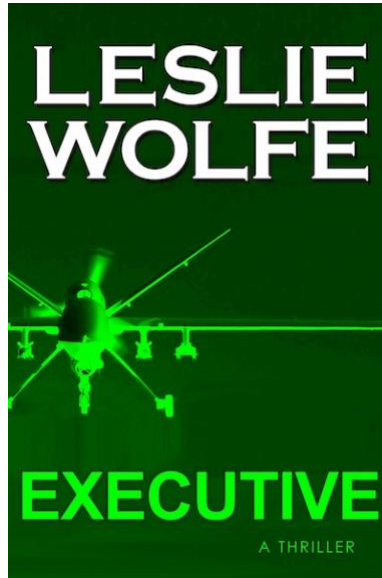
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ALEX HOFFMANN SERIES

FREE PREVIEW: *EXECUTIVE*

Her first assignment: investigate a weapons company. Its next target: her.



Your free preview begins on the next page.

...Chapter 1: Beginnings
...Thursday, March 25, 9:42AM
...Corporate Park Building, Third Floor
...Irvine, California

"I checked her out, and everything is just as expected." Steve pushed a thin file over the large desk, toward his boss. The man took it and flipped carefully through the pages, mumbling his agreement to the various things he was reading.

"Is she available yet?"

"No, sir, waiting for your approval."

The man gave the file and the photo attached to it another thoughtful look.

"Do you think she's ready?"

"No, sir," Steve answered. "But she could be, with a little bit of time and effort."

"She's so young," the man said, "so young. I hope we're right about this."

"She's not any younger than I was when I met you," Steve replied.

"True."

The man stood up and paced the floor for a few minutes, looking out the windows of his office. The sun was climbing in the sky, inundating their world with the crisp morning light. Everything would turn out all right.

"OK, please proceed."

Steve could hear the smile in his voice.

...Chapter 2: Blackmailed
...Friday, April 2, 11:13AM
...Traveling Tech Corporate Offices
...San Diego, California

"I can't do that. We're talking about one of the best tech support analysts I have ever had." George Auster's chubby face was sweating heavily, while trying to persuade his visitor.

His morning was turning into a nightmare that he could not begin to comprehend. The man standing in front of him was not willing to negotiate. This man had stepped through the door, put a picture on his desk, and looked him straight in the eye.

"She has to go. You have 48 hours. Or you lose everything."

He had no choice.

...Chapter 3: Job Search
...Saturday, April 10, 6:22PM
...Ridgeview Apartments
...San Diego, California

Your next opportunity awaits.

"I definitely hope so," Alex mumbled, waiting for a new search page to load, while staring at the promising slogan of yet another job board.

With little patience for what she was doing, and in desperate need of a job, Alex was browsing page after page of countless job postings, reading ads, and looking for possible fits. With rent due in just two weeks' time and no money left in the bank, she was considering a variety of jobs, spanning from boring-to-death customer service to marketing, but not ignoring any other available options. It was no longer the issue of making the right career choice; it was about survival and paying the bills.

At 29, she was living alone in a small two-bedroom apartment that looked like a war zone. Not preoccupied by the appearance of her home, she had furnished the apartment with a bizarre selection of items, all serving the purpose of functionality. She had focused on what she needed at particular stages in her life, with no consideration given to furniture styles or colors.

Her desk was huge, quite old, and made of solid wood. It had two sets of drawers, one on each side. Not one square inch of the desk's surface was visible, as it was covered with bills, handwritten notes, and office equipment. Her computer took most of the available space, together with a modem, two printers, a scanner, and a phone, all connected by numerous intertwined wires.

The past few days had been carbon copies of one another— search after search, application after application. She had no choice but to keep going.

...Chapter 4: Timing

...Friday, April 16, 8:40AM

...Corporate Park Building, Third Floor

...Irvine, California

"She's available and running out of money."

"Good. Place the ad in a couple of days. Let me know the minute she sees it."

...Chapter 5: Labor of Desperation
...Tuesday, April 20, 5:17PM
...Ridgeview Apartments
...San Diego, California

Her chair looked as if it had been taken from a high-end, downtown office setting—black, massive, and all leather, in total contrast to the rest of the room. Leaning comfortably back in it, Alex was reviewing job posting after job posting, and applying to whatever would have had even the slightest chance of landing her an interview. Although she was quickly going through the ads, one caught her attention.

The Agency is looking for highly motivated, independent individual, possessing a variety of business skills and an adventurous spirit. Please email résumé.

"That's weird. The Agency? What kind of name is that?" Alex said out loud, breaking the silence. That had to be just another recruiter. The email address was a Yahoo account, and, without giving it much thought, she submitted her résumé and moved to the next ad.

Seconds later, a familiar sound let her know that she had new email. One look at the sender's name and she opened it right away.

From: The Agency

Subject: Received Application

Thank you for your application.

In order to perform an assessment of your skills, please click on the link below and complete the form. Please note that this process will take at least an hour of your time. Please give truthful answers to all questions, and indicate all the skills you possess. We will carefully review your online application. If selected to move forward in this recruiting process, we will be in contact with you.

"Oh, no, not another form," Alex cried. Most online recruiting forms had proven to be nothing but wasted time, without any benefit for her. Spending an average of 15 minutes on each online application form—creating profiles, usernames, and passwords for a variety of companies—was like shooting herself in the foot. She needed to spend less than one minute on each ad, because of the high volume of ads she had to browse every day. "And this has to be way worse, they say it takes at least a full hour," she complained, but there was no one there to hear her. "You have got to be kidding me . . ." Continuing to grumble, she clicked on the link indicated in the email. A browser page opened up.

Thank you for giving The Agency an hour of your time, the message read.

"Oh, we're not there yet, pal. I've only given you 15 seconds so far," Alex replied to the written text, as she continued reading.

Please grab a cup of coffee, and let's proceed.

"OK." Smiling at the thought of having a conversation with an online recruiting form, Alex rose and went into the kitchen. Seconds later, she came back to her black leather chair, carrying a large, steaming cup of coffee. "Got it, what else do you want from me?" She clicked *next*.

If you promise total honesty, I promise a recruiting process without any bullshit, the following page stated.

"Oh, that's fresh. That's totally new," Alex laughed. In an environment in which getting a job depended on how well you replied to some well-known questions by giving some well-known answers, the whole interviewing process seemed to her like a bad joke, told repeatedly. She was amazed at how most people refused to deal with intelligent, innovative people, preferring instead a standard, already-know-the-answer person, showing little initiative and absolutely no spark.

An old college buddy of hers was currently working as a human resources specialist for a big bank. She had taught Alex a few tricks and explained that recruiters look for specific indicators, such as no turnover of jobs without spending at least two years in the same company, no "empty time" between jobs, and no varied experience—the applicant should only reflect experience in the specific field of the job applied for. Therefore, if Alex wanted to apply for a customer-service position, she had a better chance to get that interview by listing only customer-service experience. Thanks to Leah, and to her own intuition, she was easily getting interview invitations.

With her curiosity at a peak level, she clicked *next* again.

Now that I have your full attention, let's start. Please select all options applicable to you.

The first page was the most bizarre selection ever put together. There was an endless list of skills and questions, grouped by categories. Next to each entry, there was a small check box, positioned next to an available option. By clicking in the box, a check mark would appear, indicating the respective statement was applicable or true. On the upper right corner of the Web page, a progress bar displayed that this was the first page out of 26.

"One hour? I might be fast, but I think you guys are trying to hire Superman." She took a long sip of coffee and started clicking.

...Chapter 6: Hooked

...Tuesday, April 20, 5:19PM

...Corporate Park Building, Third Floor

...Irvine, California

"She's online now, sir."

"I'll be right there."

...Chapter 7: The Form
...Tuesday, April 20, 5:29PM
...Ridgeview Apartments
...San Diego, California

The first category was listed under the title "About Yourself." Alex had options for everything that could describe her, such as height, build, hair color, and style. To her surprise, there were also boxes to check about age, gender, place of birth, race, and other questions considered illegal under current labor laws. She dutifully completed each one.

The form continued with a questionnaire meant to assess the IQ level of the candidate. Although dealing with the job market quite often, Alex had almost never run into intelligence testing. One thing was certain: this was no ordinary application form, and Alex had a growing desire to meet the people behind this original selection process. Suddenly, she found herself wondering what kind of job would require such a detailed and unique application.

...Chapter 8: The Wrong Candidate
...Tuesday, April 20, 5:40PM
...CentroTech Resources Corporate Offices
...San Diego, California

"What?" The HR director could not understand. "Are you telling me I cannot hire this person? Why? Who are you?" She was getting frustrated, and her voice was showing it.

The man in front of her, without saying a word, slowly pulled a wallet from his pocket, opened it, and put it in front of the director's bewildered eyes. She recognized a Federal Bureau of Investigation badge. Her voice dropped to a whisper and her head slowly nodded in compliance.

"As you wish."

...Chapter 9: Another Page
...Tuesday, April 20, 6:42PM
...Ridgeview Apartments
...San Diego, California

New category: *Language Skills*. This time, she had to type the words herself.

Please indicate the languages you speak fluently.

English, Italian, German.

Please indicate the languages in which you can sustain a minimal conversation.

Spanish, French.

Please indicate the languages you can understand or speak a minimum of 15 words or short phrases.

Weird, Alex thought. She typed: Russian, Polish, Hindi, Punjabi, Arabic.

Please indicate the countries to which you have traveled.

"Are they recruiting for the CIA? Is that it? The Agency? Who are these people?" Her own voice, breaking the silence in her apartment, startled her.

Another page, a new category: *Computer Skills*. Another endless list of selectable options.

...Chapter 10: Friendly Fire

...Tuesday, April 20, 7:05PM Local Time (GMT +4:30 hours)

...Combat Logistics Patrol, Royal Canadian Regiment

...15 kilometers southeast of Kandahar, Afghanistan

"Hey, Lenny, got a light, buddy?" Ryan's dirty hand, holding an unlit cigarette, appeared first, followed by the rest of his body, as he was coming around the front of the Nyala. The massive armored personnel carrier, rigged with multiple antennae and a remote weapons station, was releasing six dust-covered, sweaty Canadian armed forces.

"And you call yourself a smoker, eh?" Lenny said, extending his Zippo. "Fuck, man, you never have a light on you, like, never!" He lit Ryan's cigarette, then extracted one for himself, lit it, and took a deep breath of smoke mixed with the dry dust of the Afghan desert. "Ahhh . . . it feels good . . ." Lenny walked to the edge of the road, in the shade of the Nyala, stretching his legs. "What would ya' do without me, huh? Quit? What's it gonna take to get a stubborn Newfie like you to carry his own lighter, huh?"

"Gimme yours, and I'll carry it for ya', eh?"

"You better pray this baby doesn't just go AWOL on me one day," Lenny said, clutching his fingers around the engraved Zippo, "'cause it's you whose rotting corpse they'll end up finding in a ditch, got it?" Lenny's thumb was slowly going over the engraving on his lighter, feeling the words etched into the metal: *To Leonard, with all my love. From Dad.*

"Got a light, eh, Lenny?" A third soldier was extending an unlit cigarette, requesting service with a wicked smile on his face. Lenny obliged with a deep sigh.

"I don't get it, just don't. What the hell is wrong with y'all? What would y'all do without me, huh? Good thing I don't have to wipe your lame asses too." Lenny walked away from the road, toward a pile of boulders, not too far out. Farther away from the boulders, maybe half a klick or so, young herders were watching over sheep. They had all turned to look at the convoy. The wind was carrying the stinking smell of sheep, mixing it with the omnipresent, fine desert dust.

"Where you headin', man? You wouldn't be going to take a leak, would 'ya? Do you need my presence? Do you need help with that? Wanna show it to the natives?" Ryan asked, bombarding Lenny with his questions—each question raising more laughter from the rest of the men.

"Ah, fuck off, will ya'll? I can water this desert on my own, thank you very much." Lenny waved a dismissing hand right before stopping at boulders, his back toward the road.

Friendly advice kept pouring in, mixed with roars of laughter. "Don't forget to shake it. That's right. Good boy."

In response, Lenny's right fist rose above his head in a threatening motion. Then the fist continued its journey, raising the middle finger, combined with an upward motion. Unabated, the comments continued, "You're holding it with your left? That's not right—"

A shearing sound interrupted everyone and brought instant silence among the group. Lenny turned, half-zipped, crouching to the ground. "What the fuck?"

A fully armed unmanned combat aerial vehicle, UCAV, was approaching from the south. "Whose is it?" Lenny yelled.

"American. We're fine, there's no action scheduled here today."

"I hate these UCAVs; they scare the living shit out of me," Ryan said, serious now. "With a pilot, you can expect some judgment; but with a machine, you never know."

"Newfie chicken, who would have guessed? They're safe, man, safer than the planes. There are pilots flying them drones, just like they do real planes, only they fly them like toy cars, with remote controls." Jimmy, otherwise quiet, was the group's official geek, always ready to share his knowledge of anything to do with technology.

"Still hate the goddamn things, man," Ryan continued. "Objects were not meant to fly like that and blow things up. Jesus, what the hell?"

"But the robot we send into the mine field, you don't mind, do you? It's just like that, you idiot. It's just a flying robot, with a remote control, so pilots don't get killed or captured. You're too much of an idiot for me to keep explaining shit as simple as that." Jimmy waved away Ryan's ignorant concern.

However, no one really felt safe. TheUCAV changed its heading and started descending, approaching them. The men were able to distinguish the onboard sensor array cameras, rotating in search for targets.

"Take cover!"

The yell could have come from anyone. A couple of men crawled under the Nyala, whose blast-resistant belly had the potential to provide some protection from air strikes. Lenny was still crouching by the boulders, weighing his chances to make it back to the vehicle.

From under the Nyala, they could hear the captain's voice. "Bravo One, Bravo One, this is Charlie Three, over. Bravo One, Bravo One, this is Charlie Three. Come in, damn it!"

TheUCAV took a position and launched a Hellfire missile, aimed at the group of shepherders. The explosion followed shortly, among the men's screams.

"Charlie Three, this is Bravo One, go ahead."

Lenny crouched tighter, getting closer to the ground. "Oh, God . . ."

"Bravo One, we're taking fire from an American drone, over."

TheUCAV slowly circled the area, scanning for more movement and heat signatures. It found a target. Taking position on the new object, it launched another Hellfire.

Lenny's blood sprayed the Nyala's right front tire. His engraved lighter rolled into the ditch, reflecting the sunlight.

TheUCAV was scanning again for new targets. It had two more missiles left.

...Chapter 11: Honesty Required

...Tuesday, April 20, 9:40PM

...Ridgeview Apartments

...San Diego, California

Page 26 of the recruiting form was loading on the screen. This last page began with a paragraph of instructions.

Please read each question carefully, and reply truthfully. There are no wrong answers in this section.

The first question came as a shock.

Would you consider doing these things in order to reach your goal?

Alex replied out loud, "Well, depends on the damn goal, now, doesn't it?"

Lie?

She started typing—**Yes.**

Steal?

She thought, *Hmmm. Maybe*—**Yes.**

Kill?

"What?"—**No.**

Get someone physically intoxicated?

Alex laughed, "Buy them beers until they drop? Why not?"—**Yes.**

Use false identification?

Yes.

Blackmail?

"Am I going to get arrested, based on what I say on this damn form? Um"—**Yes.**

Cheat?

"I'd rather not cheat on Mr. Right when I find him."—**No.** "I'll try intoxication first, then blackmail, and if that doesn't cut it, then I'll reconsider this."

She chuckled, as she continued to fill out the form's numerous fields.

Finally, a field marked *Comments* concluded the form.

Alex looked at the digital clock on the wall. Four hours and 25 minutes had passed since she had started. It was already late, and she had just wasted more than four hours of her time on one single potential employer, instead of applying to at least 50 jobs during this time. She suddenly felt cheated, tired, and completely exposed. *Why did I go through with this insanity? What was I thinking?*

She typed a question in the *Comments* field.

Who are you people?

Then she clicked on the large button at the bottom of the page marked *Submit Questionnaire*.

A new page loaded on her screen.

Meet us for an interview tomorrow, at 10:00AM, and you'll find out. The address is 8 Corporate Park, Suite 300, Irvine, California 92606.

She suddenly felt she was not alone in the room anymore. Shivering, she copied the address on her notepad, turned off the computer, and poured herself a large Martini on top of the coffee leftovers in her mug.

...Chapter 12: The Interview
...Wednesday, April 21, 8:12AM
...Ridgeview Apartments
...San Diego, California

Alex inhaled the aroma of her freshly brewed coffee.

"Thank God for caffeine," she sighed. She was tired after tossing and turning most of the night, thinking about the 10:00AM interview. She felt awkward at the thought of meeting a prospective employer to whom she had already admitted she was willing to steal, lie, and what not, and she had admitted it in writing too.

Getting behind the wheel of her car, her confidence started building. *What do I have to lose?* Her car was much like her apartment, with a variety of objects scattered on the seats and floor. It was a red convertible Suzuki Vitara, the only convertible SUV available for her budget. It suited her personality, and although the Vitara was a small-size SUV, the sporty feel of a four-by-four, manual-transmission convertible was able to bring her spirits up, every time she took it for a ride.

Taking I-5 north toward Los Angeles, she reached the address in just over an hour and a half. *It's not so close to home, but what a ride*, she thought, still enchanted by the spectacular views presented by the scenic drive along the Pacific coast. She pulled into a parking spot marked "Reserved—Visitors." Looking up, she saw a three-story building, appearing crisp, clean, and dignified in its white finish, sparkling in the morning sun. *Here we go. Good luck, young lady, you're gonna need it*, she encouraged herself, while stepping into the elevator.

The elevator stopped at the third floor and the doors silently glided open, allowing Alex to step directly into the reception area of The Agency. *So they have the whole floor. Or floors. Good.* She stepped up to the reception desk.

"Good morning. I have a 10:00AM appointment—" She abruptly stopped her introduction, realizing she didn't have the name of the person she was supposed to meet. *Damn.* The receptionist didn't seem to mind.

"Yes. Please take a seat; it will only be a few minutes."

She sat down on a comfortable leather sofa and began looking around. Written on the wall above the reception desk, in golden letters with a shadow effect, the company name, *The Agency*, made quite an impression, despite its upright, neutral font. The reception area was spacious, decorated with a lot of taste and a lot of money. On the left side was an incomplete wall made of glass bricks, masking what could have been the corridor leading toward offices. Discrete spotlights were placed here and there to emphasize the effect of the sunshine reflections on the glass bricks. On the right side, large windows allowed the sunshine to light up the room, while offering a spectacular view of a park.

The reception desk was a piece of furniture like no other Alex had ever seen. It appeared to be custom made, because it followed the shape and angles of the wall behind it. Three receptionists could sit at this monumental desk without even being able to touch one another. The entire visible surface had an impeccable dark oak, glossy finish.

Showcasing this remarkable desk, the entire office floor was covered in thick, beige carpet, but there was little furniture. Aside from the reception desk and the sofa she was sitting on, there were only two armchairs, with a small coffee table between them, and a cast-iron newspaper holder close to the elevator. *Strange.*

The elevator was still there, doors open. She looked closely at the elevator and noticed that no controls were visible next to the elevator doors. She turned her eyes to the receptionist. As if reading her mind, the receptionist turned her chair

around and touched a button on a metallic panel, marked "Access" bolted to the wall behind her. The elevator doors closed without a sound.

"Good morning, Miss Hoffmann." A deep, powerful voice startled Alex. She stood up, ready to extend her arm for the usual handshake. In the black eyes of the handsome man standing in front of her, there was no willingness to shake hands.

She replied, cautiously, "Good morning. How are you?"

"Please, follow me." The man did not wait for her reply; he turned and walked around the glass brick wall into a dark corridor.

I was right, Alex thought. As the man entered the corridor, a light came on by itself. *Neat*. He stopped in front of an office, knocked once, and opened the door. He stepped aside, indicating that Alex should enter. Without any introduction, he quietly closed the door and walked down the hall.

"Welcome to The Agency, Miss Hoffmann." The man behind the desk was smiling widely and seemed friendly and open. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Tom Isaac, and I'm in charge of The Agency. Please, sit down."

She took her seat and looked around. It was an average office, with common office furniture—a desk, some chairs, two filing cabinets—and a window covered by Venetian blinds, partially blocking the sun. Nothing special about it.

She answered politely, smiling back, "Nice to meet you. Thank you for inviting me." She put down her briefcase next to the chair. *Ready as I'll ever be*, she thought, waiting for the interview to begin.

"So, please let me begin by asking, what kind of job are you looking for?"

Something to pay the bills and have some fun while at it, if possible, she thought. Instead she answered by the book, her training and experience in interviewing taking over.

"My ideal job is one that incorporates both my education and practical work skills to be the best I can be. Combining my education with a working knowledge of customer operations, my entrepreneurial abilities, computer skills, and administrative skills, I want to utilize my analytical expertise to help people meet their goals. This is exactly why I am convinced that I would be a valuable member of your team."

She had no idea what job she had applied for. She had no information allowing her to be more precise, and this was considered the best possible vague answer to this tricky question. *This is going to be tough*, she braced herself.

Mr. Isaac was watching her closely, slowly nodding as she spoke. He asked the second question. "How would you describe yourself in terms of your ability to work as a member of a team?"

Standard interview questions, what a disappointment; they promised me none of this dance. Alex almost sighed.

"I have had many opportunities in both academics and work experience to develop my skills as a team player. My experience as a market research team leader also helped me learn the role of team member. I viewed my position as that of group leader and individual contributor at the same time. I ensured that everyone in my group had an equal opportunity to contribute, maintained excellent communication among group members, and coordinated their energies toward reaching our team's goal."

Mr. Isaac looked down at the file in front of him and scribbled something on the print of her résumé. She continued to look directly at him, while smiling and waiting for the next question.

"Are you currently employed?"

"Yes," she lied, without any hesitation, knowing she had a better chance of getting a job if no one knew she was currently unemployed.

"Why would you like to leave your current employer? It is a nice company, from what I hear." Mr. Isaac leaned forward, curious to hear her answer. It came without delay or hesitation.

"I feel I am not challenged enough in my current position. I would like to move toward a more challenging, more rewarding position, which will allow me to fully utilize my skills and my abilities, and also offer me opportunity for self-improvement and professional growth."

"What a load of crap!" Mr. Isaac stood up abruptly, startling her.

She froze. *Oh, my God!*

Mr. Isaac continued, pacing angrily through his office.

"I promised you a straightforward recruiting process, if you were honest with your answers. Yesterday you were willing to discuss. Today you are giving me nothing but a nicely wrapped, well-rehearsed pile of bullshit. What happened?"

She started to speak, but her voice was gone. She made an effort, cleared her throat, took in a deep breath, and gave it her best shot.

"I am sorry, sir, but the habit of giving these standard answers took over. You did ask me some fairly standard HR questions. You are right, though, I am sorry for wasting your time with all this." She managed a faint smile.

"Are you willing to answer some questions without lying, leaving stuff out, or sugarcoating anything?"

"Yes, sir." She could feel sweat at the roots of her hair.

"Be careful, one more time with this kind of crap and we stop right there, understood?"

"Yes, sir." *Do I really want to work for this guy?*

"OK, again, what kind of job are you looking for?"

She realized she had been holding her breath. *Here's your truth, mister. Let's see if you can handle it.* She exhaled the air in her lungs and answered, looking straight into his eyes.

"I'm looking for a job that will comfortably pay my bills without boring me to death, have me living in fear, and slowly killing my spirit. I want to have some fun doing that job; I want some flexibility; and I want to work with smart, open-minded people who can teach me a thing or two." She stopped and held her breath again, waiting for his reaction.

"Was it painful?" he asked. His eyes were smiling, but his face was still serious.

Surprise. "Excuse me?"

"To tell the truth for a change." He sat up and walked around the desk toward her.

"No, it was actually quite relieving to hear myself say it." She smiled shyly, aware she was blushing. "I haven't done that in a while." She did not dare look him in the eye.

He was now standing in front of her. She stood up abruptly, ready to run. He reached out his hand and gave her a firm handshake.

"Then it's really a pleasure to meet you, Miss Hoffmann. Let's continue. Please sit down. Are you currently employed?"

"No," she sighed.

"What happened?"

"My boss used to be quite a nice guy. However, one day he went berserk. He started arguing with me without reason. He said I had the wrong attitude, and that a customer had complained that I was swearing while fixing her network."

"Were you?"

"Well, the strangest thing is that I was never with that customer. I was scheduled to go, but traded accounts with a colleague, because that specific customer was close to his home. I figured the boss just wanted me out, and I left. That was no life for me; I can't handle that kind of attitude. There was no fixing the situation; the more I tried to clarify the issue, the more aggravated he would get. His reaction came as a complete surprise. Until then, he had shown only appreciation toward my performance."

"Did he fire you?"

"No. After trying to talk to him, I realized I had no other options, and I quit. I couldn't just sit there, knowing he wanted me gone. I didn't want to wait for that shoe to drop, wondering when it was going to happen."

"Most people would have stayed put, while looking for something else. Pay a few more bills in the meantime," Mr. Isaac said, watching her reaction.

"I am not most people. In order to focus on damage control, I had to acknowledge the damage and discard all unnecessary weight, such as the dismissal waiting to happen pretending to be my job."

Mr. Isaac couldn't help but chuckle. "A good sense of humor is your best ally when times turn tough," he said, and resumed the interview questions. "I need to know how you see yourself as part of a team. No standard answer, please."

Alex took a deep breath. This was going to be one interview to remember.

"Well, it depends. A team is good to have around when you need someone's help, although I'm more comfortable on my own. I like to take full responsibility *and* full credit for my actions. The one thing I hate the most is office politics."

"Office politics?"

"Yes. For example, I'm minding my own business, while one coworker has nothing better to do and starts saying stuff about me. Before I know it, I end up asked to explain things I had nothing to do with. Or, here's another example, I am not given a promotion, because I am the only one who was too busy with work to be aware that the boss bought a new car, so I never had a chance to congratulate him on his excellent choice."

Alex looked up and smiled. *It will be a miracle if I get this job*, she said to herself.

"I totally agree, but this is not a perfect world we are living in. So, how do you manage to fit in the average corporate environment?" Mr. Isaac continued, undisturbed.

"I didn't say I can't do it; I just said I hated it," Alex replied.

"Oh. True. Let's move on. Where do you see yourself in five years?" Mr. Isaac gave an encouraging smile, as if to warn her to be honest.

"I really don't know; there are too many things to consider. If I win the lottery, then we might discuss what I *really* want to do in five years. If my luck continues to work the way it did so far, in five years I will be, most likely, interviewing for yet another job, and giving some recruiter exactly the answers he wants to hear. It's hard to say," she said, then shrugged and waited for another question.

"Do you have any questions for me?" Mr. Isaac offered.

Alex sighed thoughtfully.

"How many steps are in this interviewing process?"

"Just this. Based on this one interview, I will make my decision and let you know."

OK, now I know for sure I screwed up. He won't hire me, Alex thought. She was surprised to realize how saddened she was by this thought. She couldn't help feeling that the man in front of her was quite remarkable, and she would have liked him to appreciate her. She continued, out of curiosity.

"Thank you. I asked on my online form, 'Who are you?' And I'd also like to know what job did I apply for?"

Mr. Isaac leaned forward and smiled.

"I created The Agency 17 years ago, when a friend of mine, a business owner, got into some trouble. He had grown suspicious that someone was stealing his customer files and selling the info to his competition. In order to find out who that was, he hired me, not as an investigator, but as a payroll clerk. No one pays attention to the accounting clerks," he said with a chuckle and paused, letting the story and all its implications sink in.

As it did, surprise showed on her face. She saw the ramifications, the possibilities, and grew excited about the idea. *Yes. Obviously, this idea worked. I'd love to do that for a living, yes I would,* she thought, thinking fast. *Not a moment of boredom, no office politics, actually use my brain, my dream come true. Plus they have to be paying really well.* However, her enthusiasm abruptly cooled, *why the hell is he telling me this stuff if he's not even going to call me for a second interview?* She did not realize how well the man could read her thoughts, just by looking at her transparent features and bright, expressive eyes.

"Starting from that case," he continued, "I realized there was growing potential on the market for this kind of service. We are currently a small team of four people, and we need a fifth person. I'm looking specifically for someone with a little more computer knowledge than we currently have among us, to be able to work as an IT executive and assist with email and data-related fraud concerns."

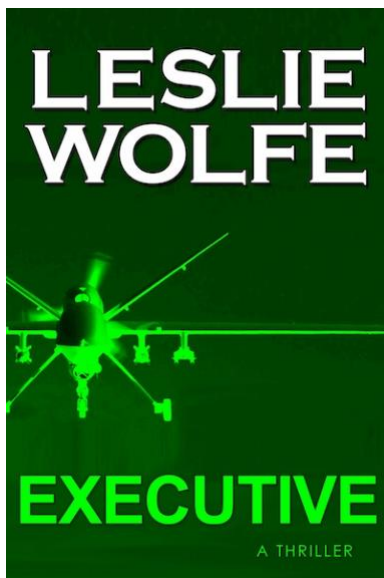
She almost had tears in her eyes. *I can't believe they won't hire me—no other job will ever compare,* she thought. Mr. Isaac was now standing up, most likely preparing to show her out. Somehow, she found the courage and asked.

"Mr. Isaac, will you please tell me where I screwed up?"

"Who said you did? Let's go meet the guys. And please, call me Tom."

Her exhilarated scream was loud enough to make the receptionist wonder what the hell was going on back there.

She knows what their weapons can do. Now she'll find out what it feels like to be in the crosshairs.



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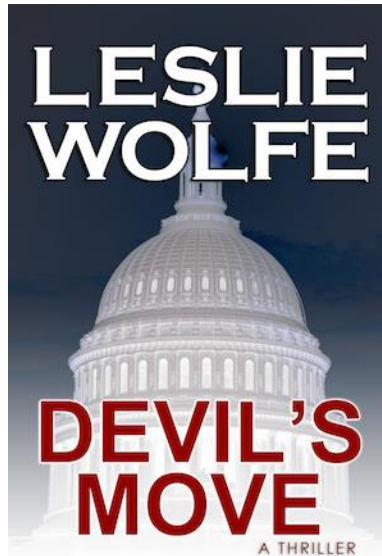
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FREE PREVIEW: *DEVIL'S MOVE*

He thought he was saving his wife. He was handing them his country.



Your free preview begins on the next page.

...Chapter 1: Ready to Play

...Thursday, May 21, 7:58PM Local Time (UTC+1:00 hours)

...Restaurant La Cordonnerie

...Paris, France

The loud ringtone shattered the cozy atmosphere of the exclusive restaurant and caused a few diners to frown and throw disapproving glances.

Oblivious and rude, the phone's owner took the call in a loud, raspy Russian. "Da?"

"Vitya? It's Misha. We're in play," the caller said and then hung up.

The Russian continued his dinner. A spark of excitement in his eyes and a faint flicker of a smile at the corner of his mouth were the only visible effects of the call. He loved playing God.

...Chapter 2: An Offer

...Thursday, December 3, 11:22AM EST (UTC-5:00 hours)

...MedStar Georgetown University Hospital—MedStar Heart
Institute

...Washington, DC

Waiting. Waiting is the absolute worst part of having to deal with hospitals. Robert Wilton nodded to himself absently, letting his weary mind wander. He had waited for almost two hours, counting every minute right outside the conference room whose opaque doors read “Transplant Committee” in black, bold lettering. The impersonal label on the door and the way it stood out against the white, impenetrable glass held a menacing look. It felt surreal to know that some complete strangers had such decisive power over the destiny of a family.

Robert tried to picture the faces of the committee members. Would they be favorable? Would they say yes? What does a transplant committee do, anyway? His mind wandered again, recalling the articles he had read in preparation for this day. They meet, they review the details of each patient, and they decide if that patient makes it to the waiting list and with what priority. They decide who gets a heart and who doesn't. They decide who lives and who dies. A shudder disrupted Robert's thoughts, and he stifled a sob. She can't die...she's all I have. Please, God...

“Mr. Wilton?” A man's hand gently touched his shoulder. The man had a sympathetic smile and sadness in his green eyes, brought forward by the pale teal of his scrubs.

Oh, no... “Yes,” Robert managed to articulate.

“The transplant committee has finished its session, and I'm afraid the news is not so good. Your wife does not qualify for a transplant.”

“No! This can't be. I'm sure this is a mistake...” Robert's voice was gaining momentum. “This must be a mistake, because you don't know her. She's wonderful...she's all I've got! Please...” Robert grabbed the man's sleeve, pleading with him, his breathing shattered by uncontrollable sobs.

“Sir, I understand this must be very hard for you to hear, and I can assure you this decision was not taken lightly by our committee. Your wife is almost at the age limit, which is sixty-five, and, unfortunately, our rules are very clear about transplant candidates with a history of substance or alcohol abuse. I am very sorry.”

Hope flickered in Robert's mind. “What are you talking about? She's not an addict! You got it all wrong...there must be some mistake. Please tell the committee they can give her a heart, because she's not an addict. You have all your facts wrong. Please.”

“Sir, I am afraid our information is accurate,” the man continued in the same professional, sympathetic, almost whispered tone of voice. “She might not be an addict, but she has a DUI on her record in the past ten years, and that's an instant disqualifier.” The man stopped for a minute, letting Robert process the information. Pallor took over Robert's tired, tear-stained face as he grasped the finality of the transplant committee's decision. “I wish there were more we could do. I am very sorry.” The man paused again for a few seconds. “Is there anyone we can call for you?”

Robert stood with difficulty, barely aware his muscles were crying with pain from the tension he had been accumulating on that waiting room chair. I need air, he thought, heading with unsteady steps toward a door at the end of a very long corridor. His mind had registered the sunshine coming through that door whenever someone had walked through

it. How do people walk these corridors? How do people leave here and tell their families it's over? Robert's mind was wandering again. If these walls could talk, they would scream.

He sat down on a bench right outside the building in the warm sunshine offered by a mild December. He didn't feel able to walk any farther. This isn't happening...This can't happen...Please, God! Holding his head in his hands and rocking back and forth, he finally let the uncontrollable sobs out, gasping for air.

"Mr. Wilton?" a man interrupted.

"Go away...there's nothing you can do for me," Robert said, not even looking up to see who was standing there.

"That's not true, Mr. Wilton. There might be something I can do for you," the man said, taking a seat on the bench.

Robert looked at the stranger. He wasn't dressed like a hospital employee, and he was definitely not the man from the committee. He absently registered minor details about this man: pricey suit jacket worn on top of a black turtleneck, expensive watch, a faint scent of high-end cologne. Light, short-trimmed, thinning brown hair; high forehead; intelligent eyes; but cold as ice. Wrinkled face. Very wrinkled.

"My name is Warren Helms," the stranger continued, "and I have only one question for you." He paused, waiting for Robert to shake his hand. Hesitantly, Robert shook the man's hand. "What would you do to save your wife's life?" Helms asked.

"Anything," Robert answered without thinking, "anything at all. Just ask. I have some money. I could raise more." Hope flooded his heart.

"Oh, it's not that complicated; it's not about money, Mr. Wilton. It's much easier than that." Helms paused, looking at Robert with inquisitive eyes. Robert was hanging on every word. He was ready. "We'll just need a small favor from you, at the right time."

"What kind of favor?" Robert asked, concern seeping into his voice.

"Nothing you wouldn't normally do, nothing out of the ordinary." Helms stopped for a second and then continued, while starting to get up. "But if you're uncomfortable, just say so and I will be on my way—"

"No," Robert almost yelled, grabbing the man's arm. "No, I'll do it, whatever it is. I'll do it."

"All right, then we have a deal. Now go home to Melanie and tell her you both are going to Vermont, where she'll be getting a new heart. I will call you with the details. Start packing today. The surgery will happen sooner than you think."

...Chapter 3: Overhaul

...Monday, December 14, 9:02PM EST (UTC-5:00 hours)

...News of the Hour Special Edition Report

...Nationally Syndicated

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.” The anchor paused slightly, the way she normally did for dramatic effect. Her wavy blond hair and perfect makeup showcased a face filled with excitement. “In an announcement that took everyone by surprise earlier today, the White House confirmed that President Mason has signed off on the initiative to have the next presidential elections ‘brought to the twenty-first century,’ as the president himself phrased it.

“The American presidential election, a democratic institution in itself and the single most important process in our democracy, has been maintained almost unchanged for more than a century. Traditionally handled via paper ballots marked with pens or by punched holes, the election process has had little innovation brought to it, with the exception of sporadic, county-level initiatives. For next year’s presidential elections, we are now looking at a completely overhauled process involving technology, such as touch-screen monitors and centralized electronic data storage and analysis.”

The camera zoomed out, allowing the studio guest to become visible on the screen.

“Our guest tonight is the initiator of the elections process overhaul, California Senator Sidney Mulligan. Senator, thank you for joining us tonight.”

“Thank you for the invitation, Stephanie, always a pleasure.” The senator smiled at the camera.

“Senator, please tell us what made you decide to spearhead this initiative?”

“Very simple, Stephanie: it was way overdue. Election data is crucial information, highly sensitive, and time critical. Until now, on numerous occasions, due to the imperfect process we currently have involving paper ballots and all the processes related to paper voting, we have seen allegations of tampering, miscounting, and influencing, just to mention a few. Like the situation we had in Florida in 2000, if you recall.” The Senator stopped talking, allowing Stephanie to engage.

“Yes, I do recall. Wasn’t that when the machines punched holes in the ballots that were not clearly associated with the ballot options?”

“Precisely. Based on that experience, and on other situations where I felt—we felt—that the democratic process of elections is jeopardized by its own archaism, I have decided to not sit idle and instead to drive this change. That’s what motivated me to rally some resources and begin exploring the possibility of an overhaul.”

“How difficult was it for you to see this initiative approved?”

“Relatively difficult, I might say.” He paused for a little while, thinking. “Although, in retrospect, the electoral process has been maintained almost unchanged for more than a hundred years because my fellow legislators are mostly risk averse. With the exception of a few isolated precincts innovative enough to deploy some form of technology to this process, the majority of the country still votes on paper today.”

“Then how exactly were you able to see this through? Walk us through what it took to get this overhaul approved.”

“It wasn’t extremely hard, once we formulated it and submitted it for debate—just more difficult than I had anticipated.” Senator Mulligan paused, arranged his already perfect tie, and then resumed. “Before submitting it, I met with several technology leaders in Silicon Valley and worked through some scenarios, identified some of the pitfalls, and worked

through a proof of concept. I wanted to make sure we're not wasting time and effort or running the risk of overlooking any potential issues."

"I guess it helps having Silicon Valley right there by your side, doesn't it?" Stephanie interjected.

"Sure, it does." The senator smiled right back, open and friendly.

"Was this a democratic initiative?"

"Well, not at the start. At first, when I suggested it, the voices of opposition were on all sides of the political spectrum. Now it has the full support of the Democratic Party. We worked through that, and we were able to rally enough initial support to make it go to vote. I think the strategic and historical dimensions of this initiative transcend party lines and reach deep into our very cores as political leaders."

"What were the main reasons legislators voted against it?"

"Fear of change, risk aversion, fear of technology, just to name a few. The opponents are intimidated at the thought of changing anything in one of the cornerstone processes of our democracy." The senator thought for a few seconds, and then a mischievous smile appeared in his eyes. "But let's keep in mind that America builds the same home designs it did fifty years ago, just because it's safer, easier, and cheaper to do so. No one wants to take on the risk of building new, modern houses that people could potentially be reluctant to embrace. The typical neighborhood in suburban America looks exactly the same way it did halfway through the last century, because at the end of the day, Americans are, simply put, risk averse. Change averse. And that is the biggest roadblock in the path of innovation and progress."

"Maybe we should have started with this question: how will it all work? What will change in the voting process? How will the voters experience change?"

"Very little will actually change in the voter experience, but this change will be critical. The voters will still be registered, as they are now. Nothing new there. Their voter registration cards will be reissued every two years; again, nothing new. The registration cards will have bar codes on them, still nothing new. On Election Day, inside the voting booths there will be touchscreen devices, very similar to tablets, only mounted on small stands inside the booths. These devices will have bar code readers, so the voter will be able to scan their registration card to start the voting process. Once they scan their card, they will be presented with information on the screens, walking them through the entire voting process.

"So, for example, the first screen will show 'President and Vice President' options, and voters will simply touch the names they want to cast their votes for. When touched, that specific candidate's section on the screen will be highlighted in green, and the device will prompt the voter to touch 'continue' if they accept the selection. Then they advance to the next screens, one vote at a time. Very simple and straightforward."

"Yes, absolutely," Stephanie approved. "What happens in the background? How does it all work?"

"That's where all the beauty is. The voting system will be housed by a data-processing government contractor, vetted by the NSA—that's the National Security Agency—with the highest levels of security in place. The versatility of this new system enables the device to offer all the state-specific and local ballots after scanning the registered voter cards. This system will aggregate and process all information as votes are collected, so we will have our ballot results within minutes after booths close. Additionally, having a precise record of each and every vote, time stamped and location stamped, will completely eliminate all the suspicions about vote tampering or manipulation, thus cleaning up our voting process."

"Very interesting. Who's building all this technology? Will it be ready in time for November elections?"

"We have selected a government contractor, DCBI, with decades of experience delivering impeccable service to assist with the technology deployment. For those of your viewers who might not be entirely familiar with the name, Donaldson & Campbell Business Intelligence is one of the top three technology-consulting firms in our country. It has a history of delivering strategic government contracts on time, within budget, and with the highest security. DCBI will deploy

the entire solution, based on very specific requirements that include every single aspect of the new system, from how the devices will look, feel, and work to how the data will be captured, interpreted, and stored.”

“One last question, senator,” Stephanie said, suddenly turning serious. “Are you worried? Do you have any concern this overhaul might not go as planned?”

“No, I am not worried, not at all.” The senator’s calm smile lingered.

“Thank you very much for your time with us here tonight, senator. This was very interesting and informative. We are looking forward to having you join us in the studio again with progress updates.”

“Thank you, I would be happy to.”

The camera zoomed back in, centering on Stephanie’s elegant features.

“That was Senator Sidney Mulligan, the pioneer of electronic voting. On January 7, we will welcome to our studio the voice of opposition against this highly disputed overhaul, New Jersey Congressman Jim Archesi, one of the most conservative voices in the Republican Party.” Stephanie paused briefly before delivering the final phrase of her show. “Live from our studio, this is Stephanie Wainwright, with News of the Hour.”

...Chapter 4: A Contract

...Friday, December 18, 1:33PM PST (UTC-8:00 hours)

...Meadowood Mall Starbucks

...Reno, Nevada

"Hello?" Coffee spilled on the table, as the cup tipped over in the man's rush to pick up the call.

"This is Helms. Travel arrangements are made. She's arriving on the twenty-third at 8:25PM, American Airlines flight 1075 from DC via Dallas/Fort Worth. Get the job done."

"Yes, sir," the man answered as the caller hung up.

...Chapter 5: Training

...Tuesday, December 22, 8:07AM PST (UTC-8:00 hours)

...Carmel Valley Beach

...San Diego, California

Alex Hoffmann landed hard on her back, the air knocked out of her lungs despite landing on sand. She grunted and spat out some of the sand that had stuck to her tongue. She tried to get to her feet, but then gave up and settled on the wet beach, still dizzy, eyes open under the fine December mist.

"I hate you," she said, giving Lou a look of deep resentment. "I hate you very much right now. Words cannot describe."

"Yeah, whatever," Lou said unmoved, "now get back on your feet. You're very vulnerable when you're down."

"Don't care anymore," she whimpered. "Just go away."

"No can do, boss, we only have a few days to get you in shape. Up!"

"I am in shape," she grunted angrily. "I look great." She got up, shaking the sand off her sweats and trying to arrange her wet hair. "I am in great shape, and I can take care of myself, thank you very much."

"Wrong and wrong," Lou said. With a swift movement of his arm, he grabbed her and twisted her in the air. This time she landed face down in the sand.

"Ugh," she spat. "Enough already, I think I get your point." She curled on her side, not caring about the wet sand anymore. "But I am in great shape, even if I don't know martial arts, or whatever this is. I'm not GI Jane, nor do I intend to be. Not ever."

"Sure, you're in great shape to go clubbing, nothing more, and you look great in one of those short skirts. But when things got rough I had to bail your ass, if you so kindly remember."

Alex felt the sting. "So what? That's what we do for each other in this job. That's what we're supposed to do: have each other's backs. Plus, I already thanked you."

"Yeah, but what if I'm not there? What if none of us are there when you need help? Do you want to die before your time? Are you in a hurry or something? Or do you want the last thought that goes through your head before you die to be 'I now die of laziness because I could have learned how to defend myself, but I was too complacent to get my ass off that sand and work with one of the best close-combat trainers I could have hoped for'?" Lou approached her and offered his hand to help her get up. "Up you go."

"You don't ever lose an opportunity to list your talents. Modesty sure ain't one of them. You also should have started with hacking, which I'm sure is the strongest skill you have. You should have stuck to hacking. It would have hurt less." She grunted with a smile and patted him gently on his very well-developed forearm. "OK, but whatever you do, don't throw me on the ground again, or I will start crying."

"Deal, but only for today. And you get to do whatever I ask you to do, without argument. We've already wasted forty-eight minutes squabbling. We only have a few days, so let's make the most of them."

"Yeah, OK, but you know it's Christmas week, right?" She flashed him a full-blown manipulative smile.

"Don't care. So please give me twenty ab crunches on my count. Go!"

She sat on the wet sand, scowling. Lou started counting and coaching her.

"One, two, breathe, four, five, keep it coming, faster, seven, eight, keep going!"

The deserted beach, just north of Torrey Pines State Reserve, was one of her favorite places to come and relax, enjoy the constant crashing of the Pacific waves, and bask in the gentle sunlight. Today, and most probably for quite a few days to come, it had become their own private dojo. Louie Bailey, Lou for short, the newest addition to The Agency team, had just finished his first case. It made Alex feel competent, tenured, and a bit protective: although Alex was only one case ahead of Lou in terms of experience, he obviously didn't need any of her protection. Six-foot-three and built like a rock, the ex-SEAL seemed very able to take care of himself.

"Up," he interrupted her ab crunch session, "let's run." He sprinted ahead of her, and she struggled to catch up. He was leading her where the waves touched the shore, making running a splashy, annoying, and difficult exercise.

"It sucks here, in the water," she complained, "why not run six feet to the right? What's wrong with that? My feet are wet now."

"You can't postpone or reschedule a fight because your feet are wet. This is not about comfort; it's about focus and pushing your limits outside your comfort zone. So push yourself, focus, and endure." He smiled discreetly, his head turned away from her.

"Bastard," she mumbled.

He was right, and she knew it. The Agency work was very dangerous. Infiltrating organizations and conducting undercover investigations without being part of any law enforcement entity was a risky existence that could turn deadly at any time without warning. It had happened in the past and would definitely happen again in the future. She hated him for being right and hated this cold, wet, and miserable alternative to what could have been a day of luxurious indulgence in front of the fireplace, complete with Belgian chocolates, martinis, and a good book.

"OK, we're stopping," Lou said, "now drop down and give me twenty."

"You're joking, right?"

"Wrong. Drop and give me twenty pushups, now. On my count. One, two, three. Good."

Yep, great sacrifices I'm making for my job today, Alex thought, but well worth it, I might say. Her job had been a continuous adventure since the day, not so long ago, when she had walked through The Agency's door to interview with its founder, Tom Isaac. Tom and his small team had since become like a family to her, a closely knit group of top-notch, highly intelligent professionals, with Lou Bailey as the latest addition.

Each assignment required a different approach, and her low tolerance for repetitive, boring work was fully satisfied. The job was challenging and dangerous, but very rewarding. And quite well paid too, she thought, letting a smile of satisfaction make it through her effort-strained features. This was going to be her first financially comfortable Christmas ever.

"Enjoying yourself, huh?" Lou's voice brought her back to reality.

"No, not at all, let me be very clear about that." She laughed. She stood up, panting, knees and arms trembling from the prolonged effort.

"All right, let's start some real training now," Lou said and winked.

"Kidding me? What was this I've been doing here since 8AM?"

"Well, mostly bitching, and some warm-up." He laughed. "Now we're getting into the interesting part. The purpose of our training is to give you the basic self-defense knowledge required, at minimum, to deter relatively simple attacks. Tom briefed me about your past. So please pay attention: this is important." He sat on the wet sand, crossing his legs in a relaxed half-Lotus pose. She followed suit. They were both wet from the rain and their sweat and covered in sand, but the warm-up had left Alex indifferent to any environmental factors.

"I will teach you how to deter attacks by hand, knife, and gun. Typically, when going after a woman, aggressors will not come heavily armed or in large groups. Due to their reduced body mass and overall lower strength, women don't seem as threatening. The bad guys are most likely to think you pose zero threat and will tend to underestimate any risk associated with you putting up a fight. We'll learn how to make them regret it."

"Will you teach me how to throw my legs in the air and kick them in the head?" She grinned mischievously.

"No, and please forget every single fight you've seen in movies. This is real life, not some carefully choreographed John Woo combat scene, where actors just fly through the air without any respect for the laws of physics." He was not smiling anymore. "This is real, as real as it gets."

"OK," she said, her attention in full gear.

"The techniques we are going to practice are part of a family of combat techniques called CQC, or close quarters combat. Specifically, I will show you two different CQC techniques. One is borrowed from Krav Maga, the self-defense system invented by the Israelis, and the other from Systema, developed by the Russians. Between these two fighting systems you will have a good base of defensive and offensive strategies to counter an attack."

"I see," she said. This was getting serious. "Did you learn these when you were a SEAL?"

"Yes. There are many other combat techniques, but there are some reasons why I chose these two for your self-defense training. One reason is that no attacker would expect you to know either of them, giving you the benefit of surprise. Second is that between the destructive efficiency of Krav Maga and the fluid elasticity of Systema, you have the best mix of skills to be able to neutralize a threat with minimum risk to you."

He sat up with ease and reached into his duffel bag. After helping her up, he offered her a training knife, painted to resemble a real knife but made of rubber. She took it, examining it closely.

"Come at me with that knife, and I will show you how to defend and disarm," he said, making inviting gestures with both hands.

"You won't slam me to the ground again, right? You promised."

"Yeah, yeah, I promised. Just aim for my chest with that knife."

She pounced and made a stabbing gesture aimed at his chest. Swiftly, he deflected her right arm toward his left and caught her arm under his, immobilizing her. Then he turned to his left, forcing her to kneel, while twisting her arm until she dropped the knife conveniently into his hand. The whole thing lasted less than half a second.

"Again," she said, feeling challenged. "Not sure yet how you did it. Slow down a bit."

"Having fun already? Good, because we're training with guns tomorrow. Real guns."

Alex was not smiling. Memories of being held at gunpoint clouded her eyes. "What did you mean by forcefulness, and what was that of Krav...what was that name again?"

"Krav Maga. In Krav Maga the purpose is to deter the attack with maximum prejudice."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you will learn how to kill your attacker."

...Chapter 6: Proposal

...Wednesday, December 23, 11:36AM Local Time (UTC+1:00 hours)

...Palais Hansen Kempinski Hotel

...Vienna, Austria

Vitaliy Kirillovich Myatlev, Vitya to his very few friends, one of the richest Russians alive and a former KGB agent, had become accustomed to the pleasures of luxury spa treatments. Taking the old Russian Banya tradition to the next level, he no longer considered a good massage to be an enjoyment reserved only for spoiled women. He liked to indulge in the spa suite for countless hours. He preferred to start with a cleansing sauna and continue with a relaxing massage performed by lovely young ladies with talented fingers. Then he enjoyed taking a nap on a slab of warm marble.

This time was different. Woken from his nirvana by one of his bodyguards, he had to cut the blissful hot stone experience short and head straight for his penthouse suite. His two bodyguards followed closely, as they did most of the time. The three of them boarded the elevator hurriedly.

Vitaliy Myatlev had an important guest for lunch and wanted to make sure he did not keep his guest waiting. He glanced at the newly acquired Patek Philippe watch that had set him back almost half a million dollars and muttered under his breath, "It's late already...Ivan, what the hell were you thinking? Never let it happen again!"

"Da...yes, sir," a shamed Ivan answered, looking at his shoes.

Myatlev was keen on speaking English and wanted his staff to follow suit. Although he was one of the true Russian oligarchs, he spent the majority of his time in the Western world.

Myatlev was Russian by father, Iranian by mother and place of birth, and Ukrainian by choice. His father, Kirill Myatlev, a KGB lieutenant colonel of the First Chief Directorate, had taken an assignment in late 1952 at the USSR Embassy in Tehran in the sore aftermath of the Iran-Azerbaijan crisis. Several years after the crisis had ended, tensions between the USSR and Iran about the disputed territories at the core of the conflict were still high, making his posting with Tehran a challenging assignment. This crisis, many historians agree, was one of the events marking the beginning of the Cold War.

In 1952, under the leadership of Communist Party First Secretary Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev and Secretary General Joseph Stalin, the USSR was expanding its horizons. The country was preparing for the omnipresent and inevitable Cold War by strengthening its intelligence networks and consolidating its diplomatic relationships with its remaining allies. Key intelligence officers of the First Chief Directorate took posts in embassies around the world, assuming the roles of unofficial leaders for all foreign intelligence operations in their respective countries of assignment.

Kirill Myatlev was no exception. His posting was strategic, one of the hot potatoes of KGB's foreign intelligence assignments under a diplomatic ruse. He served his country well and held the post for many years. While he was deployed in Tehran, Stalin died and was replaced by Nikita Khrushchev, a personal acquaintance of Myatlev's.

This personal relationship kept Kirill Myatlev's career unaffected by the change in leadership following Stalin's death. Foreign intelligence had changed hands, moving under the leadership of Lavrentiy Beria, who'd disbanded all existing structures and reassigned everyone, placing all his loyal people in KGB leadership roles and crucial foreign soil assignments.

Kirill Myatlev survived the political depuration of the First Chief Directorate and continued his station in Tehran unperturbed. That's where he met Farrin, Vitaliy's mother, and with the prerequisite blessing from KGB headquarters in

place, married her. Vitaliy was born in Tehran a year later, and they all lived there for five more years before Moscow recalled them.

Farrin struggled adapting to life in Moscow, constantly surrounded by drunks spewing profanities and engaging in crude behaviors, all insulting her profound Islamic beliefs. She had hoped that her son would become a devout Muslim. However, young Vitaliy took after his father and showed no real faith in any denomination and no interest in anything or anyone but himself. Disillusioned, heartbroken, and hopeless, Farrin left Russia to live with her family in Tehran. She never came back to visit. As for Vitaliy and his father, they didn't miss her all that much. One was busy working foreign intelligence, now a major general, while the other was growing up as an unsupervised teenager with lots of attitude and early problems with authority, women, and alcohol abuse, having the time of his life.

Major General Myatlev transferred his rebellious son to a select high school reserved for sons and daughters of elite Communist Party members, Central Committee leaders, members of the government, high-ranking military, and militia officials. No longer feeling elitist among such peers, Vitaliy spiraled out of control even more. His drinking binges offered him a few near-death experiences, and some of the sex orgies he organized became well-known in the school and beyond. He was becoming a liability and a risk to his father's career.

By the time Vitaliy had finally graduated, soon after his eighteenth birthday, his father had already grown tired of using his influence with the militia to keep the rebellious, irresponsible son out of jail. Setting his foot down, he gave his son no other alternative than to join the KGB and start building a career in intelligence, where he could closely supervise his progress and make him walk the line. Not having much choice, Vitaliy took the offer and was immediately accepted by the Dzerzhinsky Higher School of the KGB; his father made sure of that. Vitaliy hated the many painful months of boot camps, interrogations, and other hardcore training drills.

Vitaliy graduated a calmer, more responsible young adult, but the rebel still lived under the surface, ready to come out. His thinking was not shaped like everyone else's. Secretly, he was not a communist, nor was he a patriot. He stayed self-centered, focused solely on his own well-being. His powerful mind had survived many brainwashing exercises during his formative years and helped him come up with solutions and ideas that were creative, out of the ordinary, and very successful. This type of thinking helped him advance fast through the ranks of the KGB First Chief Directorate, where he continued to follow in his father's footsteps.

Vitaliy hated working for the KGB. He hated working for anyone for that matter; but, of course, the KGB was not something one resigned from; it was unconceivable, as bad as treason. There was no way out. Looking back though, joining the KGB had been the decision that had opened the door for him to become who he was today.

He spoke four languages fluently, his linguistic skills developed in early childhood by his multilingual family environment. His English was flawless and almost free of accent; his German and French were not bad either, and his unpracticed Farsi almost forgotten.

By 1981, he had shaped up and become an appreciated intelligence officer, working on assignments in Western Europe. Of course, having a KGB general for a father hadn't hurt at all. The most coveted assignments were in Western Europe and North America, and by the time he had turned thirty, he had worked both regions. He was attracted mostly to assignments of an economic nature. He started handholding researchers and USSR delegates through their rarely seen business trips to the West to make sure they didn't defect. He moved up to commercial contract negotiations and vetting of foreign corporation officials who wanted to open subsidiaries in the USSR.

Vitaliy arranged foreign trade contracts of hundreds of millions of rubles, and, in this role, he was the one getting the bribes. Corruption of USSR commercial representatives was a well-known reality in the business circles of the West. Vitaliy was smart about the bribes he accepted. The shinier items—most coveted luxury watch, gold chain, VCR, or stereo—

were reserved for his commanding officer. He delivered the items personally to his boss, calling them “small gifts,” and his boss never asked Vitaliy where they’d come from. Instead, he named Vitaliy for the next commercial assignment and the next one after that.

Vitaliy kept the bulk of the bribes, stashing them away as hard currency or gold in places all over the West, together with contact information for key business people he had met. He had sworn his allegiance to the USSR, but when it came to his squirreled greenbacks, he trusted the Western powers more. He was smart, greedy, and opportunistic, ruthlessly negotiating his bribes. Whenever he saw a way to grab a perk or make a profit, he didn’t hesitate. He also found the time to make friends with other young, ambitious, cutthroat Russian intelligence officers, friendships he cultivated carefully throughout the years.

One day it was over, one cold November day in 1991. Communism was done and finished; the KGB was falling apart, and Vitaliy was free again. He left the dissolving KGB without giving any notice, just scribbling a one-line resignation letter to get his papers released from the personnel department. He exited the Lubyanka KGB headquarters edifice without looking back and started building his fortune.

With the USSR falling apart and all the former Soviet Republics seeking their independence from Russia, there was chaos in the streets. Many of his Russian friends and contacts were in Russia, including the majority of his former KGB contacts, who had decided to return home instead of immigrating to or seeking asylum in the West. Russia was also not a communist economy anymore. It was the dawn of Russian capitalism through a painful passage from communist, state-owned structures to the capitalist, free-market economy, a period one could call transitionism.

However, no one knew how to be a capitalist, how to think like one. Being citizens of a communist country for generations, never traveling outside the USSR, having mandatory but guaranteed jobs, and having lived in a system that made owning any kind of property or wealth a capital offense, no one knew how to become a capitalist overnight. No one except Vitaliy and other foreign intelligence officers who had stashed their cash outside the country, had contacts in the real capitalist world, and the knowledge of what capitalism was, how it worked, and how it can make the right people rich.

Vitaliy Myatlev wasted no time. Within months of his departure from the KGB, he had opened several companies in Russia with foreign capital he’d been able to raise rapidly. He brought into the country luxury household items, such as ice-free refrigerators, washing machines, dryers, convection ovens, and microwave ovens. He knew not many Russians had money to buy these at first, but he would hold the stake in the appliance market, and once all the known brands had been deployed through his companies, no one else would be able to grab that distribution market from him.

Moreover, all the KGB officers and party officials who were loaded, but had decided to keep their accumulated savings in Russia, had heaps of rapidly devaluing Russian rubles to spend. Myatlev’s prices were ridiculously high, but his merchandise moved fast nevertheless. From Whirlpool to Kenmore to KitchenAid, he brought them all to Mother Russia, for a substantial profit.

He moved on to bring wireless cellular services into a country that had almost no telecommunication infrastructure outside the major cities and citizens were forced to wait months for a new landline, despite the copious bribes they were willing to pay. The mobile phones addressed that need, and, within a few years, almost eliminated residential landlines.

He still didn’t stop. Next, he built a few banks. He finally held the capital reserves needed to attract partner names like Credit Suisse and AIG, and to issue a credit card product of his own. After all, the Russians needed a financial institution to lend them money at predatory interest rates to pay for the highly expensive appliances and overpriced cell phones. Once the foundations of his financial empire had been laid, he proceeded to acquire vast amounts of real estate at ridiculous

prices, knowing those prices would soon rise. He was able to foresee the inflation that soon took over Russia and moved his liquidities to hard currencies and gold.

He had already made the list of the top 100 richest people in the world, and that was before he started his oil and gas endeavors. He wasn't going to stop; it was never going to be enough. His lust for power was tireless, and the thrill of the hunt was too exciting for him to give up.

Vitaliy Myatlev had moved to Kiev a few years before, when his wealth had grown to be large enough to cause him sleepless nights. Some of his old KGB friends had climbed the ranks of political power, achieving interestingly strategic and useful roles in the Russian government. One had just become president; the other had been the minister of defense for a while, holding that seat for a few years now. Their influence, kept motivated by large cash payouts, luxury cars, and custom-built villas, had proven very advantageous throughout the years.

But Myatlev was not stupid. He knew their favor could turn into scorn overnight, and he couldn't trust any of them. Therefore, Myatlev acquired Ukrainian citizenship in addition to the Russian and Iranian citizenships he had gained at birth, bestowed on him in a hurry and without due process by the deputy minister of the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs. Of course, now the minister had a new Mercedes S65 AMG, lunar blue metallic, and there was a rumor spreading that a dying aunt from Germany had willed him the exquisite vehicle.

Myatlev opened the door to his suite as soon as Ivan swiped the access card and entered the imposing living room to find his guest reading a magazine, installed comfortably on the plush sofa. Shit...he thought, remembering he was wearing only a white spa bathrobe.

His guest rose and extended his hand with a slight nod. Myatlev shook the man's hand vigorously.

"Welcome, Mr. Zaidi," he said in his most dignified tone of voice, trying to compensate for his inappropriate attire.

His guest, dressed to the nines, smiled and responded, "Or maybe I should say welcome, yes?"

"Yes, indeed, indeed. My deepest apologies for keeping you waiting and for having you endure seeing me dressed like this," Myatlev responded, making a hand gesture to apologize for his improper appearance.

His guest, Samir Jamal Zaidi, an Iraqi national of considerable wealth, was rumored to be well connected to both sides of the political battlefield in his country. Welcomed in the high circles of American political power and equally honored in Iraq by various political factions otherwise at war with each other, Zaidi was highly influential and a great partner to have for any endeavor. In his late forties, Zaidi had an appearance of determination and calculated calm, never showing any of his thoughts or feelings. His face, covered with the typical beard that Iraqi nationals liked to wear, was impenetrable and seemed entirely immobile and expressionless. He wore sunglasses at all times, even indoors, hiding his eyes behind dark lenses. He was a hard man to read.

Minutes later, after Myatlev had dressed appropriately for the occasion, he and Zaidi took their seats at a dining table brought up by the hotel staff, set to perfection with white brocade linens, silver accessories, and Bohemia crystal glasses. Myatlev's bodyguards had taken positions from a polite distance, guarding the men as they ate.

"I have a proposition for you, Mr. Zaidi," Myatlev said, immediately after his guest had finished the soup.

Zaidi made an inviting gesture with his hand.

"I am assembling a small group of very influential, very wealthy individuals," Myatlev continued, "whose global interests are aligned. Several countries are represented in our council, and yours is one of the countries that should hold a seat in this association of common goals." Myatlev paused, gauging his guest's interest level. Zaidi's eyes flickered for a split second, barely visible behind his tinted lenses, but he remained silent.

"There are many things we can do for each other," Myatlev continued, "and even more things we can do together. United." He stopped and focused on the schnitzel in front of him, savoring a piece of it with his eyes half closed in delight.

Finally, Zaidi spoke. "Which countries are represented on your council?"

"So far, Iran, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, and, of course, Russia."

"How many representatives are you inviting from each of these countries?"

"Only one," Myatlev said gravely.

They ate silently for a few seconds.

"And what is the mandate?"

"During the past few decades we have observed how America has turned into the world's most arrogant bully, fortifying its super-power position in the world and stopping at nothing to maintain that power and increase its wealth. The American domineering way to meddle in other countries' internal affairs has reached an unprecedented level of insolence, causing significant concern for several countries."

"Oh...so your mandate is anti-American?" Zaidi asked abruptly.

"Our mandate is to establish a new world order, where we don't have the high-and-mighty Americans dictating how we conduct our internal political and economic affairs. Our mandate is to fix the balance of power in the world and restore other nations' rights to decide for themselves."

Myatlev took another bite of schnitzel, allowing Zaidi time to consider his proposal.

"How are you planning to pursue this goal? Politically? Engaging in violence?"

"That would be for the council to decide, depending on what actions we decide to take."

"I see," Zaidi said and then promptly touched his mouth with the white napkin, marking the end of his meal. "I am very honored by your consideration, but this is not something that I am inclined to be a part of. I would also like to wish you all success with this initiative."

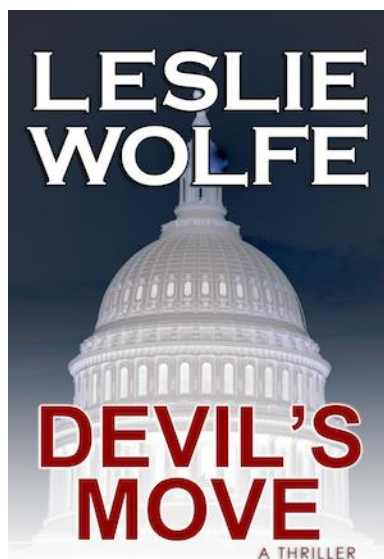
"Would you like some dessert?" Myatlev asked, unperturbed. His eyes encouraged Zaidi to accept his offer, then shifted slightly to catch Ivan's gaze. Myatlev nodded almost imperceptibly, and his bodyguard nodded in response.

"No, I have to decline, I'm afraid. It has been a very satisfying meal; thank you for your hospitality," Zaidi said.

Ivan approached Zaidi from behind and grabbed his head with his right arm, immobilizing it as he placed a napkin soaked in chloroform over his nose. Zaidi struggled for a few seconds and then fell inert. The two bodyguards grabbed Zaidi quietly and took him to the other room. At some point in the very near future, they would get him out of the hotel in a suitcase, shoot him in the head somewhere, and throw his body in the Danube.

You can't win every time, Myatlev thought bitterly and took a sip of wine. He had to be more careful next time.

They saved her life. They can still take it back.



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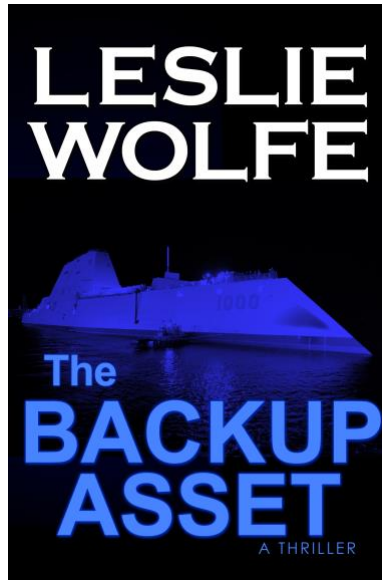
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FREE PREVIEW: *THE BACKUP ASSET*

They were trusted with America's military secrets. Someone found out theirs.



Your free preview begins on the next page.

...Chapter 1: Ready
...Undisclosed Date, 4:39PM EST (UTC-5:00 hours)
...Undisclosed Location
...Norfolk, Virginia

He stared at the back of his hands in disbelief. They were shaking so hard it made for a difficult task to get another taste of coffee. Using both hands, he grabbed the mug and took a sip of steaming liquid, warming his frozen hands on contact with the white glazed ceramic. He smiled a little, as his eyes focused in passing on the message written in red lettering on the side of the mug. A gift from his coworkers, it read, "I do math well, what's your excuse?" How appropriate, he thought, I don't do this very well, and I need to get better at it. Grow a pair, for Christ's sake, he admonished himself, giving his trembling hands another disgusted glance.

He made an effort to set the mug on his desk without spilling any coffee, but that didn't work as planned. His hands were shaking too much. A few droplets stained the scattered papers on his desk, most of which bore the stamp TOP SECRET.

"Shit," he muttered, under his breath, and rushed to get some Kleenex.

He patted the papers dry, cleared his desk of everything else, and spread the top-secret files on the glossy surface, carefully going through every piece of paper. He finished sorting through each piece of documentation; then paced his office anxiously for a couple of minutes, clasp his hands together, trying to steady himself. Can't back down now, he thought, and I wouldn't even if I could.

He looked up at the digital weather station hanging on his office wall. His rank within the organization gave him the privilege of a private office, decorated to his taste. Hanging close to the large window overlooking Norfolk Harbor, the device told the time and the weather. It displayed the forecast, showing the high and low temperatures expected, indoor temperature, humidity, and also showed barometric pressure as a yellow chart. In the middle section of its display, a small graphic depicted the sun peeking from behind some clouds, all drawn in blue. It was going to be a nice day, with partly cloudy skies, barometric pressure steady, and reasonable temperatures for the season. None of that mattered, though. He had less than three hours to make the drop, and he wasn't ready yet.

He refocused and wiped his sweaty hands nervously against his suit pants.

"Let's get this done and over with," he mumbled, removing all papers from his desk except a single pile he had just put together. He spread out the contents of the pile and started organizing the documents in order, placing them facedown in an unmarked manila folder.

The first document was an evaluation memorandum regarding the compatibility and readiness status for laser cannon installation aboard USS Fletcher, DDG1005, a Zumwalt-class destroyer. Marked TOP SECRET. It was several pages long, and he made sure he had them all and in the right order.

The second document was a capabilities assessment for Zumwalt-class destroyers, complete with technical specifications, class overview, and general characteristics, including weapons array, sensing technology, and vessel performance. Marked SECRET. Nine pages long.

The third document was a performance and capabilities assessment for the laser cannon itself, the most recent and groundbreaking technology developed for the US Navy, the successful and eagerly awaited result of seven years and \$570 million worth of research and development. Marked COMPARTMENTED—ABOVE TOP SECRET.

Satisfied, he turned the carefully constructed pile of documents face up and closed the folder.

He was ready for the drop.

...Chapter 2: The Report
...Tuesday, February 16, 10:23AM EST (UTC-5:00 hours)
...Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Headquarters, Director Seiden's
Office
...Langley, Virginia

Henrietta Marino came a few minutes early for her 10.30AM appointment with Director Seiden. His assistant, a sharp-looking young man in his thirties, barely made eye contact with her before asking her to take a seat and wait.

She didn't follow that invitation. She stood, pacing slowly, feeling uneasy and awkward in her professional attire, and checking her image in the pale reflection of the stainless steel door leading to the restricted communications area. She straightened her back, trying to project the confidence expected of an analyst if she wanted anyone to take her seriously. There was no way she could improve her average, almost plain looks, her dark brown hair tied in a ponytail, or her freckled complexion, but at least she could project some confidence.

Henrietta Marino, Henri for short, was a senior analyst with the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence—Russian and European Analysis. Thirty-five years old, she held a master's degree in political science, and had a twelve-year record of accomplishment as an analyst for the CIA.

For the past eight years, her work had focused on Russia, Russian affairs, and the repositioning of Russia on the world power scale. She understood the Russians really well, or at least she hoped she did.

Her latest report illustrated Russia's concerted effort to reinvigorate its nuclear stance, unprecedented since START I in 1991. The signing of START I, the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, by the United States and the USSR, had marked a historic moment. The USSR was still a federation back then, but the treaty encompassed all former Soviet republics and remained in effect after the federation dissolved.

START I, and later START II, limited the number of nuclear warheads and intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs, on both sides and mapped the road to arsenal reductions. It marked the beginning of a new era, where peace was becoming a possibility. It marked the end of the Cold War.

Henri had anticipated her report would cause some turmoil, being the first report ever to document and argue the rekindling of the arms race, the first of its kind in fifteen years. Within minutes after she had filed it, her phone had started ringing. Colleagues asked her if she was sure. Her boss followed suit immediately and grilled her for an hour on the report facts. Even the CIA's general counsel, whom she'd never met, reached out and asked if she knew what that report meant. He also encouraged her to withdraw it if she wasn't 100 percent sure. Finally, Seiden's chief of staff asked her for more details and her degree of confidence. Now Seiden wanted to see her.

At first, her confidence had been high, the full 100 percent everyone expected from an analyst of her seniority. However, after so many confidence-eroding phone calls and meetings, she wasn't that sure anymore. Still, she knew not many people were able to spot patterns as she could. She had the ability to identify patterns from the fifth data point, in some cases even from the third. It didn't matter what she was analyzing. People's behavior, global events, communication, actions, legislation, she was able to pinpoint immediately what her data points had in common and project a trend based on her observations. Her ability to predict the evolution of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, infamously known to the world as ISIL, although she had never worked in the Middle East Analysis Group, had brought her the promotion to senior

analyst. That, of course, had happened only after everyone stopped thinking she was crazy and started seeing her point. She wondered if the same people were thinking she was crazy this time too. She wondered how long it would last.

"You can go in now." Seiden's assistant made eye contact for more than a second, making sure she went straight in.

She took in a deep breath, straightened her back one more time, and walked through the door displaying as much confidence as she could.

Director Seiden sat behind a monumental desk, reading from a report, most likely hers. Heavily built, wearing the frame of a former athlete or weightlifter, Director Seiden looked intimidating in his charcoal suit, white shirt, and loosened silver tie. In his sixties, the director had a receding hairline showing a tall forehead and permanent frown lines. His role, most likely one of the most stressful leadership roles in the US government, must have given him plenty of reasons to frown throughout the years, carving those deep lines in permanent testimony of who knows what crises he had dealt with.

Bushy salt-and-pepper eyebrows shaded his eyes. He focused intently on his reading material, while his right hand absently touched his teacup, probably considering another taste of Earl Grey.

Henri hadn't interacted with Director Seiden that often. Such a visit was an exceptional occurrence, considering there were three levels of leadership between her pay grade and his. She felt anticipation anxiety creep up on her. She wanted to make a good impression, and she only had one shot at it.

"Sir," she said, after clearing her throat, turned dry and scratchy all of a sudden.

"Take a seat," Seiden said, not lifting his eyes from the pages.

She sat in one of the large leather chairs in front of Seiden's desk, careful to not make a sound and break the director's concentration.

"Interesting theory you have here," he said, finally looking at her. "How sure are you?"

For some reason, Henri instantly forgot her carefully rehearsed exposé and blurted out unfiltered thoughts.

"I was very sure when I put that report together, but now I don't know anymore. Everyone doubts me, questions my judgment. I hope I'm right. I thought I was."

She cringed hearing her own words. She sounded like an insecure child presenting her math homework and still somehow questioning whether two plus two equaled four.

"Are you a leader, or a follower, Ms. Marino?"

"Umm...I aim to be a leader, sir."

"Then you shouldn't let your self-confidence drop because people are asking questions. It's their right. But you do have a brain of your own, right?" Seiden's voice was almost encouraging. He wasn't smiling or anything, but Henri didn't sense any disappointment or anger in his voice.

"Yes, sir," she acknowledged, aware she was blushing.

"Let's try again. How sure are you, Ms. Marino?"

"It's Henri, sir." She blushed a little more. Maybe offering her first name was inappropriate? She had no idea, but she was going to worry about that later. She was clumsy with people, always had been. "Yes, very sure."

"On what basis?"

"I have profiled President Abramovich. His detailed profile is on page five, I think. That profile, combined with several actions he's taking, all listed in the summary section of the report, led me to believe he is preparing for war, or for a renewed arms race, at least."

"I can read, you know," Seiden said, tapping his fingers on the report cover. "What can you tell me that isn't in the report?"

"Sorry, sir. Yes, well, Abramovich is a pure sociopath, of the worst kind possible. He's a malignant narcissistic sociopath, who would kill millions over his bruised ego. I started my report from that evaluation and from analyzing several actions the Russians have recently taken. They correlate really well; they form a pattern that spells arms race to me, possibly even changes in Russia's form of government."

"How so?" Seiden took his reading glasses off and massaged the bridge of his nose with the tips of his fingers.

"His entire background speaks to that. He was KGB. No, even worse, he was political KGB. He was a KGB general during Mikhail Gorbachev's reign at the Kremlin, but Abramovich's contempt for Gorbachev was common knowledge. He hated Gorbachev for his glasnost and perestroika, for his pro-West attitude and his willingness to end communism in Russia and bring freedom to the Russian people. Abramovich climbed to power under the self-proclaimed mission to restore Russia's greatness, and he started working on that since his first day as president of Russia, in the typical manner of a sociopath."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning his actions are disrespectful of anyone else's values, human rights, or the law, for that matter. He is the most dangerous kind of sociopath one can imagine. Absolutely no conscience, no scruples whatsoever, combined with holding the supreme power in a powerful country. After all, when did President Abramovich start being on everyone's mind again?"

Seiden didn't answer; just continued looking at her, waiting for her to resume her analysis. He'd probably heard these things before and had no interest in dwelling on them, nor cared to play question-and-answer games with her.

"Right," she continued. "He invaded Crimea, because he needed faster access to the Black Sea, a waterway shortcut. He didn't care that it was in a different country; he just annexed Crimea, erasing the border that stood in his path. Nothing mattered to him, not even another country's sovereignty. Then what happened? We applied sanctions. Abramovich, whose ego knows no limit, found the sanctions insulting. He fought back with his own sanctions, but he's hurting. Along with him, his financial backers are struggling. The Russian oligarchs, who paid him immense bribes in exchange for favorable legislation and the unofficial permission to do whatever they pleased, now are facing bankruptcies and are demanding action. His personal cash flow has almost dried up. That's why President Abramovich doesn't want the sanctions lifted anymore. He wants much more than that. He wants revenge; he wants blood. He wants us to pay for his bruised ego and tarnished image."

"Interesting," Seiden said, "but not all that new. What else do you see?"

"Several other things that correlate. The Russian people like him a lot. They, too, are sick and tired of poverty and uncertainty. Their support for him has created a unique circumstance that allowed him to start on the road of becoming a dictator; to remain in power until he draws his last breath."

"How come?" Seiden's interest was piqued.

"Well, after Russia became so-called 'free' from communism," she said, making quotation marks with her fingers in the air, "one of the first legislative changes was the amending of the Constitution, limiting the number of consecutive presidential terms to two, just like we have here in the States. The first few terms were four years long, until 2012. Then, they amended the Constitution to make them six years long, all during Abramovich's tenure at the Kremlin. Once his first two terms were consumed, no one thought he would be coming back to lead the country, but he did. He was elected again after a short hiatus, the single-term intermission required to satisfy the Constitution limiting him to two consecutive mandates. Very soon after he returned as reelected president, the Constitution was amended again, extending, as I said, the terms to six years. With these changes in place, he already had twelve years ahead of him, during which time many things could happen. That might include, I am postulating, another amendment to the Constitution, opening the door for more

consecutive terms. Because he is well supported by the desperate Russian people in search for stability and sustainability, that amendment will be easy to vote in. This is how I see him paving the road to dictatorship.”

She stopped talking, swallowing with difficulty. She was painfully aware she spoke too much and too fast.

Seiden whistled and leaned back in his chair, interlocking his fingers behind his head.

“You definitely have my attention now, Henri. Why an arms race though?”

“In the past year and a half, several incidents involving the Russian military took place around Europe and even here, in North America. Forty-seven, to be exact. Near misses, some might call them, or provocative, as others have labeled them, nevertheless they are quite a few. Way too many to be slipups, mistakes, or random acts. These data points form clusters. My analysis isn’t finished yet on these specific actions, though.”

“Yet you filed a report?” Seiden frowned, the lines on his forehead becoming more visible.

“My report is focused on Russia’s nuclear stance, and I’ve finalized that part of the analysis. I was just giving you conjuncture.”

“I see. Then let’s talk nuclear threat.”

“Well, going back to the forty-seven incidents I mentioned, and how apparently random they were, well, I am positive they’re not. I will finish the analysis on those events and substantiate my point. But keeping those so-called random incidents in mind, I will now list nuclear-related, apparently random events that took place in the past few months. A cleanup and restoration operation of their ICBM sites, in no particular order, took place during the past few months. Satellite shows it clearly; they’ve dusted off the majority of their ICBM sites, even some we didn’t know existed. Our satellites tracked the cleaning crews once we knew what they were doing.”

“How did you know to look for those? Do you normally track via satellite every convoy they move around?”

“No, but it was what I would have done. I would have cleaned up my existing arsenal, get it ready, train my people, and produce more weapons. Makes sense. So I had satellite surveillance on a few top ICBM sites, and bingo! One day they showed up. Then I followed the convoys.”

“Hmm...What else?”

“A few months ago, an exercise drill was conducted, involving 25,000 armed forces in a simulated massive nuclear attack. You’ll find the details in Appendix 2.”

“That’s worrisome,” Seiden said, frowning some more. “Keep going.”

“Their top nuclear research facilities received some new funding recently. The Moscow facility is building a new wing. They’ve increased their uranium extraction rate at Priargunsky, Khiagda, and Elkon, their biggest uranium ore deposits. The plan is to double their extraction in the next ten years, under the guise of green energy. And Abramovich recently made changes in the leadership of the RVSN RF, their Strategic Missile Command.”

“I see. Keep going, if there’s more.”

“Yes, there is. They’re building a large center, partly buried underground, relatively close to an enrichment facility, the one in Novouralsk. We’re not sure what that facility will be housing, not yet. On the political side, they’ve forged a troublesome alliance with India, another nuclear power. Finally, President Abramovich made a bold statement in the media, stating that North American defenses, specifically NORAD, cannot stop his new and improved nuclear missiles anymore. By his count, we’re defenseless. That’s unconfirmed, though. The fact, I mean—”

“Henri, we need to get a task team going. I’ll assign some more analysts under your supervision. Find the underlying correlation behind those incidents you haven’t finished modeling yet, and get me some working scenarios. I’ll deploy a resource in the field to find out what’s going on at that center they’re building. Maybe even find out what the extra funding is supposed to buy them. We need to get ready.”

“For what, sir?”

“World War III, most likely. We’ve already entered Cold War II.”

...Chapter 3: Crazy Wall
...Friday, February 19, 5:25PM PST (UTC-8:00 hours)
...Alex Hoffmann's Residence
...San Diego, California

Alex liked her rental home, a comfortable three bedroom in the heart of Carmel Valley. It had a peaceful backyard she often enjoyed, where she could work on her laptop until late in the evening, in almost complete privacy offered by several dense bushes and mature trees. She enjoyed the deep, heady scent of flowering citrus trees, especially at dusk, when cooler air came rolling in from the ocean, bringing a little moisture with it, to enhance the sensation of peaceful, comfortable paradise.

She'd had that house since she'd started her employment with The Agency, a small, private, investigation firm working exclusively with high-profile corporate clients. Founded by Tom Isaac and his wife, Claire, The Agency had become Alex's second family. With an IQ of more than 160 and a driven, assertive nature, Alex found her work for The Agency quite enjoyable and fulfilling. It supplied the fast-paced challenge, the reward, and offered a politics-free environment where she could thrive.

It was a great team at The Agency. She'd been lucky to find it. Tom carried all the wisdom of the business, and the experience of doing this kind of work, for more than twenty years. He was always willing to share that knowledge with her or any one of her peers.

Claire Isaac was adept when it came to figuring out how someone could infiltrate an organization that The Agency was hired to work with. She found the right open spots on the organizational charts and wrote amazing résumés that fit client job openings, getting a team member inconspicuously hired.

Brian Woods was an expert in procedures, protocols, and systems, and he was a top-notch strategist.

Richard Fergusson, a financial and business genius, normally started his work after the culprits had been identified. He helped CEOs and boards of directors with the cleanup, serving as a senior executive on an interim basis. Richard was also Alex's personal fashion advisor, having taught her how to dress for every role or cover story she needed to fulfill.

Louie Bailey, ex-SEAL and expert computer hacker, broke through firewalls whenever they'd get stuck using other methods. She had recruited Louie from her first job at The Agency when she worked with NanoLance and had him to thank for her self-defense and handgun proficiency.

And Steve Mercer, corporate psychologist, was the one who assisted clients navigate the rough waters of their investigations, managed everyone's expectations, and profiled suspects and other players based on their actions and methods. But Steve was more than that to her. She had fallen in love with Steve, despite her better judgment and her determination to follow the unwritten rule forbidding any type of romantic involvement with a coworker.

Yes, they were a great team, that's why she thrived at The Agency. She had a strong sense of right and wrong, and native investigative skills that helped her navigate the intricacies of undercover investigations in corporate environments, where entire fortunes were at stake, and the perps were highly qualified and knowledgeable.

Alex didn't hold any official function; she didn't wear a badge. She infiltrated organizations at the request of business owners, CEOs, or boards of directors who had reasons to suspect malfeasance within their corporations. Her clients preferred their concerns to stay quiet, private, yet to be investigated just as thoroughly as any official inquiry. Over time

though, she had forged good working relationships with the authorities. In a couple of cases, some of the wrongdoing she had exposed had crossed the line from corporate misconduct well into criminal code territory.

When she had a new client, she immersed herself in her work, and the effort was quite considerable. Her cover, typically a newly hired leadership employee starting at the company she was investigating, was a fulltime job in itself. In addition to that, she had The Agency team to work with, a client to update, reports to write, and actual investigative work to handle. No wonder she didn't spend a lot of time decorating her home or picking out new furnishings.

She didn't have a lot of furniture; just a few items she needed to feel comfortable and function effectively. A large leather sectional occupied the living room, together with a huge TV and stereo surround she'd bought the night she moved in. The master bedroom, painted in a light shade of green, held a king-size bed, two nightstands, and two lamps with tabletop dimmers. It wasn't much, but she was most comfortable in open, clutter-free spaces.

The second bedroom was another story altogether. Painted in light blue, it had track lighting installed on the ceiling, holding many powerful light bulbs. Thick, dark blue velvet curtains, not allowing a single shred of that powerful light to be visible from outside, covered the windows.

A huge corkboard covered almost an entire wall. Another curtain railing hung above it. If needed, matching thick velvet drapery could cover the corkboard completely, leading any visitors to believe there was just another window behind it.

Post-it notes, knitting yarn in four colors, scissors, multicolored pushpins, markers, and tape cluttered the two tables in the blue bedroom. A small coffee machine and scattered coffee pods in various flavors completed the inventory of apparently disorganized items. A large armchair stood in the middle of the room, facing the corkboard. Despite the sunny day, clear sky, and perfect temperature, Alex chose to close the heavy drapery and curl up in that armchair rather than go outside and enjoy her backyard. There was one thing she couldn't take with her outside: her crazy wall.

Numerous pictures, clippings, and Post-it notes covered the corkboard, pinned down with colorful pushpins and tied with yarn. Every color she used had a meaning. Green yarn reflected a verified connection between two people, events, or pieces of information. Blue was for plausible, most likely to be true, yet unverified connections. Yellow marked a suspected connection, while red was for surprising, unverified, wild hunches.

Pictures of several individuals were pinned to the corkboard, together with country names, maps, locations, dates, all organized on a timeline illustrating events that had started taking place roughly two years earlier and had stopped in November of the previous year. That was the timeline of her most recent case: a corporate investigation that had uncovered a terrorist plot. She hadn't been able to paste a whole lot of information after that November date. Just scattered Post-it notes with single words followed by question marks, her guesses, and hunches, all unverified, pasted on the timeline wall to stay at the forefront of her attention.

Focused intently on the upper midsection of her timeline wall, Alex stared for minutes at the yellow Post-it marked with the X and a question mark. The position of that Post-it with the letter X showed that he was the leader of the entire structure reflected on her timeline. Underneath that Post-it, there were several others listed facts, conclusions, and hypotheses, using the appropriate marker color. She knew he was Russian, rich or well-funded, mobile, and a male. Those facts were written in green. She wondered whether he was working for the Russian government—SVR maybe? The Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, or SVR, was just as powerful as the KGB had once been. After all, it was led by mostly the same people and had the same agenda. That Post-it held the letters SVR and a question mark written in yellow marker. Then a little lower, another Post-it held the initial V written in blue. During The Agency investigation, she had learned this valuable piece of information. His initial was V. His name most likely started with the letter V. Last name or first name? Unknown. She knew nothing more. Not a shred of information, nothing. In almost four months.

Absentminded, she almost missed the doorbell chime. Steve's here, she thought.

"Come right in!"

She started getting up from her chair, extracting her long, slender legs from underneath her and looking for her missing left slipper. There it was, almost buried under the armchair.

When she looked up, Steve was leaning against the doorframe, a look of deep disappointment clouding his blue eyes.

"Hey," she greeted him happily, "good, you're here! We can leave in just a few." She had to reach up and stand on her tiptoes to peck him on the lips. He didn't meet her halfway, and his kiss wasn't all that warm.

"Come right in? Seriously?" Steve's frown was prominent. "In how many ways is that just plain wrong? How can you be so careless?"

She looked at him sheepishly. It was gonna be one of those days, when he treated her like a child. She hated that more than anything.

"Look, I knew you were coming. I had unlocked the door just minutes before you came, really."

"But that doesn't make it OK, Alex. Not in our line of work."

"Yeah, I know." She sighed, and tried to deter his attention. "You're right, and I'm sorry. Won't happen again. Let me grab my bag and we can go."

She tried to pass by him through the door, but he stopped her in her tracks.

"Not so fast, Alex."

She turned to face him, feeling her blood starting to boil.

"And this?" Steve pointed at the timeline corkboard. "Didn't we talk about this?"

She sighed again, trying to calm herself and salvage the evening. She wanted them to have a good time, to enjoy their weekend at the cabin, but she also needed to make a point.

"Look, Steve, this is my home. I do what I want in my home, in my time."

"I agree," he conceded, "but it's unhealthy, and I'm worried about you. You're obsessing over a case we closed four months ago. It isn't good for you. You have to move on."

"I'm not obsessing; stop being a shrink, all right?" Anger tinted the pitch of her voice.

"I can't," he smiled bitterly. "I am a shrink, and I can't just turn that off and pretend I don't see you heading in the wrong direction, although sometimes I wish I could. The case is over, let it go."

"It's not over, not until we find him!" Alex pointed at the Post-it note marked with the letter X.

"We may never find him, Alex. Sam told you it could take years! You can't live like this. Have you been to work today?"

She blushed and ground her teeth angrily, repressing a groan. She remembered the sweatpants and wrinkled T-shirt she was wearing, her unkempt hair, and lack of makeup. Yep, busted, she thought.

"Brian said he didn't need me today, so I took the day off."

Steve paced slowly toward the window, and then pulled back the thick curtains, letting the sunshine in through the sparkling white sheers. She squinted.

"What's wrong, baby?" His voice was warm, concerned, and almost parental. "Talk to me."

She stood quietly, unwilling to have that conversation. It wouldn't be the first time they'd had it, and it would probably be a waste of time again. He just didn't get it.

"You used to like your job," Steve continued. "Just two years ago, when you came to work with us, you couldn't get enough of it. You were so excited, so happy to have the opportunity to do the work we do. What happened?"

"Almost three years," she said.

"All right, almost three years. But still...You are a fantastic computer engineer, you're a great investigator, you have this super-intelligent brain, you're analytical, brave, and bold. Do you remember what you liked the most about working for The Agency?"

She stood quiet, uncooperative. She'd been through this before. Oh God...make the preaching end already, she thought.

"I'll tell you if you don't remember." Steve continued unperturbed. "You liked that you could go inside organizations and right the wrongs you found, making people's lives better. You liked you could make a difference for so many. You loved to dig around, chase the facts, and find the corrupt, greedy, evil individuals who made everyone else suffer. You loved saving lives. And you loved taking a new client every few months, keeping your mind challenged and alert, helping you learn new things and celebrate the achievement with every closed case and happy client. Where did all that go?"

Silence engulfed the room for several seconds, interrupted only by chirps and trills coming from the birds in her eucalyptus tree. The world outside was alive, was filled with sunshine, life, and happiness, while she was buried here, with her ghosts. Maybe he was right.

"It didn't," she finally spoke.

"Huh?"

"It didn't go anywhere. I still love doing all that; I wouldn't change it for the world. But my case isn't over, that's why I can't let go."

"Do you trust me professionally?" Steve asked.

"Sure I do, with my life."

"Then trust me when I say you delivered your case successfully. The client was happy. You saved the day. You made us all proud: me, Tom, Brian, Richard, Claire, and Louie. Louie would follow you into a burning building; did you know that? And you made Sam proud too, and he's hard to impress."

"But somehow I can't let go. I'm still twisting my mind looking for clues, and there are none. Did we overlook something? Who knows what he's up to next, our Mr. X? Will we even see it coming? He is scary brilliant!"

"Yes, he is. But if you can't take any of our advice for it, take Sam's. We're all corporate investigators, I agree, but Sam's ex-CIA. He knows the spy-and-terrorist business better than we'll ever know it, and he said the same thing. Keep your eyes open, but move on with your life. We might never get to him; he might never resurface again. He might be busy doing time in Siberia for failing his mission, for all we know. Who the hell knows?"

"We're definitely never gonna find him if we stop looking, that's how I feel. Someone's gotta keep on looking. No one knows we've worked this case. Sam's retired CIA. He's not active anymore, so he's not looking either. So, who is? Or who should be?"

She knew she had a point, and he didn't argue.

"All right," he said, "what if you continue to search for him, but with a time limit? Say...two hours per week, not more?"

"I tend to not trust you when it's about me. You've always been overprotective. Will two hours per week keep me sane?"

"Yes, it will teach you to control this urge you have to obsess about the puzzle piece you're missing."

"Can I do four?"

"Huh?"

"Hours. Since you tend to be overprotective and all that," she said, tilting her head to the side in a flirting gesture.

"No. Not more than two hours per week. Please promise me. Go back to doing what you loved to do, put your heart in each client you're working. If your mind is elsewhere, your work will suffer."

"This client's fine, it's Brian's client anyway, not mine. I can afford to do it. I'm just support, not that important or essential anyway."

"Would you be comfortable repeating that statement to Brian?"

She blushed and pursed her lips. Damn.

"Umm...No."

"Why do you let yourself think that? We're all risking our lives when we go undercover. Our support is critical, and you know that. You should know that better than anyone. We're all counting on one another, and we're all counting on you. When you're primary on a case, we don't cut corners on your support, or allow ourselves to become preoccupied by something else."

"All right," she admitted. "I'll give you that. But if I limit this to only two hours, the only question is what would I do for fun?"

He let out a long, pained sigh.

"That's your choice too. I could be here with you every day, if you'd only let me. We could spend our lives together."

"No. We've discussed this. As long as we work together, we can't have that type of relationship. Weekends and vacations, and only if we go out of town. That's it, and I'm not budging."

His blue eyes didn't hide his sadness very well.

"You know we talked about it," she continued in a softer voice, "you know why I can't. It would be risky for us both, for the entire team. We can't, and you know that. Even if Tom doesn't mind, I do."

"Then let's get going," he said, trying to put some cheer in his voice and mostly failing.

She took a quick shower, changed, and got ready for their weekend trip at his cabin up in the mountains near Alpine. He grabbed her bag, opened the door for her, and loaded the bag in the trunk of his black Mercedes G-Class.

Alex turned on her heels and headed back into the house.

"Be right there, I forgot something," she said, as she closed the door behind her.

She went straight for the blue bedroom. She pulled the window curtains shut, turned on the powerful track lights, and took several pictures of her crazy wall with her phone. Satisfied, she turned off the lights, pulled the curtain that concealed the corkboard shut, and locked the main door on her way out. Two hours, four hours, whatever, but who's counting?

"I'm ready," she said, smiling, and hopped in the car. "Let's go."

...Chapter 4: Replacement
...Wednesday, February 24, 11:39AM Local Time (UTC+3:00 hours)
...The Kremlin
...Moscow, Russia

President Piotr Abramovich, the most powerful man in Russia, felt nothing, if not powerless, that morning, irritated by his prime minister's continued inability to name a new defense minister.

Arkady Dolinski, the chair of his government, just couldn't get it right. He had suggested a few names, but none of those generals had what it took to drive Abramovich's military vision. They were weak, comfortable with their set ways and their overflowing vodka guts. None of them was the crusader Abramovich was looking for.

He missed Dimitrov, his former minister of defense, his old friend Mishka. Abramovich paced his Kremlin office slowly, remembering the last time he'd seen him. Hearing that a critical intelligence operation had failed, Dimitrov had collapsed of a heart attack right there, on that rug, breaking the Bohemian crystal coffee table on his way down. He didn't die that day, though. He recovered, but Abramovich had no other choice but to announce his retirement to the entire world.

Almost five months later, the defense minister seat on Russia's government was still empty. Dimitrov's shoes were hard to fill. Abramovich still remembered the days when they had worked together in the First Chief Directorate of the KGB, in Foreign Operations. It was the two of them and Myatlev, all three united by their ambition, their willingness to pay all costs only to win, advance, and lead, and their pledge to have one another's backs, regardless of circumstances.

Unlike Myatlev, Abramovich's early life hadn't benefitted from having a father as a high-ranking KGB officer. His parents had been blue-collar workers in a system that squeezed them dry and spat them out, sick and forgotten. After a life-long struggle, working twelve-hour days in noisy, toxic manufacturing plants, followed by standing in long lines to buy the bare necessities of food and supplies, his parents didn't even live long enough to make it to retirement. His mother had died of bone cancer, her screams of pain waking up their entire neighborhood for weeks. His father had a stroke before he reached age fifty, leaving young Piotr to figure out how to survive on his own.

He had sworn to himself he'd never follow in their footsteps. Not him. Let the rest of the Russians sweat their lives away in god-forsaken factories. That life was not good enough for him. He was going to be different. He was going to have it all.

He had to claw his way into the system and hadn't hesitated in doing so. He'd started at the ground level, at eighteen, fresh out of high school with no other place to go that would have been in alignment with his ambitions. He joined the KGB's Seventh Directorate as an entry-level surveillance agent, locked in windowless rooms and listening all day to the conversations that key party leaders had in their secretly bugged homes.

Most Russians knew there was no such thing as a private conversation in the apparent privacy of one's home. The KGB bugged private residences without hesitation, especially those belonging to men and women holding ranks of power in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Even though they suspected their homes could be under surveillance, the occasional slipup still happened, and Abramovich was there to hear it, record it, and use it. A political joke told by a visiting relative, a snide or bitter comment, or just the stating of a simple fact, such as the absence of heating on a cold winter day, could be easily taken out of context, manipulated, and turned into a life-ending report.

Abramovich figured out that once he filed his reports, most of the people in question were never heard from again. Inspired by the newly gained awareness of his secret power, he started building a strategy.

His boss was easy to manipulate and quite indifferent, but his boss's boss, a man named Konev, was a hardheaded, old-school idiot who disliked him and was never going to let him advance. Abramovich spread the seeds of doubt regarding Konev's allegiances, and then offered to the right people to bug Konev's home and spend a couple of weeks recording his conversations.

A few days later, carefully edited tapes played back, in front of a shocked audience, the voice of unsuspecting Konev responding to his wife's comment about the scarcity of meat in their meals with a phrase expressing angrily that the situation had gone on long enough, was intolerable, and he was going to do something about that. Only Abramovich knew that Konev had said that phrase in the context of his ten year old getting bad marks in school. Abramovich had learned how to cut tape, edit, adjust the sound levels to make it smooth, and recopy the edited pieces onto a brand new tape. He had also learned how to dispose of the fragments, how to destroy magnetic tape without leaving a trace of evidence behind.

Last he had heard, Konev was being shipped to Perm-36, a forced labor camp administered by the GULAG. The GULAG, just as dreaded as it was notorious, was an acronym for the Russian Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps and Labor Settlements; in short, the forced labor camps management.

Konev never resurfaced; few people who entered the GULAG's camps ever did. But Konev was not the only one Abramovich had sent to Perm-36; he was just the first.

In recognition for his exemplary work in the identification and capture of an enemy of the people, Abramovich was offered the chance to enter the Dzerzhinsky Higher School of the KGB. He took the opportunity enthusiastically and started on the path to become a career KGB officer. He was only twenty-two.

At Dzerzhinsky he met both Myatlev and Dimitrov, just as young and ambitious as he was, and their early friendship evolved into a mutually benefitting long-term alliance, forged to help one another propel their careers. They grew to rely on one another, even trust one another to some extent. People like them knew better than to fully trust anyone.

Then Abramovich started ascending to power. His reputation for ruthlessness and his deep knowledge about how to destroy lives parted the crowds in front of him; nothing and no one stopped him on his way up. No one who wanted to stay alive or see his or her family again dared oppose unrelenting Abramovich.

After graduation, he had the choice of service, and he chose to lead a small division within the Fifth Chief Directorate reporting to Lavrentiy Beria, later known to have been responsible for the political abuse of psychiatry in the USSR. Fascinated by the incredible power he'd have in that role, he didn't go for the coveted Foreign Intelligence unit in the First Chief Directorate. Although foreign intelligence was his next goal, he wanted to learn new ways to control opponents, to extract information, and to incarcerate indefinitely without anyone questioning the validity of his decisions. What better place to do all that than the psychiatric unit?

Anyone who was a dissident, who said anything or did anything that contradicted the communist dogma, could happen to have a nervous breakdown. Sluggish schizophrenia was a popular diagnosis at that time. Any such diagnosis required admission for treatment in a special psychiatric ward, bitterly yet unofficially known as psikhushka, a Russian term for what would freely translate as the loony cage. These psychiatric wards were nothing more than psychiatric detention centers, where unwanted dissidents were chemically brainwashed into long-term, quiet obedience, and forgotten there until they drew their last breaths.

Of course, any dissident could have a public nervous breakdown if the right drugs were administered, with or without their knowledge. Abramovich learned a lot about drugs, manipulation with drugs, and information extraction under the influence of drugs. Thus, he became an even more successful, feared, and unstoppable career KGB officer.

He gave punitive psychiatry almost two years of his life. Then he moved on to Foreign Intelligence, where his newly acquired pharmacology knowledge enabled him to get above average results in the extraction of information from both

willing and unwilling participants. Seven successful years later, he left Foreign Intelligence, having yet again a choice of careers in front of him. He chose the Second Chief Directorate, dedicating himself to learning the ropes of internal political control. He was thirty-five and a major general, the youngest ever to hold that rank, multiple decorations adorning the uniform he wore with immense pride.

The path opened for Abramovich's political ascension. He was a general during Gorbachev's tenure at the Kremlin, and watched in horror how that reckless traitor was dismantling the USSR and selling the parts. Right when he was so close to holding supreme power in his country, the USSR was disappearing right in front of his powerless eyes.

There was no way he could fight Gorbachev and stop his damned glasnost. He tried and failed on multiple occasions. Gorbachev was fiercely pro-West; he strongly believed in all that transparency and reform bullshit that was going to ruin Russia and bring it to its knees. They were all at the mercy of Western puppeteers who had made fools out of Gorbachev and all his followers.

When the KGB dismantled, he was forty years old and more decided than ever to take the Kremlin one day and restore his country's lost greatness. It took some effort. He had to adapt to a changing political landscape, new entrants in the game, and new political structures emerging all around him. People feared the same things, whether in communism or democracy, and he knew how to master those fears.

The Kremlin was his now and had been for a few years. He was almost midway through his third term as president, proving again that he could achieve the impossible. He had started his path to reconstruct Russia's fallen greatness. The urgency of his vision kept him up at night, counting the years he had left before he'd win the supreme game of his career.

Few people embraced or even understood his vision, and his tolerance for them was wearing thin. He hadn't grown any more patient with the passing of years; he often felt he was running a desperate race against time, the world, against everyone.

Abramovich slowed his pacing enough to grab a quick shot of vodka from the readily available bottle of Stolichnaya waiting on ice near his new coffee table. Grabbing ice cubes with his fingers he let them drop in a glass, and covered them with the clear liquid. He took a large gulp, letting out air in a satisfied, audible expression of satisfaction, typical for Russian career drinkers. Then he went to his desk and pressed a button.

"Da, gospodin prezident?"

"Get Dolinski in here."

Minutes later, after a quick knock on the door, his prime minister entered.

"Dolinski, tell me you have a defense minister."

Dolinski kept his head lowered, eyes fixated on the floor.

"Gospodin prezident, I have a couple of names you might want to consider."

"Like whom?"

"General Sokol would be a good fit. He's old guard, a hardliner, combative."

"He's a hundred years old, for fuck's sake, Dolinski, what the hell? I need someone who's going to live long enough to make things happen. Someone who can still think of war, want a war, start a war."

"Then General Chaplinski would be great. He's only sixty years old, very determined, a great leader."

"Do you think Chaplinski shares my vision? In his heart? Or just does it lip service? Is he a communist or United Russia?"

United Russia had become the leading political party after the fall of communism. It was non-ideological in nature, a party uniting all the politically disoriented survivors of almost a century of communism. But as a member and former

leader of United Russia, Abramovich knew that anyone could function under the colors of United Russia and have their own hidden agendas.

"He's United Russia. Did you want a communist for defense minister? How would the world see that?"

"Screw the world, Dolinski, I don't care about what they see and don't see. This is about making Russia great again, not about impressing the goddamn West. The West can go to hell, and if I can help make that happen, I will. Stop trying to kiss the West ass, Dolinski. Do you still have the balls to do your job? Or has it castrated you already, left you impotent?"

Abramovich's voice had reached thunderous levels, his anger taking over. He gulped the remaining vodka and slammed the empty glass on his desk.

"N-no, sir," an intimidated Dolinski managed to utter.

"I'm surrounded by impotents." Abramovich continued to pontificate from the bottom of his lungs. "No one has the guts to help me get back what's ours, what has always been ours. Where are the great men of Russia? Where are the fearless leaders of tomorrow, our brave generals? Doesn't anyone have what it takes to get me results? To think and plan great things? Who's been handling defense since Dimitrov retired, and what have they accomplished?"

"Umm...I worked with Generals Chaplinski and Sokol to keep things in motion until we name a new defense minister."

"Is that what you think this country needs? Keeping things in motion?"

"We continued to execute the plan set by Minister Dimitrov before he retired. The readiness for engagement, the incursions outside the national territories, even Division Seven."

"How's our readiness?" Abramovich's tone dropped to almost normal levels.

"It's going according to plan. We've restored to 100 percent readiness all our missile sites, nuclear submarines, and military jets. We've conducted exercises and assessed the readiness levels of our ground forces. We've taken an updated inventory of our arsenals and started research and production on every item we still need. We estimate that by midsummer we will have all our arsenals replenished as per the former minister's plan."

Abramovich started pacing again, slowly, pensively.

"Get me more," he said after a few seconds. "Get me more than what the plan called for. Revise the plan and bring it to me for review. I know START limits our arsenal counts, but I want to have bigger nukes, new planes, more powerful nuclear submarines. Double the fleet of Borei submarines, get rid of all the junk. And authorize more funds for nuclear research. Put all of that in your plan."

"Umm... how about funding? We're running out of funding for defense. With the sanctions, it's been hard."

"Screw the sanctions. Take from somewhere else. Social security, education, health, I don't care. Raise some taxes. Just make it happen."

"Yes, gospodin prezident."

Abramovich dismissed Dolinski with a wave of his hand, and Dolinski disappeared, closing the door quietly behind him.

Dolinski might be able to pull it off, but he still needed a good defense minister. No, he needed a great one.

...Chapter 5: White House Visit
...Thursday, February 25, 8:12AM EST (UTC-5:00 hours)
...The White House
...Washington, DC

The day held several firsts for Henri. Her first time at the White House. Her first time going anywhere with Director Seiden. Her first time in the same room with the president. She hoped she'd rise to the occasion and make Seiden proud.

"We should get started shortly," Seiden said, "we're his first agenda item. That always helps."

She nodded, not sure what to say. Seiden read right through her self-imposed calm.

"You'll do fine. Just remember what we discussed. Keep it short and clear, no speculation. Short phrases, minimum words, keep it simple. And it's OK to say that you'll have an answer in a few days if you're not sure about something."

"Uh-huh, yes, sir," she confirmed.

"This is a briefing, not a brainstorming session. Only confirmed facts and finalized analyses, got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"You can take your seats in the conference room now," a staffer said, and showed them the way. "Would you like anything to drink? Coffee, tea, water?"

"Thank you, we're good," Seiden replied for both of them.

An assistant took a seat at the remote part of the table, getting ready to take notes.

President Krassner entered, followed closely by two of his advisors.

Brief introductions identified General Foster, the president's military advisor, a tall, proud man in uniform, with his chest covered in decorations, and Norbert Purvis, the national security advisor, who looked more like a businessman than a politician.

"Good morning, everyone," Krassner said, "let's hear it."

Going straight to the point, Doug Krassner was exactly how Henri thought he'd be, after seeing him on television on numerous occasions. Krassner had the reputation to be a smart, open-minded, and gutsy leader, willing to go a little differently about things and break some molds if that meant progress.

"Mr. President," Seiden greeted him with deference, "thank you for seeing us on such short notice."

"What's on your mind, director?"

"This, sir," Seiden said, pushing slightly forward Henri's report, bound nicely in report covers bearing the CIA insignia in gold emboss.

"I flipped through some pages," Krassner said, "makes for a very interesting read. So...we've entered Cold War two dot zero, huh? Great way to start my presidency." Krassner smiled, an open smile not in the least bitter.

"Two dot zero, sir?" Seiden asked.

"My technology advisor said the new Cold War will involve technology way more than we'd anticipated. He came up with Cold War 2.0 instead of Cold War II, and it stuck."

Everyone chuckled lightly.

Krassner cleared his throat quietly. "OK, let's get started. What do you think this means?" He pointed at the report.

"War, sir," Seiden replied. "Maybe not now, not this year, but definitely going toward war. Crimea might have been the trigger for a chain of events leading to global conflagration."

"Can Russia go to war with the entire Western world? NATO is a powerful alliance."

"My analyst suggested that we shouldn't think of Russia in the traditional way, as planning to go to war directly and amassing thousands of tanks and troops in a direct, open invasion. Marino and her team think this war will be different, based on the profile they've built for President Abramovich and his actions to date."

Krassner turned slightly to face Henri.

"What do you think these military actions are about?"

"Sir, I think these incursions are testing our response times, our response procedures, and our response strength. Overall, they're testing our response, or wearing out our vigilance while testing our response."

Seiden looked away briefly to hide his irritation. The incursions analysis was not completely finalized. Yet she was venturing a non-substantiated hypothesis, the exact opposite of what they had discussed on their way in. Well aware of that, Henri swallowed hard and mentally prepared to walk on thin ice. Whatever the risk for her career, Krassner needed to know the facts ASAP. It was an acceptable risk, if she were to be proven wrong. Much better than taking the risk of informing Krassner a few days too late.

"What for?" Krassner asked.

"Nothing good, that's for sure," she blurted. Without turning her head, she caught Seiden flashing an angry glance toward her.

"That's an understatement," Krassner commented. "Can you venture some guesses?"

"Umm...sure. I think they could be testing our response to figure out where and how to conduct a first strike. That's one theory. Another theory is that they could be conducting these territorial displays of aggression to distract us, while they're looking to launch ballistic missiles. The missiles scenario is covered in my report. In addition, a third scenario is that they could be doing these close-call incursions in the hope that someone on our side gets nervous and engages by accident. Although, in all fairness, I don't see them caring too much about who started it, or who's to blame. Abramovich is beyond that. He just wants vengeance for the Crimea sanctions and the public humiliation they brought him."

"If you were to choose one scenario, which one do you think is the most plausible?"

She hesitated a little before answering, wondering, as many other people had wondered lately, how sure she was. Very.

"I'd have to say scenario two, sir. I'd have to go with the nuclear-strike scenario."

Silence fell thick, lingering for a few seconds that seemed like hours. Krassner opened the report and briefly browsed through it, making a quick note on one of the pages.

Then he looked up at Henri again.

"What do you think of my technology advisor's opinion, with respect to the new cold war? Do you think he has a point?"

She hesitated, not sure whether the question was directed at her or at Seiden.

"Can you venture a guess which technologies would be more interesting to acquire or develop to consolidate our offensive and defensive positions?"

Krassner was looking straight at her, and so was Seiden, who nodded discreetly.

"Mr. President, I don't have this analysis completed. I can look into this issue and prepare a report in a matter of days."

"You're an analyst, right? Then analyze, speculate with us. Let's hear what you think."

Krassner wasn't going to give her any room to maneuver out of the situation. She might as well use the opportunity to tell him what she thought. Henri took a deep breath before speaking, reminding herself to slow her machine-gun verbalization to an easier-to-follow delivery rhythm.

"Mr. President, I think technology should be a much higher focus for the US military. Should have been would be the right way to put it. We need to allow innovation to penetrate our weapons systems, aircraft, communications, everything technology.

"The backbone of our Air Force is based on thirty- to forty-year-old concepts. The fifth-generation jets are coming into service way too slow. So slowly, they're already somewhat out-of-date by the time they become operational. We fly the same planes as we did thirty years ago. Maybe they're not thirty years old, but their concepts are. Yet most of us can't stomach having a car older than eight years."

"Enough," Seiden whispered into her ear, barely audible. She clammed up promptly.

"Not at all, let her continue," Krassner said.

She cleared her throat, suddenly constricted by seeing how stiff the president's military advisor seemed. His pursed lips, flanked by two deep ridges formed around his mouth by an expression of offended consternation, were conveying a clear message. Drilling, unforgiving eyes focused on hers with an intensity she hadn't encountered too often. She decided to lay off the fighter jets for a while.

"We put satellites into orbit at roughly five to seven times the cost that other countries spend to do the same thing. Private entrepreneurs can figure out how to build rockets and move cargo into space cheaper and faster than NASA."

She paused for a few seconds, waiting to see if they wanted her to continue. Krassner made an inviting gesture with his hand.

"Did you know that European countries are significantly more advanced in their search for clean energy? They are decades ahead of us. The list can continue, but the bottom line is that our traditional resistance to change has cost us dearly in terms of progress. The weapons we build are clunky, obsolete and carry huge price tags. They're not efficient; they don't make use of modern technologies, light materials, process innovation (like three-dimensional printing), or materials innovation, such as carbon fiber molding. The Chinese have already 3D-printed an apartment building and are manufacturing light jets made from carbon fiber: light, maneuverable, and fuel-efficient. Yet we build the same clunky rust buckets designed in the fifties, so I would say yes, your advisor was definitely right. Technology will definitely play a role in future war strategy, from more perspectives than just cyber warfare. By the way, I think we're actually doing fairly well in cyber warfare. At least, courtesy of the NSA, we seem to be better prepared in that area."

"Please continue," Krassner said. "What would you do?"

"Well, we did make some progress in the past decades, not much, but we've made some. Unmanned flight, stealth technologies, computing power, all these new technologies gave us immense strategic advantages. We just need to continue on this path. For each area, we should drive innovation before we spend trillions more ineffectively on antiquated technology. I'd also focus on revamping NORAD and our antimissile defense; it might come in handy sooner than we'd like. We also need to observe more, to find out what's out there, to, well," she chuckled slightly, thinking of paraphrasing a known movie title, "to spy hard. For many years, we've been focused on GWOT and forgot all our other enemies. Global war on terror must continue, but we need to redeploy in other areas." Seeing Seiden's consternated look, she added quickly, "In my humble opinion."

Krassner smiled.

“Thank you for your candor and original thoughts; they’ll keep us busy for a while.” He turned slightly and looked toward Seiden. “Director Seiden, as soon as the intrusions analysis is complete, I want it on my desk. Let’s talk strategic response immediately; get it set up.”

Krassner walked briskly out of the conference room, followed closely by his two advisors and his assistant. Seiden and Henri left immediately after them, heading for the parking garage.

Alone with Seiden in the car, she allowed herself to take a deep breath.

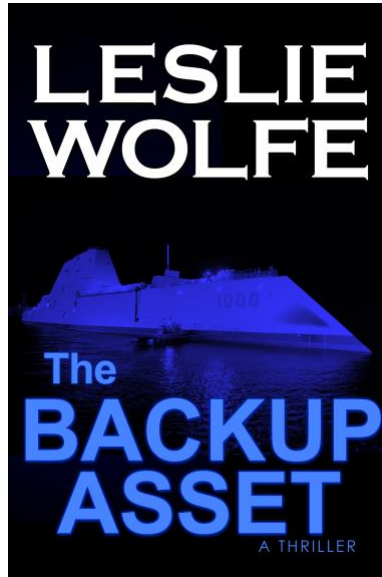
“Sir, am I fired?”

“Not sure yet,” Seiden replied without a trace of humor in his voice. “This wasn’t like any other presidential briefing I have attended, that’s for sure. Put some numbers together to substantiate your theories on those Russian incursions. Write your report, do the most thorough work you’re capable of. Ideally, do that before presenting to me, to anyone, especially the president. But in this case, keep me posted as you go, tell me what you find, as soon as you find it.”

“Are you concerned I might be wrong in my theories?”

“No... I’m afraid you might be right.”

He doesn't need to break the locks. Just the people holding the keys.



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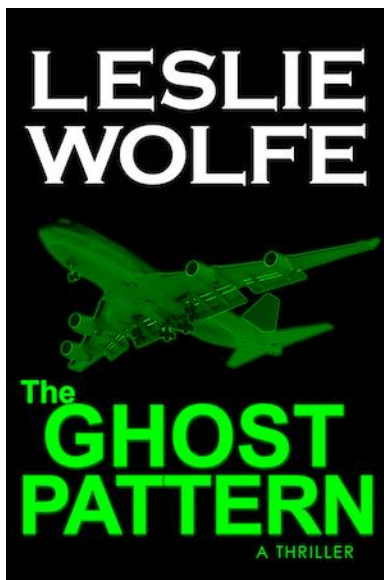
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FREE PREVIEW: *THE GHOST PATTERN*

Their plane didn't crash. Someone needed them alive.



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...Chapter 1: The Perfect Environment

...Wednesday, March 30, 11:01AM Local Time (UTC+3:00 hours)

...Russian Ministry of Defense

...Moscow, Russia

He glared at the man standing in front of him and clenched his jaws in an effort to control his anger.

"Speak," he growled.

"*Gospodin* Myatlev," the trembling man articulated in an unsure voice, "I think I found the perfect environment for our next test."

Vitaliy Myatlev let the air out of his lungs slowly. This was not one of his multinational corporations... this was the Russian government. People were slow and stupid sometimes. Most of all, people couldn't just be killed on the spot, especially when they couldn't be replaced that easily. Damn... When the hell did he turn from powerful oligarch into a goddamn clerk? A high-ranking one, that's true, but little more than a clerk, serving the almighty Russian president, and running to answer his every call.

The man stood silently, afraid to speak, his back bowing a little more.

Myatlev gestured the man to continue.

"There are 112 men," he said, "all about the same age, height and build, isolated, and vulnerable. It couldn't be better for what we need. They're perfectly contained, and remote. No one will know."

"You're saying this time it will work?"

The man lowered his eyes. "I think so, yes."

"You think...?" Myatlev snapped.

"Umm... sir, with every new pharmaceutical compound there are levels of tolerance, side effects, complications, environmental and metabolic factors to consider. Especially when the drug is aerosolized, the delivery isn't that precise. This hasn't been attempted before," the man added in a timid voice, then wiped his brow with his lab coat sleeve. "We haven't—"

"Save it," Myatlev said. "I've heard it all before, Dr. Bogdanov. Just give me results."

...Chapter 2: Invisible

...Tuesday, April 12, 8:45AM Local Time (UTC+1:00 hour)

...North Sea Drilling Operations, Shore Base

...Aberdeen, Scotland

Chief Ramsay paced the room impatiently, muttering curses under his breath and looking out the same window every two seconds, although the view stayed eerily the same. A cold and foggy Aberdeen morning, engulfed in fog so thick it condensed water droplets on everything it touched, including his office window.

He picked up the radio and tried again.

"Nancy Belle, Nancy Belle, this is Shore Base, come in, over?"

He released the radio button, listening intently and hearing nothing. "C'mon, c'mon, where the hell are you?" he whispered impatiently.

His typical mornings were a lot different from that particular one. He'd come in the office a few minutes before 8:00AM, shaking off the humid chills brought by the thick Aberdeen fog, and heading straight for the coffee machine. He'd brew a fresh cup, then enjoy it while making his morning rounds. That was a figure of speech, of course. He rarely left the shore base. Once a rig was in production, barring some unforeseen event, the head of shore base operations had no reason to visit in person. His morning rounds consisted of radio calls with each of the drilling platforms under his purview, making sure everything was running well. He'd check the status of operations for each rig, and receive reports for everything from staff health to outstanding work orders for parts and repairs.

That would have been a routine morning. This time, things were different.

Nancy Belle, or NB64, was one of the three offshore oilrigs he was responsible for, and it was not reading on any comm. The night before NB64 had signed off with a "status normal, nothing to report" code, and now there was nothing, not a single sound coming from the platform on any channel. It was as if the milky fog had swallowed it whole.

A quick rap on the door, and the shift supervisor came in uninvited.

"Boss?" he said, rubbing his forehead hesitantly.

"Yeah, what do you have?"

"Nothing, dead silent on radio, on sat, all of it is dead. I tried a few personal cell phones, none pick up. Even video is down, all of it."

"What?" Ramsay stopped and turned on his heels to face his shift lead.

"Yeah, boss, all video feed is down for 64."

"Damn...bloody hell, what happened to those boys? Have any of the other rigs reported anything?"

"No, nothing," the man replied, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, while the frown on his forehead became more pronounced under the rim of his hard hat. "But they don't have eyes on them either...fog's too thick."

Ramsay went to the window and pressed his binoculars against it, squinting hard against the eyecups, trying to make something out in the milky haze that had swallowed everything like a shroud. His other rigs weren't visible yet either, but NB64 was the farthest one out; it would be a while.

"There's one," he said, pointing in the direction of a familiar shape almost completely hidden in the fog.

"That's 27," the other man confirmed. "If we can see 27, it shouldn't be that long before we put eyes on 64."

"Nancy Belle, Nancy Belle, come in, goddamnit," Ramsay tried again and got no response. "Go try video again, will ya'?"

The man left quietly. He returned within minutes. "Nothing, boss."

Ramsay stuck his face against the cold window and squinted some more.

"There she is," he said, as the fog lifted a little more, enough for him to discern the familiar silhouette of NB64 against the gray mist. "She's still there!"

Ramsay grabbed his binoculars and looked at 64 again. "Yeah, seems to be in one piece, no flames, no smoke."

He made another attempt to raise the rig by radio, then turned to his lead and said, "You know the procedure. We can't wait any longer; it's been almost an hour. We have to assume the worst. Get SAS and emergency response ready, and meet me on the helipad."

Minutes later, the rotor blades of a SA 330E Puma helicopter ripped through the lifting fog as it headed toward the eerily silent NB64.

...Chapter 3: Irritation

...Tuesday, April 12, 10:51AM Local Time (UTC+3:00 hours)

...Russian Ministry of Defense

...Moscow, Russia

Vitaliy Myatlev reaped the benefits of being President Abramovich's lifelong friend, and loved it. He took a top floor office in the Russian Ministry of Defense, right next door to Minister Dimitrov, another one of his lifelong friends. Although at the center of a starving, frozen, and desperate Moscow, Myatlev's office was lavishly decorated in Western fashion, with imported furniture and art pieces worthy of the world's finest galleries. He had become accustomed to a certain lifestyle since he had started enjoying tremendous success in business, propelling him on the short list of the world's richest men. He would have settled for nothing less.

This lifestyle contrast was nothing new to the citizens of Moscow, accustomed by now with the gaping chasm between classes. Moscow was the only place in the world where workers dressed in rags crowded on commuter busses that shared the streets with a parade of Lamborghinis and Ferraris. No, nothing new for them.

Since the fall of communism, Russia had quickly replaced one dominant class with another, leading to little quality of life improvement for the average citizen. Of course, it had been the Communist Party's greatest, the KGB's finest who had access to riches, connections, and business knowledge to lay down the foundations of capitalism in Russia. No one else but them, the same ruthless elite had gained access to capitalist power using the same methods as they did back in their communist days. This time they were chasing the mighty dollar, not the political favor of one communist dictator or another.

Myatlev was no exception. He'd come of age in the final days of the old KGB, cutting his teeth in foreign intelligence and gaining invaluable exposure to the West and its ways. He also gained something equally invaluable during those days: the lasting friendship of two young men he met while he was a student at the Dzerzhinsky Higher School of the KGB.

The three of them had a lot in common; they were ruthlessly ambitious; stopped at nothing to achieve their goals; and were bold, unafraid, and brilliant. They all lived to see their dreams become reality, although in different directions.

One, Piotr Abramovich, or Petya for his close friends, had become the president of Russia, and the first to stay in power for more than the typical two mandates after the fall of communism. Abramovich had started his third presidential mandate, and the Kremlin rumor mill suggested he was planning yet another Constitution amendment, to remove any remaining limitations on his path of becoming the first post-glasnost dictator. His ego moved mountains; his bruised ego started wars.

The other one, Mikhail Dimitrov, was Russia's minister of defense, the best and brightest the country had seen in ages. A talented strategist with a cool head on his shoulders and a heartfelt desire to restore Russia's greatness along with Abramovich and Myatlev, Mishka Dimitrov was the voice of temperance keeping impulsive Abramovich from setting the world on fire. He had to walk a fine line to do that, but no one else could do that better than Dimitrov.

Finally, Myatlev, the youngest of the three but not by much, had been born with a natural inclination for big business. Within years after he was set free by the fall of communism, he had amassed billions of dollars and business interests, ranging from banking, imported goods, food, and oil in Russia and the former Soviet republics to investments in technology, natural resources, and real estate everywhere else on the globe. Of course, having his best friends in high positions of power within the Russian government had helped him a little in his business ventures. Myatlev never had to worry about permits,

taxes, or even staying on the right side of the law. He had become an all-powerful oligarch, grateful and generous toward anyone who helped him prosper.

Of course, there was a price to pay for all that, like his presence here, in his Ministry of Defense penthouse office. He, out of all people, held a regular day job...the thought of that made him cringe. But no one could say no to Abramovich and live to see the light of tomorrow. Abramovich might have been his friend, but that friendship survived, like with most sociopathic narcissists, just as long as Myatlev did what he was told, and obeyed wholeheartedly. Famous for his unpredictable mood swings, Abramovich could turn on a dime and decide to throw him to the depths of Siberia, or just kill him on the spot. Abramovich was the only man on earth who held the power to destroy Myatlev.

But there was a bright side to his unofficial role in the Russian government. Myatlev enjoyed power more than anything else in the world, even more than he enjoyed money. He also loved his country. He was sincerely committed to serve Russia and help restore its lost greatness.

He was deeply, wholeheartedly grateful to Mother Russia. In service to his country he had gained the skills, knowledge, contacts, and money to get him started on his way to business success; he never forgot that. *Plus*, he thought with a crooked smile, *there are fortunes to be made when rebuilding an empire*.

He and Dimitrov weaved ambitious plans to help restore Russia's long lost greatness and rebuild the decrepit military and technology infrastructure. Dimitrov's military instinct set the vision, the strategy, the ideal. However, Myatlev had an uncanny talent; he manipulated people into doing what he wanted. No matter how complex or diabolical Dimitrov's vision, he found ways to build incredible plans and orchestrate their execution. Most of the times, he was highly successful.

There was mutual benefit from their partnership, and Myatlev made sure the benefit stayed just as mutual as Dimitrov liked. If Russia's defense needed a couple hundred new helicopters, the contract would go to one of Myatlev's companies, and an incentive would find its way into Dimitrov's cash vaults. Then the business genius that was Myatlev would buy a helicopter manufacturer, build the choppers, then sell the plant at the height of its capitalization glory. That was, of course, if no other choppers were needed by the Russian Army.

And that's how the world turns, Myatlev thought, filling a glass with vodka and some ice, slapped carelessly in the cut crystal glass with his chubby fingers.

At 59, Myatlev's physical appearance told the honest truth about the abuse his body had taken throughout the years. He had telling bags under his eyes, and he had lost most of his hair. His skin hung around his jaws as if he were a bulldog, and his eyes were always bloodshot. Vodka was a constant presence in his life, and so were fine cigars and expensive foods. His gastritis was giving him some trouble lately, and the latest sip of vodka immediately bore a hole in his stomach.

"Ivan," he called, summoning his aide and lead bodyguard.

Ivan, a well-built ex-Spetsnaz, walked promptly through the door.

"Boss?"

"Get me something to eat."

Ivan reappeared in the doorframe within seconds, carrying a tray with beluga caviar on ice, surrounded by tiny squares of thin, white toast.

"Thanks," Myatlev said in a rare acknowledgment, chewing with his mouth open. Then he tapped his finger on the empty glass, and Ivan promptly refilled it.

"Dr. Bogdanov is scheduled to arrive in a few minutes," Ivan said. "Do you want me to cancel that?"

"Argh...no, I need to talk to him," he replied, rolling his eyes in exasperation.

Myatlev wiped his mouth with a napkin and lit a cigar. He opened the window and took in the aroma of spring with his cigar smoke. Bogdanov...If this was the best that VECTOR Institute had to offer, Russia was in trouble.

VECTOR, the State Research Center of Virology and Biotechnology, somewhat the Russian equivalent of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or CDC, was home to Russia's most advanced medical research. Some of that research, like in any field for that matter, found its way into military applications, hitting Myatlev's radar.

Myatlev had been laying the ground for his most recent plan, but his plan required real talent, finesse, genius. He saw none of that in Dr. Bogdanov. Yes, he was a well-educated and highly recommended medical researcher, but he was spineless, a coward trying to read Myatlev's mind and serve him what he wanted to hear, instead of working with him, sharing his vision, and making it happen. But, alas, Bogdanov was the best VECTOR had to offer. *Bozhe moi...*

A tap on the door, and Ivan announced him.

"Dr. Bogdanov to see you, sir."

Myatlev turned toward the door, not leaving his favorite spot by the open window.

Bogdanov stepped through the door, pale, staring at his feet. He held his hands tightly clasped together, probably to keep them from shaking.

"So?" Myatlev asked. "How did it go?"

"The...the results were...umm...less than we expected," Bogdanov started, clearing his throat with difficulty, and swallowing hard.

"What happened?"

"They were...uncontrollable. Once they were exposed to the drug we couldn't stop them, and—"

"So the test was a failure, another one," Myatlev said, slamming his palm against the windowsill. "After all this work, we have nothing, that's what you're saying?"

"Umm...I guess we could say that—"

"Enough with the bullshit," Myatlev cut him off angrily. "Grow some balls and admit you have nothing, or tell me what you have."

"Y-yes, sir, we have nothing. We need to go back to the drawing board."

"Your researchers aren't worth much, are they?" Myatlev asked in a threatening tone. "Why can't you find me better ones? Do I have to solve all your problems for you?"

Silence fell for a second. This time, Myatlev expected an answer.

"No, sir," Bogdanov replied weakly.

"I need to have this done already," Myatlev continued just as angrily as before. "Why is it so hard to get a controlled response in people? The entire goddamned pharmaceutical industry does exactly that, gets controlled responses to chemicals in people. Yet you and your idiots can't. What kind of doctors are you?"

Bogdanov stood quietly, not sure how to respond to that.

"You had the perfect environment for this test. A contained, remote environment with male test subjects of about the same build. That's exactly what you said. Still you screw it up. Why the hell is it so hard? All I am asking of you is to fix me a drug mix with controllable results. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

Myatlev turned his back to Bogdanov, leaving him standing there, not sure what to do, afraid to break the silence and ask. After a while, Bogdanov found the courage to leave Myatlev's office, quietly closing the door behind him.

Myatlev heard the door click shut and whispered to himself, "Impotent idiots...all of them."

...Chapter 4: Findings

...Tuesday, April 12, 8:57AM Local Time (UTC+1:00 hour)

...NB64, Nancy Belle Offshore Oil Drilling Platform

...Near Aberdeen, Scotland

Chief Ramsay looked at the men seated next to and across from him. They had the same expression, curiosity mixed with concern, and the determination one sees on a soldier's face before going into battle.

"People, listen up," he said, and everyone turned toward him. "In a minute or two we will be touching down on NB64. The platform has been out of contact and has missed the established communication touch point, which was at 8:00AM today. All video and comm links are down. Our protocol," he said, slowing his rhythm of delivery a little, making sure everyone understood, "our protocol requires us to assume the worst-case scenario, which is a terrorist attack."

Most men knew the protocol well and were not surprised. Two younger men from the emergency response unit lifted their heads slightly.

"An offshore oilrig is strategic infrastructure," he clarified, "hence a prime target for terrorists. It's isolated and immobile, relatively easy to approach despite all security, and therefore vulnerable. Please explain what types of attack we should be mindful of when landing on the rig," he said, inviting one of the veterans to explain it to the team.

"The attack could be chemical, biological, or traditional, with explosives. Do not assume you know what's wrong with the rig's crew or the rig itself until it's actually confirmed, and you hear the clear signal given either by me or by—"

"Chief Ramsay," a young man interrupted in a high-pitched voice, bearing horror written on his face. "Look!"

They looked in the direction of the rig, now in close proximity as the chopper was making its final approach. The deck was stained with blood. Bodies were scattered everywhere. It was the scene of a massacre.

"Masks on," Ramsay ordered. "Keep chatter to a minimum."

They disembarked quietly, then almost all of them stopped in their tracks, taking the details in.

Right next to the helipad, a man lay in a pool of blood with his head split open, the ax still stuck in his skull. A few yards out and to the left, another man had found his demise strangled with a piece of chain. A third man lay on his side, and the unnatural position of his head indicated his neck had been broken violently. Toward the mess hall entrance, a man hung halfway over the guardrail, with a knife stuck deep in his heart. Everywhere they looked, it was the same...countless bodies, all violent deaths, inexplicable. It was as if the entire crew had suddenly turned on one another and fought to their deaths.

Chief Ramsay ordered the teams to split up and go below deck with a few hand gestures. He also gestured the quick unspoken signal for "be careful," a rapid succession of the gestures advising them to listen and watch. Then he led one of the teams below deck, into the mess hall.

The same horrific scene extended below deck. The floor was almost entirely covered in blood, and they had to be careful not to slip and fall. A worker had been killed with a hammer blow to the face, and had fallen on top of one of the mess hall tables, lying there with his eyes still open and mouth gaping in a silent, perpetual scream.

Chief Ramsay advanced cautiously, his weapon drawn, and froze in his tracks seeing a technician alive, eating quietly at one of the tables. The man didn't acknowledge anyone's presence, seeming entirely absorbed in his thoughts. He had some difficulty cutting pieces of a brittle biscuit with his plastic knife, but he continued nevertheless, unperturbed.

Chief Ramsay approached a little more, then asked, "What's your name, son?"

"Jim," the young man answered without looking up from his plate, continuing to chew his food.

"What happened?"

"Something happened...yeah..." Jim replied thoughtfully, as if trying to remember.

"Who did this to you?" Ramsey insisted.

"Everyone...no one..."

Ramsey paused for a second, then changed his approach. The man must have been in shock after all that violence.

"What are you doing, son?"

"Me?"

Ramsey nodded, encouragingly.

"Having lunch with Charlie... He's my best friend. We always grab chow together."

One of the men stepped a little to the side of the table, to see behind a row of pantry cabinets. "Oh, my God..." he exclaimed. He yanked his mask off his face, and pointed at the floor with his other hand. "What the hell happened to these people?"

On the floor, right behind where Jim sat, a young man's body laid still, a bullet hole marking the center of his forehead. His nametag, still intact, read, "Charlie Hernandez."

...Chapter 5: Practice

...Thursday, April 21, 9:07AM PDT (UTC-7:00 hours)

...American Shooting Center

...San Diego, California

Lou Bailey tried his best to make his colleagues comfortable with the exercise he had in mind. He knew them well enough to know they'd be unhappy with the day's agenda. Therefore, he had reserved the entire gun club for the morning, and he even brought everyone's favorite coffee in steaming, tall paper cups.

Alex Hoffmann was the first to arrive, only a few minutes late.

"Hey, Lou," she greeted him and gave him a quick hug.

He made her proud. He was her protégé, although the ex-SEAL had twice her body mass and it was all muscle. She had recruited him from her first client, impressed with his initiative, quick brain, and relentless courage, all great assets for an undercover investigator. Not to mention his amazing hacking skills. Lou could break past any firewall, and crack any encryption.

Steve Mercer was the next one to arrive. Their very own corporate psychologist, the man who helped them think through theories and profile their suspects. The man who brought calm to emotional storms and kept their clients steady and levelheaded during their biggest crises. The man she still loved, but couldn't forgive. She made eye contact with him for a split second, then looked away.

"I thought I had the address wrong, Lou," Steve said instead of a greeting, but accepted the coffee with a wide grin. "What am I doing in a gun club?"

"Wait for it," Lou replied cryptically and winked. Steve smiled and leaned against the wall, sipping on the extra hot mocha latte.

"Good morning," Brian said professionally, entering the clubhouse, confusion written all over his face.

Brian Woods was the business genius of the team, and their very own expert in the gadget technologies they sometimes engaged to help them in their work. His main expertise remained business though, and his classy demeanor made him look every bit the part. On many occasions, he had stayed behind in client organizations, serving as executive officer until leadership replacements were recruited, or until the client finished with the cleanup that many times followed their covert investigations.

That was the team she had joined just a few short years before, as a young executive with a computer science background. Even to this day, she sometimes wondered why they had chosen her; why Tom Isaac, The Agency's owner, had put his faith in her and her abilities. Since then she had accumulated a few decent notches on her belt, a few, yet challenging cases she had worked successfully, causing that self-doubt to start fading away. She finally felt she belonged.

"Is Richard coming?" Alex asked, eager to see the rarely visible financial genius of their crew.

"No, not this time," Lou replied. "He's on the East Coast and couldn't make it."

"If I'd only known," Brian said sarcastically and smiled while accepting his triple espresso from Lou. "Why are we here?"

"Thank you, reluctant colleagues, for being here today," Lou said, earning some chuckles as he spoke. "Per our boss and mentor, Tom, I am now in charge of your fitness, self-defense training, and gun proficiency." The pride in his voice was both amusing and heartwarming.

The two men groaned in protest.

"I work with my brain," Steve said, making a dismissive gesture with his left hand, still holding his latte in his right hand. "I don't need any self-defense...I'm a shrink. I can talk my way out of pretty much anything."

"You're not gonna talk your way out of this one, Steve, that I can promise you," Lou replied.

"I don't need this either, I think I'll head out," Brian said, making a beeline for the exit. "Thanks for the coffee, mate."

"Not so fast," Lou said, cutting across his path. "I was tasked to do a job here, and I will not fail."

Brian stopped and looked him in the eye. Then he relaxed a little. "OK, let's see what you have. Although I have to warn you, I am a total klutz when it comes to guns and fighting. I am a businessman; I fight with numbers."

"What am *I* doing here, Lou?" Tom asked, surprisingly appearing out of nowhere. "I have tasked you to train the team. Why did you call *me*?"

Unperturbed, Lou handed Tom the remaining cup of coffee.

"Well, aren't you a part of the team?"

They all laughed, seeing how shocked Tom looked.

"I'm not...Well...I don't need this, you know. I rarely go undercover any more, I just stay behind—"

"Oh, no, no, no," Brian said, grabbing Tom in a side hug, "what's good for the goose, you know..."

"Yeah, OK," Tom conceded. "Lou, please remind me to train you on how to take direction," he added with humor in his voice.

Tom Isaac was the founder of The Agency, the man who had created their small investigative unit, focused solely on high-profile corporate clients. He was the one who brought them all together—their mentor, and their friend. To Alex, he was more than that; Tom and his wife, Claire, had become Alex's family.

"Ready?" Lou asked, and was immediately rewarded with a variety of grimaces, long sighs, and smirks. He didn't seem to care.

He opened a duffel bag filled with handguns. "Brian, what do you do if you have to fire this weapon?"

"Umm...I examine it and, if available, I read the manual first," Brian replied, and Alex couldn't contain a chuckle. In all fairness, she had been the only one who had discharged a weapon in the past couple of years. However, without Lou's diligent training in Krav Maga and firearms, she would have been toast a few times over.

There was no way of knowing, before taking a client's case, what types of danger they'd be facing. Most of them had worked for The Agency for more than ten years and their lives had never been in any significant danger. Corporate investigations sometimes bordered on boring rather than adventurous, or even dangerous.

Yet Alex had been held at gunpoint on her very first case. Gun proficiency was a good skill to master, even if one's record didn't support that belief. Sometimes, although seemingly benign at first, the cases they worked uncovered significant crimes being committed by people with either too much, or nothing left, to lose. That, in itself, was a recipe for danger. That was the reason why she had accepted to go through the rigorous physical conditioning Lou was imposing on her every week, complete with self-defense, close quarters combat, and timed target practice. Although, in all fairness, she still hated the crap out of that physical conditioning routine.

"OK, that's not going to work," Lou replied, all serious. "You have to be ready at a moment's notice. Today we'll do basic gun safety, gun operations, and you'll all handle these guns until your hand knows what to do before your brain even acknowledges it."

"Lou, please start with these two," Tom said, "I really don't think I need this much of—"

"Nonsense," Lou interrupted, "what would you like to start with? A Sig? Or a Beretta?"

Alex smiled discreetly. Her protégé knew how to hold his ground.

...Chapter 6: Departure

...Wednesday, April 27, 5:03PM Local Time (UTC+9:00 hours)

...Tokyo International Airport

...Tokyo, Japan

Lila Wallace straightened her flight attendant uniform, getting ready for departure. The same uniform she wore almost every day for work without even noticing suffocated her now. She had tossed and turned for the most part of the night, thinking she'd be stuck on the same flight with Mr. Flying Asshole, the first officer and copilot.

She forced herself to take a deep breath and swallow her tears. Even if he'd been a cheating bastard, fucking anyone in range who registered any life signs, she had to behave at her best, or risk being put on report by the flight's commander, Captain Gene Gibson.

Captain Gibson is a real gentleman, she thought. *Too bad they don't make them like that anymore*. Gibson had tried to warn her, discreetly of course, but she didn't listen. She dismissed the advice for caution expressed by Gibson, who had encouraged her to give the relationship some thought, and she'd fallen hard, head over heels, for the moronic first officer Andrew Klapov. Andy, as she had once loved to call him, had been her very own Prince Charming for about two weeks, which happened to coincide with the exact time it took him to get her in bed.

She thought they had something real, and had never been so happy in her life. That lasted until their next flight together, when she'd assumed she had an open invite for Andy's hotel room, and stumbled onto naked Andy performing cunnilingus on her colleague, Corinne. From between Corinne's legs, Andy had looked her in the eye and smiled, licking his lips and winking at her. Heartbroken and disillusioned, she'd run out of there in tears, without being able to say a single word.

Corinne never learned of Lila's personal tragedy; she'd been carried away on the wings of mindless bliss at that dramatic moment, and hadn't even noticed her coming into the room.

From the scene of that crime, Lila ran all the way to the hotel's business center, where she submitted a request for crew transfer, filled with typos and making little sense. Probably having seen such correspondence before, and understanding implicitly what had caused the request, the airline management had approved it, but it was to go into effect at the first of the following month. One more trip, that's all she had left to endure. One more trip with Mr. Flying Fuck.

On top of it all, their typical route, which was San Fran to London and back, had changed at the last minute, and that last trip had to be to Tokyo and back. Four days instead of three. Great...just great.

She brushed her chestnut hair back and tied it neatly in a ponytail, then applied fresh lipstick and touched up her nose with the powder puff. She gently tapped, without smudging her makeup, the corners of her eyes with a tissue, to absorb the tears that had been welling there. No way was she going to look heartbroken over that prick.

"Fucking bastard..." she muttered. "I so deserve better than this."

Then she grabbed her wheelie and walked out of the restroom, watching her reflection in the mirror, noticing in passing how strong, professional, and beautiful she looked. Not bad for a girl from Fayetteville, Arkansas. Not bad at all.

Before stepping onto the jetway, she stopped for a moment to grab the flight's manifest from the gate attendant, and gave it a quick look, hoping for a miracle. Nope, none to be found. Flight XA233, nonstop service from Tokyo to San Francisco, had 423 passengers checked in and ready to board.

Well, it could have been worse, she thought, considering the plane's capacity was 496. But an almost full cabin might be a blessing in disguise, keeping her busy, and making the fourteen hours go by faster.

She trotted with confidence on the jetway, boarded the plane, and tucked her wheelie in the staff closet. She popped her head briefly into the cockpit, greeting Captain Gibson and completely ignoring the dick in the first-officer seat.

Then she signaled the gate crew to start boarding, and took her spot in the first-class cabin, ready to greet the passengers.

They started boarding quickly, first class followed closely by the rest of the passengers, some chatting excitedly about a conference or something like that. The conference travelers were scattered throughout the plane, but they seemed to know one another fairly well.

As soon as a third or so of the passengers had made their way on board, she picked up the microphone and made her announcement.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard Universal Air flight XA233, with nonstop service to San Francisco. Today's flight will be almost full, so please be considerate when stowing your carryon luggage. Your smaller bag should fit under the seat in front of you. From the flight deck, Captain Gibson and First Officer Klap welcome you aboard Flight XA233. Thank you for flying Universal Air; we appreciate your business."

She hung up with a wicked smile, happy with the pun she'd made by calling the bastard Klap instead of Klapov, in reference to the sexually transmitted disease. She couldn't resist turning her head to see his reaction.

The bastard didn't seem to care, but Gibson frowned gently in her direction, like a disappointed parent. It made her sad. She pulled shit like that and it felt great for a second, then it ruined her life. Reckless, that's what she was. Reckless in her choice of men, and reckless again in how she dealt with the consequences of her own mistakes.

She stood and filled a few glasses with champagne, the traditional welcome for the first-class passengers.

The woman in 1A had already taken her seat, tucked everything out of sight, and was reading a magazine. She accepted the champagne with a smile and a whispered thank you.

"You're welcome, Ms. Bernard," she replied.

Lila, like all flight attendants who worked the first-class cabin, was required to know the names of their passengers and greet them by name. She only had four on this trip, so it wasn't that hard. This passenger's name seemed strangely familiar, but she couldn't place it. Adeline Bernard...an actress, maybe? She definitely looked like one.

She moved on to 2B, where one Darrell Maldonado was loud on his cell phone. She offered him the champagne and he took it without skipping a beat in his heated phone conversation. She touched his arm gently to get his attention, and said, "You will need to end that call in a minute, sir, and switch your phone to airplane mode."

He dismissed her with a hand gesture, as if she was a bother of sorts, a mosquito buzzing him, or some other form of pest. In his dialogue with the other party on the phone, he inserted casually, "Oh, no, I'm still here, I got time. I just got irritated by something, that's all."

Asshole. Maybe there should be an airline just for them. They already had the right pilots for that.

She heard her colleague announcing roll call and crosscheck, and then she started demonstrating the safety features of the Boeing 747-400. She did one more quick round in the first-class cabin, ensuring 2B was off his phone, then sat on the jump seat and prepared for takeoff.

...Chapter 7: Going East

...Wednesday, April 27, 11:32AM Local Time (UTC+3:00 hours)

...Russian Ministry of Defense

...Moscow, Russia

Vitaliy Myatlev ignored the loud growling in his stomach announcing the buildup of hyperacidity, and washed it down with his third shot of vodka for that morning. After providing a few seconds of deep satisfaction, the alcohol started burning what was left of his stomach lining, causing Myatlev to fidget uncomfortably and cuss under his breath.

"*Tvoyu mat,*" he swore in his mother tongue, "this job is going to kill me." He leaned back in his chair, unbuttoning his jacket and putting the palm of his hand on his bloated stomach, in an effort to soothe the pain. Maybe a smoke would help.

He opened a new box of Arturo Fuente Opus X cigars, taking his time removing the clear packaging, and inhaling the scent released by the unsealing of the humidor. Then he chose one cigar, and carefully removed its wrapper, stopping at times to inhale the smell of the exquisite Dominican tobacco. That box of cigars had set him back thirty grand...he wasn't going to let a stupid stomachache stop him from enjoying one.

He clipped the tip with a golden cigar clipper engraved with his initials, a gift from an old business partner. Then he lit the cigar, taking his time, holding the tip above the open flame of his torch lighter, and puffing a few times. Then he let out a long sigh, together with some bluish smoke, but not even that calmed his pain.

He opened the window and let in some fresh air, then took in the cityscape of downtown Moscow, with the massive Kremlin a little to the left, and numerous government buildings crowding the central area of the city.

He used to like this game, but not anymore. For the most part, he still liked playing God, more than anything else, and did so every opportunity he got. But he hated being so close to his friend and unpredictable sociopath, President Abramovich. He hated feeling vulnerable, at Abramovich's whim.

He'd been fearless ever since he'd started amassing wealth at unprecedented rates. He had everything. He had numerous prosperous businesses in various countries, some of which offered no extradition, just in case he'd ever need that some day. Myatlev was one of the richest men in the world, having broken into Global Fortune 50 a few years back. He had good health, with some minor issues, of course, but still he was doing all right. And he had the same insatiable lust for power and achievement that had propelled him to where he was, and continued to fuel his unrivaled drive.

Only one man could crush all that in seconds, and that man was Abramovich. Myatlev hated how he felt about Abramovich and the power he had over him. He'd heard somewhere that genuine power is held by the person who can destroy what you value the most. How true.

At times, Myatlev had thought of killing Abramovich. It would be so easy. Thirty-five years of friendship didn't mean much to Myatlev, who hated being vulnerable more than anything else in the world. He also knew that, if the right circumstances would align, the same thirty-five years of friendship wouldn't hold Abramovich back from sending Spetsnaz after Myatlev with an order to kill on sight.

Then why not beat Abramovich to it and take him out? Myatlev let out another smoke-engulfed long sigh thinking about it. Yes, it was about money. Lots of it. With a favorable, at least for now, Russian president watching over his interests, and with Dimitrov as defense minister, money kept flowing in from all directions. Tax exemptions, official or unofficial.

Countless privileges. Government contracts, military and civilian, they all came his way. In turn, he shared the cash with his two friends, and agreed to help Abramovich and Dimitrov rebuild Russia.

But there was a catch, a wrinkle in this fantastic arrangement. It kept Myatlev awake at night, despite almost being in an alcohol-induced coma every night before his head fell on his pillow.

He'd committed to deliver masterful plans in intelligence and covert operations, to acquire weapons and technologies through a wide net of foreign-based assets, most of which were deployed in America. His unrivaled imagination had delivered strategies that, at a global level, could shift the balance of power in the world in Russia's favor, almost overnight. He had the audacity to deploy foreign intelligence asset arrays in a manner seen only in computerized big data models. He'd crafted unexpectedly innovative solutions to all of Abramovich's frustration with the Americans, and to Dimitrov's military needs.

The problem that was fueling Myatlev's gastritis-soon-to-become-ulcer and his growing fear of Abramovich's retaliation was that his most recent plans had failed to deliver the promised results. No doubt, Abramovich was becoming frustrated with his delivery. No matter how carefully he had planned every single detail, no matter how closely he'd been involved in managing every aspect of the plans—and he hated that—they still failed. It was almost as if he had an unseen enemy out there, one who understood what hid in the deepest corners of his mind and could think ahead of him, taking away the advantage of surprise.

He had thought, at some point, that his identity might have been exposed, that he'd been compromised. No one knew, outside of a very few carefully selected people, that one of the world's richest magnates held a permanent office in the Russian Ministry of Defense. Except that inner circle of trusted friends and appointees, no one knew that he led foreign intelligence, espionage, and military strategy operations instead of focusing on his business empire. No one knew, outside of Dimitrov and, of course, Abramovich, that he was sometimes using his own cash, rerouted carefully through several countries, to fund covert operations on foreign soil. He paid that price to ensure no one associated Russia with terrorism, and, of course, the top two Russian leaders paid him back tenfold in contracts and favors.

But, if his identity had been compromised, why was he still alive? Myatlev wasn't fooling himself; he knew very well that he could become a target the moment the Americans learned who he really was and what he did with his time. Yet the adrenaline rush and the financial windfall were strong motivators for him to continue playing this game.

It felt like a game, and he knew the Americans had no sense of humor; they would have taken him out by now. He actually expected it to happen any day, fueling his adrenaline rush and his growing paranoia. Yet he continued. His ambition couldn't take defeat, then call it quits just because the game had become too dangerous; that was not who he was. Myatlev lived to win, in business or in the service of his country; it didn't matter. Winning was all that mattered. Conscience hadn't bothered him ever in his choice of weaponry or tactics; there was no limit to what his mind could conceive.

In moments like these, when he allowed his mind to wander, he wanted more than anything to find out who was playing games with him. Who was behind the lackluster delivery of new weapons technology through his newly deployed array of agents on American soil? How the hell did the Americans catch his best asset handler so damn fast?

It felt personal; it felt that whenever he had a grandiose plan, his unseen enemy would step in and foil that, but otherwise let him operate. He was sure that the enemy existed; but if he did in fact exist, Myatlev wasn't sure why his enemy hadn't killed him already.

He flicked the cigar butt out the window and turned his attention to the matter at hand. He opened a file folder left on his desk and started reviewing the information it contained.

Doctor fucking lame Bogdanov. *Not such a gift from God after all*, Myatlev thought, referring to the meaning of the man's last name. The file showed the background of a studious young man coming from a solid family with good political

connections, who had worked his way through medical school and had graduated top of his class from Lomonosov Moscow State University, then had chosen to become a researcher and had been accepted at the VECTOR Institute immediately. Then he'd proven himself at VECTOR, becoming one of its best researchers.

Myatlev just hated the guy; there was no other word for it. Gutless, spineless little prick, he called him. He could deal with his demeanor better if Bogdanov could bring him some results, but the two months Myatlev had been working with him had been an exercise in frustration.

"Ah...fucking Bogdanov," he said, slamming the file folder on his desk. "Ivan?" he called.

"Yes, boss?" Ivan replied, entering the office promptly and stopping in the doorway.

"Get Bogdanov in."

Ivan stepped aside, making room for cowering Bogdanov to step in.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Myatlev," Dr. Bogdanov said in a hesitant voice.

Myatlev didn't respond. He gave Bogdanov a quick look, then said, "You're going to set up operations near Sakhalin, on the mainland."

"Sir?" Bogdanov said, as his eyebrows shot up in surprise. Sakhalin was an island near the extreme far east of mainland Russia, just a few hundred miles from Japan. It was literally at the other end of the world.

"You're going to pack everything you need to build a full research facility and move it to the new location. Ivan will make sure you get everything you need. You have 48 hours to get ready."

Bogdanov clasped his hands together, rubbing them anxiously. "But, sir, how would—"

"You'll load everything on a military cargo plane. Tell VECTOR to call Minister Dimitrov if there are questions. Take everything you need, you won't find anything there on-site." Myatlev paused for a second, measuring the man from head to toe. "This is your last chance, you hear me?"

"Y-yes, sir, but what's going to...what are we—"

"Bogdanov, it's enough that I have to fix your problems for you. Don't be a bigger idiot than you already are. This is your last chance to get me the results I need. If you fail again, you won't be coming back from there."

Bogdanov turned pale and didn't say another word. Myatlev waved him away, and Ivan took him outside, closing the door quietly behind them.

Good, he thought, let's hope this time it works. How hard can it be to create a new drug?

With the Bogdanov issue taken care of, all he needed was lunch, a good, soothing meal that would ease the pain gnawing at his stomach.

...Chapter 8: Detour

...Wednesday, April 27, 6:57PM Local Time (UTC+10:00 hours)

...Flight XA233—Somewhere over the Pacific Ocean

...East-Northeast of Japan

Andrew Klapov checked his watch nervously, for the third time within five minutes, then checked the cockpit instrument panel again. Everything was normal on their flight to San Francisco. Altitude, 36,000 feet and holding. Vector 062, as per the flight plan.

Captain Gibson had switched the aircraft to autopilot soon after takeoff, and was flipping through the pages of a magazine, reading quietly. Gibson rarely engaged his copilot in idle conversation. Klapov had always suspected Gibson despised him, particularly because of his numerous flings with flight attendants. But Gibson and his opinions were about to become irrelevant.

Klapov pushed away the coffee cup delivered earlier by Lila, and took a small thermos from his case. Who knows what that bitch might have spiced up that coffee with? He wasn't going to risk it. Some of these broads never understood their role in the grand scheme of things, and had the temporary delusion that they somehow mattered. Strangely enough, Klapov found himself entertained by Lila's bitterness, almost flattered. Ha! If she only knew, she'd probably stop trying to do whatever she was trying to do with her snide remarks and snotty attitude. There was no way in hell he was ever going to care about anything she did or said. In his mind, women were single-use, consumer goods, and he was an insatiable consumer with an eclectic taste. He enjoyed the hunt more than even the sex, and once a woman had fallen prey to his charms, she simply ceased to exist, as he moved on to his next target.

Klapov checked his watch again; two more minutes had passed. It was about time. He checked the horizon line, and this time he saw it. Small, barely visible at first, another jet was approaching.

Then his satellite phone rang, a first ever in all of Klapov's flight hours with Captain Gibson.

"What's that?" Gibson asked, surprised.

"Just my phone," Klapov replied, then picked up the call. "Hello?"

Gibson frowned, and Klapov turned slightly toward him, keeping a close eye on every move the captain made.

"Yes, I can see it, I'm ready to proceed," Klapov said, before ending the call.

"Proceed with what?" Gibson asked, frowning.

"We have traffic," Klapov said, instead of replying to Captain Gibson's question, and pointing toward the approaching Challenger.

Gibson turned to observe the approaching aircraft, and didn't notice Klapov pulling a silenced gun.

"I'll call it in," Gibson said, and reached for his comm.

"No, you won't," Klapov replied, and then pulled the trigger twice, in rapid sequence.

Gibson's head fell on his chest, but he remained strapped in his seat, held back by his harness. Blood started dripping from the two bullet holes in his chest.

Klapov took the Boeing 747-400 off autopilot and, with smooth maneuvers, aligned it with the Challenger, as the other aircraft flew in position right above the Boeing. Klapov changed vector to 070, turning slightly southeast and leaving the assigned flight path. Then he took out a small, encrypted radio.

"Challenger, do you read?"

Static crackled for a second, then a strongly accented voice confirmed.

"Read you clear."

"Maintain course and speed, and wait for my signal to switch transponders," Klapov instructed.

"Copy that."

He put the radio down, and called the flight attendant. Before he could do anything, he had to deal with the passengers.

Lila put in her code and opened the cockpit door, then froze as soon as she saw the blood pooling at Gibson's feet. She gasped.

"You bastard," she said, "what did you do? What did you fucking do?" The pitch of her voice climbed as she spoke.

"Lila baby, you have two options," Klapov said, patting the handle of his gun. "You can go to pilot heaven with dear old Gibson, or you can do your job and keep the passengers safe. What will it be?"

She clenched her jaws and pursed her lips, staring at him with eyes glinting with pure hatred. The bitch's contempt was entertaining.

"What do you want?" she finally asked.

"I want you to tell the passengers we're detouring a little to avoid some turbulence, maximum delay 30 minutes or so. I want them strapped in their seats, quiet, off their damn sat phones. Flight attendants too. Let's try to avoid more people being shot as part of today's flight plan, all right? Can you do that for me, baby?"

His charm wasn't working on her any more, that was obvious. She would have probably killed him on the spot if she caught a chance. Somehow, despite the job he had to do, the thought of Lila trying to kill him gave him an erection. He almost smiled.

"Why are you doing this?" Lila asked. "What are you doing?"

"Just taking a little detour, nothing more," he said, grabbing hold of his gun and releasing the safety.

Lila flinched. "All right," she said in a trembling voice, "I will tell them. Then what? You're gonna kill us all? I knew you were a prick, but this?"

"Then you keep the fuck quiet and keep everyone calm, seated, buckled, and safe," he said, patronizing her.

Sheesh! Women and their entitled questions, he thought. "Remember, I don't really need you to do this job," he added, liking her reaction to his threat.

She looked past him and noticed the shadow of the Challenger.

"Who are they?"

"Doesn't matter. Go!" Klapov gestured her with his gun to get out of the cockpit.

Moments later, he heard Lila making the turbulence announcement through the PA.

Then he picked up the radio.

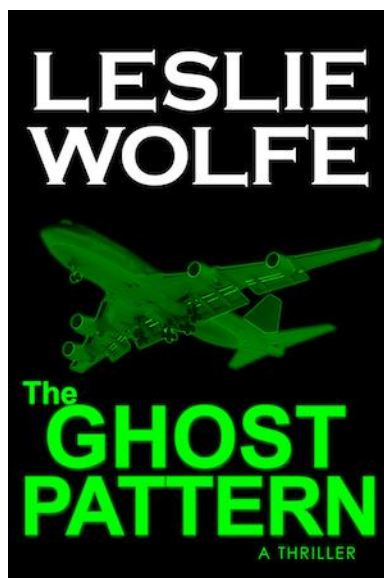
"Challenger, do you read?"

"Go ahead," the heavily accented voice replied through static crackles.

"Ready to kill transponder. Fire your transponder up, on my count. Three, two, one, go!"

About two hundred miles away, a Tokyo ATC radar operator saw the beacon code for flight XA233 flicker for a second, then continue on its path across the Pacific. He thought nothing of it.

Their captors don't want to kill them. They make them kill each other.



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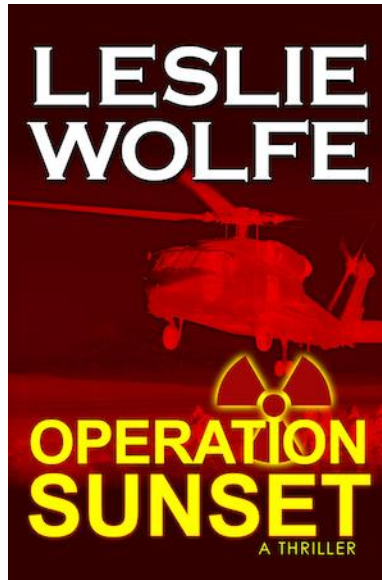
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FREE PREVIEW: *OPERATION SUNSET*

She dared a terrorist to come after her. He's bringing enough firepower to bury everyone she loves.



Your free preview begins on the next page.

...Chapter 1: Welcome Home

...Wednesday, May 24, 5:45PM Local Time (UTC-8:00 hours)

...John Wayne Airport

...Santa Ana, California

Alex shifted in her seat as the Phenom turned gracefully, on final approach to Santa Ana's John Wayne Airport. She stretched her neck, her eyes glued to the plane's small window, to see the sunny coast she called home. The heart-piercing deep blue of the Pacific, as is glittered when sunrays hit its restless surface and reflected back in a million shards of diamond, the golden sands of shore, safety, warmth, and familiar places. That was home. She'd missed it. She'd feared she'd never see it again. Her heart swelled and her eyes welled up.

She cleared her throat, embarrassed by her own weakness. *Look at me, the sentimental soldier. Argh...*

She turned toward Lou, but shifted too abruptly in her seat. A pang of sharp pain in her sternum caught her breath and reminded her she was still convalescing. The pain was nothing like it had been a few weeks before; it was just a reminder to take it easy still. Three cracked ribs and a hairline on her sternum, they had said. A couple torn ligaments in her left shoulder, and a pretty bad cut on her forehead. That, unfortunately, had left a scar. Her first battle scar, hopefully her last. Scars aren't sexy in women... only in some men. Damn. Alex hated long bangs, but probably she'd have to consider them now. A curtain of hairstyle camouflage to hide the wounds of battle. Huh. Like that was going to work.

"Hey Lou," she said, then cleared her throat again, still choked up a little.

His eyes were glued to the window. From his side of the plane, he could see the city, and farther out, the hazy Los Angeles skyline, almost lost in the smog.

"What's up," he replied, then cleared his throat a little, quietly.

"Are you getting emotional, seeing that we're finally coming home?"

He turned and looked at her, a little surprised.

"Come on, you can admit it," she pushed him, smiling widely, making him frown and purse his lips. "It's just the two of us here."

"Yeah... a little," he eventually confessed, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

"It's okay to be happy to be home, you know," she pressed on. "What are you planning to do in the next few days?"

"As little as possible," Lou quipped, then chuckled lightly.

"Yeah, we got time. I'm planning to work on my tan more seriously. The Japanese doctors told me to spend as much time as possible lying on my back, resting. On the beach sounds like the perfect place for me."

"Then, in about a week's time, we'll resume your training routine, right? They said in five, six weeks you should be back to normal. That's coming up."

"Lou, I hate you right now. Words cannot express." She made a strangling gesture with her right hand, grunting a little.

"Yeah, yeah, right. Heard that one before."

"The doctors said at least two more weeks of R&R," she said. "I won't let you ruin that. Plus, we got some time, until Sam and Blake return."

"We shouldn't have left Japan without them, you know. No man left behind, that's the right way to do it."

"They are fine, well taken care of, and out of harm's way. They're not exactly left behind on the battlefield."

"Yeah, but still."

"Lou, they have protection round the clock. The Bravo Team is with them. They are surrounded by top-notch medical professionals, caring for them in one of the most exclusive, most expensive health clinics this world has to offer. They rest, they relax, they do physio; that's all they do. They're probably going to make a full recovery before we do. And they're coming home in a week or so."

"Yeah, I guess..."

A chime interrupted them.

"That's it, folks. Buckle up for final descent." The pilot's voice was loaded with the same kind of excitement they were feeling.

"I'm actually impressed with this guy," Alex said.

"Who?"

"Dylan, the pilot," she clarified, lowering her voice a little. The door to the cockpit was wide open.

"Why?"

"I didn't think he'd make it out there without losing his shit. He's not military, you know. He's just a civilian, who landed a cushy job flying a big shot banker, *the* Blake Bernard, around the world."

"Yeah, he's okay, I guess."

The landing gear made a squealing sound as they touched down, followed by the roar of the engines thrown in reverse. The Phenom slowed down, then taxied to the VIP terminal at John Wayne Airport.

Alex unbuckled her seatbelt and jumped to her feet, holding on to the seat for balance. She winced when her ribs reminded her again to take it easy, but that reminder quickly faded away under the excitement of being home.

"There they are!"

On the tarmac, lined up to meet them, stood Tom and Claire, and, a little to the side, Steve. Steve looked a little grim; there was tension around his mouth, and a frown line crossed his entire forehead. Alex's smile froze on her lips.

"There's going to be hell to pay, I guess," she said, softly.

"What did you expect? I'm not sure I forgave you either, you know." Lou's words were harsh, but the warmth in his voice softened them a little.

She was the first one to get off the plane, landing in Tom's bear hug.

"Welcome home," he said. "We need to talk."

Ugh.

Then Claire was next to hug her.

"Good to have you back, my dear," she whispered warmly.

She moved to greet Steve next, and she managed to do that awkwardly, averting her eyes, and feeling like she wanted the earth to open up and swallow her right where she stood. Not a word was spoken between the two of them. Just a hasty, hesitant handshake, and she pulled away.

She took a deep breath, bracing herself, and opened the conversation as if nothing ever happened. She turned to Tom and smiled.

"So, what's for dinner?"

"Ah, all kinds of good stuff," he replied. "Portabellas on the grill, skirt steak, and a side of... What the hell were you thinking?"

She took a small step back.

"What do you mean?" she managed.

"The flares stunt you pulled." Tom's eyes were dead serious, glaring at her mercilessly.

"I thought I'd bring him out, that's all. I'm tired of chasing a ghost. All this time, and all I have is one letter. One initial, the damn letter V. A letter I've grown to hate."

"He's a terrorist, for chrissake, Alex, a terrorist! You don't bring out terrorists like that."

"Oh, no? Then how? How exactly am I supposed to bring him out?"

"Why is it your job, to begin with? I'm your boss, Alex, and I'm telling you this is not your job."

"Ah, so now you pull rank on me, Tom, is that it?"

"Well..." Tom hesitated, taking it down a notch. His wife reached out and gently squeezed his hand. "You leave me little choice, Alex. This is not what we do. We're not equipped to chase down terrorists. We're a corporate investigations agency, and a small one. That's all we are, all we do."

"I—I know," Alex said with a sigh. "But these cases, I didn't choose them, you know. They chose me, *you* chose me to work them. Because this bastard's still out there, I can't call these cases closed, and it's killing me. I thought I'd draw him out, that's all. Play on his ego, tease him a little."

Steve approached the two of them.

"Did you stop and think you're endangering all of us by doing that?" Steve asked. His frown grew deeper.

She felt her heart break a little, seeing Steve turned against her. What could she expect? Her disappointment quickly became anger, and she spun on her heels to face him.

"Wait a minute there, Steve. Weren't you the one who lectured me on how I'm becoming obsessed with someone who doesn't even exist? Well? Make up your mind, then. Does he exist? Or doesn't he?"

"*Someone* does exist. Someone who might have been watching that satellite feed when you lit up the flares and looked straight up, so they can see you grin at them as you destroyed their operation. In my line of work, that's called adding insult to the injury. You just motivated your enemy, that's all. Whoever that is, V or not." His voice was firm, but sad at the same time.

She still resonated to the undertones in Steve's voice, more than she cared to admit. Damn it to hell... the heart doesn't belong in the office... or on the battlefield. Lesson learned.

"Yes I did. That's exactly what I wanted to do. A motivated enemy will come out and attack."

"Sure he will," Steve continued. "He can kill you in your sleep, or rig your car to explode. How are you calling that a good outcome? What if you can't see him coming, to do anything about it?"

She pursed her lips, a wave of deep irritation scrunching her features. She shook her head gently, almost imperceptibly, as she kept her eyes glued to the tarmac.

"I'm still struggling to hear you talk about this, when you were the most adamant non-believer in this man's existence. You were the one who reassured me that there's no Russian terrorist leader behind everything. You said it was all in my imagination. You made me doubt my sanity. So, why the change in spirit? Because if you did in fact reconsider, and now you do believe that V is really out there, then you owe me an apology." She ended her ranting in a defiant tone, and lifted her gaze to meet his. She drilled her eyes mercilessly into his, until he looked away.

"Truth is, I don't know," Steve conceded. "I don't know if you were right, or if I was right. I don't know if there's a Russian terrorist out there or not. One thing's for sure though. What you did was reckless, because you endangered your life and everyone else's for no good reason. For no clear outcome whatsoever. You've now set a trail, a trail that someone can follow with ease, all the way here, to all of us."

Her jaw dropped. She was stunned, and angry with herself for not seeing it, in her egotistical excitement with the possibility of catching V. Steve was right; she hadn't thought of them for a second. High on the moment's adrenaline and only

caring about exposing and hunting down her elusive Russian terrorist, she had jeopardized the lives of the people she cared about the most. They weren't just coworkers. They were her family, her friends. *Oh, my god...* Her hand went to her mouth, shaking, and cold as ice.

"You're no longer the stealth hunter, Alex," Steve added in a low, conclusive pitch. "You've become the hunted, and so have we. This is the mistake you've made."

She stood there, speechless for a while. Pallor descended on her face, turning her features spectral. As realization hit, she felt a million pinpricks on her skin, as wave after wave of adrenaline hit her insides.

"I'll—I'll just disappear," she whispered. "I'll go away, fall off the face of the earth. That way, you'll be safe."

"You'll do no such thing," Tom intervened forcefully. "We're in this together, no matter what."

She felt her eyes well up, and a tiny smile of heartfelt gratitude appeared on her lips. Then she turned to Steve.

"How about you? You feel the same way?"

"Absolutely," he replied, not a trace of hesitation.

"Lou?"

He'd been leaning against the car for a while, his leg injury causing him some grief. However, he bounced up on both his feet and approached her.

"Hundred percent. Never leave a man behind, remember?" He smiled, then added, "I also happen to trust your judgment, you know. So far, I've seen some pretty awesome results. Maybe, who knows? You'll draw this bastard out, so we can rid the world of him. Whatever his name is."

She nodded toward Lou, then turned to Claire.

"How about you, Claire?"

"I will repeat what I said earlier. It's good to have you home, my dear. That's all that matters to me. The rest, you will fix, together. I have no doubt."

Tom opened the door to his car, inviting everyone to join him with a jovial, wide gesture, and a slight bow. She felt a wave of emotion swell up her chest. They were her family, and they had forgiven her. She swallowed hard, trying to refrain from crying. She tried to hide it with a quick joke, as she boarded Tom's car, sliding with difficulty on the back seat.

"So, I take it I'm not fired, huh?"

Tom made eye contact with her in the rearview, for a split second, but enough for her to register the smile in his glance.

"Don't tempt me."

...Chapter 2: Bruised Ego

...Thursday, May 25, 10:12AM Local Time (UTC+3:00 hours)

...Presidential Apartment - The Kremlin

...Moscow, Russia

The heavy velvet draperies were half-closed, a little unusual for that time of the morning. It could only mean two things. Either President Abramovich had a fierce migraine, or he was mad as hell. Neither scenario showing any promise of a good meeting, Dimitrov repressed a sigh, and continued pacing the carpet slowly, waiting for the man to show his face.

He focused on his steps for a while, taking one step at a time, studying the intricate design of the rich Oriental rug, aligning his fine leather shoe to the delicate curves drawn in wool. No matter how heavily he stomped his foot, the rug swallowed all the noise. The lavish design, a million gold arabesques dancing on a dark, deep red with hues of burgundy, matched the wallpaper, the famous Kremlin gold-encrusted ceilings, and the massive, sculpted hardwood doors, also covered in gold foil.

So much detail for the mind's eye to perceive, register, and analyze. So much gold, infatuation, and pretense. After having spent the past fifteen years of his life serving as Russia's controversial, yet balanced defense minister, Dimitrov craved some simple, white walls, maybe with a wall rug or two, just for the sake of tradition.

"Ah, you're here," Abramovich said, surprising Dimitrov.

He snapped out of his reverie and turned to greet his boss.

"Good morning, *Gospodin Prezident*."

"Drop the formalities, Mishka, it's just us here, in my private quarters."

He took the invitation, and relaxed his demeanor a little. After all, they'd been friends since their earlier days as junior officers in the KGB. That seemed like centuries ago.

"Morning, Petya."

"That's better," Abramovich acknowledged. "Do you know why I wanted to see you?"

"I—no, I don't think I do," Dimitrov replied cautiously. Abramovich was world-famous for his short fuse, irrational thinking, and ultra-sensitive ego. Not someone you'd want to assume things about.

"I have the press conference in under an hour."

"Ah..." Dimitrov said, before he could stop himself. So that's why the semi-darkness in the presidential quarters. Deeply hurt, Abramovich was hiding from the world. The damn press conference was going to cost a lot of people, dearly.

"Yes, yes, Petya. Yes, you understand. I have to apologize to the entire world on live television. Can you believe that?"

Dimitrov didn't answer. He let his eyes speak, encouraging the volatile Abramovich, while offering him a cigar. Maybe smoking would soothe him a little.

"I have to explain to the whole world that I had no idea what was happening in my own country, goddamn it. I will be the laugh of this entire globe. They'll think me impotent, clueless, a puppet! A trinket, bounced around by someone else, more powerful than I am!"

Abramovich paused his lament to light up the cigar. Dimitrov held the match with steady hands, steadier than he'd expected.

Then Abramovich resumed his deploration, his pitch higher a notch or two.

"How am I going to explain that such a massive undergoing had happened without my knowledge? Tell me, Mishka, how?"

Abramovich stopped, this time waiting for an answer.

Dimitrov let a second or two pass by before speaking. When he spoke, his voice was calm, reassuring yet not dismissive, supporting, and firm.

"Petya, this has happened many times before in history. Today it's harsh, I agree... it's humiliating for you, and demeaning for our country. But you can say that the terrorist attack was a complete surprise to the Russian people, as it was to the rest of the world. You can say no one knew that, hidden in the forested depths of the Far East, evil had found a place to nest and weave its plans. And you will say that you will not rest until you uncover the roots of this evil. You will say all that, while looking straight into the main camera, and believing it with all your heart."

Abramovich stood immobile, following keenly every word that came out of Dimitrov's mouth. Then he turned and took a couple quick steps to his desk, to jot notes on gold letterhead stationery. He held his cigar between the index and middle finger of his left hand; tiny specs of ash found their way onto the shiny, inlaid hardwood desk top.

"What else?" he asked, still leaning on his desk, ready to take more notes.

"Nothing else, Petya, nothing else. If you wish, you can blame it on the Chechens; we always do that. Whatever you decide, keep it very short. All you need is to make a statement. Once you've made it, you don't need to say anything else. Take a couple of questions though; it makes you appear open, honest, and human."

"Ahh... the press and their damn questions."

"Regardless what they ask, all you have to say is how committed you are to finding and punishing the source of this evil. That's all."

"I am, you know," Abramovich stated, with a hateful glint in his eye.

"You're what?" Dimitrov's eyebrows shot up, aiming to get closer to his receding hairline, and adding a few more transversal ridges on his forehead.

"Committed to punishing this evil. I'll give it to Myatlev; I'll give it to him so badly that he'll never forget who he failed."

"I see what you mean," Dimitrov said quietly. "You must be mad."

"I am more than mad. I am more humiliated and angrier than I've ever been in my entire life. Do you know why Myatlev's still alive, at this very moment?"

Following along like a good sport, Dimitrov replied, careful to quickly repress an eye roll.

"No, Petya, why?"

"Because he's got some balls, this guy. Balls the size of Barents Sea icebergs, that's how big they are. Too bad he failed, and he got caught. By the Americans, no less. For that, yeah, I want to kill him myself, with these two hands," he continued, illustrating by holding both his hands firmly outward. "Nevertheless, can you imagine what the world would have been like if he'd succeeded? Can you imagine? Having the power to dictate what everyone of any importance will do, will think?"

Dimitrov remained silent, a crooked smile twisting his lips somewhat. Then he decided to push the issue a little, just to take a temperature read.

"So, it's not because the two of you go way back, even further back than the two of us?"

"Nah... No. He screwed up really badly, but he meant well. He's loyal, dedicated, and trustworthy."

"Then he's forgiven?"

"No, not at all. He still didn't deliver, and neither did you. The two of you work together every day, share the same floor, and have promised me one thing. Yet I get nothing, after so much time. Only promises and failures."

"Petya, we are both trying to avoid the nuclear option. We don't want to bring radioactive air on top of Russia, for our children to breathe. That's why he's been thinking up all these ballsy plans, to give you what you want without destroying the entire planet."

"While in the mean time the Americans grow more arrogant, more defiant, and their superiority is pissing me off!" Abramovich bellowed, the sound of his voice reverberating in the huge room. "Is it too much to ask? For a power like Russia is today?"

Dimitrov swallowed hard. "No, sir."

"Don't sir me, Mishka, don't be an idiot. You've done well rebuilding the army, the arsenal, everything. The *Armata* tank is a thing of beauty. But I want the Americans on their knees, defeated, begging for my mercy! *My* mercy! How do you plan to deliver on that, you and your dear friend Myatlev?"

Abramovich's anger was ramping up again... Dimitrov suddenly realized he was too old for this job, too old for Kremlin, too old for Abramovich's tantrums. He considered it for a split second, but then decided it was the absolute wrong moment to hand in his resignation right then and there. Abramovich still took pride in throwing the insubordinate few in Siberia, where remnants of the Gulag still existed, under new, reformed names, but the same leadership, and employing the same methods.

Dimitrov's eyes darted at Abramovich, then looked away. He was afraid the sociopath standing combatively in front of him would see right through him, and hear his thoughts. *God help us all, and forgive us the cowardice we are showing by letting this man live.*

"He surprised me a little a few weeks ago when he ordered a few backpack nukes," Dimitrov eventually said, hating himself. "We delivered the order. I don't think he's planning to hold on to them for too long."

"He did? Really?" Abramovich's voice bubbled with excitement.

"Yes... I was surprised to see he finally adopted the nuclear path. You've been trying to convince him for a long time, and he held strong. He was afraid we would ruin this world for all of us, for generations to come, not just teach the Americans a lesson. But he came around; he changed his mind, recently. He must have thought of something. He must have a plan."

"It was about time," Abramovich replied serenely.

"You should speak with him, see if you agree with his new plan. No more surprises for you this time, right?"

...Chapter 3: Ready to Run
...Thursday, May 25, 4:22PM Local Time (UTC+3:00 hours)
...Russian Ministry of Defense
...Moscow, Russia

Vitaliy Myatlev's office was abuzz with activity. Myatlev himself directed traffic like an effective street cop, while his aide and personal bodyguard, Ivan, took notes impassibly on his plastic clipboard.

"Alright, boss, what else?"

"Um, let's make sure the safe at the house is emptied out. I think it is, but check to make sure," Myatlev asked, a little impatient.

"I cleaned it out myself just a few months back, but I'll drop by tonight and take another look."

"Good. Have the jet fueled and the pilot in it, on standby, day and night."

"Done."

"Who's taking care of the stuff at the house?"

"I am, after dark, just like you said."

"Good. Leave the bulky stuff behind. Leave the furniture; just take my clothes, documents, that kind of stuff. How about Kiev? Is the villa prepared?"

"Yes, it is. Everything is ready for your arrival."

"Good." Myatlev sighed, and allowed himself to calm the frenzy of his just-in-case departure preparations. They were good on time. He was prepared to leave on a moment's notice, should the case present itself. It was better to be safe than sorry.

He also needed to be very discreet in his preparations. Abramovich wouldn't take too nicely to him getting ready to run, albeit only to Kiev, at his favorite residence. However, Kiev was now in a foreign country, Ukraine. Abramovich would consider his departure to a foreign country as desertion, and everyone knew what Abramovich did to deserters, lifelong friends or not.

His thorough preparations were more of a precaution than anything was. He wasn't planning to run, just for the sake of becoming Abramovich's next hunting target. No matter how rich and powerful Myatlev was, once Abramovich had decided he wanted him dead, he couldn't survive for long. Division Seven had the best cleanup crew a secret service had ever had. Myatlev knew just how good they were, because he'd trained some of them himself, and seen most of them in action.

Nevertheless, he intended to carry out the president's vengeful plans, without hesitation, even if that meant the detonation of numerous nuclear devices within the continental United States. Now more than ever, Myatlev shared Abramovich lust for vengeance, after having been bitterly humiliated by that Hoffmann bitch. Fuck her. Fuck that bitch from hell.

He felt alive again, and thrived in the feeling, rejoiced in it. For almost two years, he had believed he was losing his mind. Crippled for months by rampant anxiety and bouts of paranoia, at times he'd believed he had an imaginary enemy, who saw through all his strategies and ruined all his plans. Other times, he'd feared it was the hand of God himself. Senseless fears had crept up on him, augmented by the very alcohol he had used to try to silence them. Thus, he'd forgotten who he

was: a powerful energy and weapons magnate, who never failed, and never took no for an answer. Who had no enemies, because the moment an enemy would surface, that enemy would soon find an early demise. Now he finally remembered, with every bone in his body and every breath he took; he was back in the power seat.

Once the source of his irrational anxieties had gained a name and a face to go along with it, he transformed overnight, returning to his old self. His drinking habit almost entirely gone, the dark circle under his eyes, and his swollen abdomen were soon to follow. His stomach recovered on its own, as his paranoid worries disappeared. He felt twenty years younger; his refreshed blood pumped strong in his veins, ready to fuel his rekindled ambitions of infinite wealth and power, and a tireless lust for vengeance.

That bitch, she almost killed him. She was going to pay, and then some.

“Um... anything else, boss?”

The rest of the staffers had left, after packing diligently resource lists, deployed agents networks, asset banks, maps, organizational charts, and every single useful document Myatlev could think of. The last of them had vanished quietly, closing the door behind him.

“No, you can go, Ivan. We’re set. Thanks.”

Ivan approached Myatlev, extending his clipboard for him to view.

“What about her? Should I take care of her?”

A picture of Alex Hoffmann was attached onto Ivan’s clipboard, held in place by a large metallic clamp. A little grainy and blurred, that was the image captured via satellite when the bitch had delivered her latest blow. Smiling defiantly, sure of herself, the Hoffmann bitch had laughed in his face. Her time to die was now.

“Yes, Ivan, take care of her, and of everyone she’s ever loved, ever met, ever set eyes upon. You hear me?”

“Yes, boss. I’ll get it done myself.”

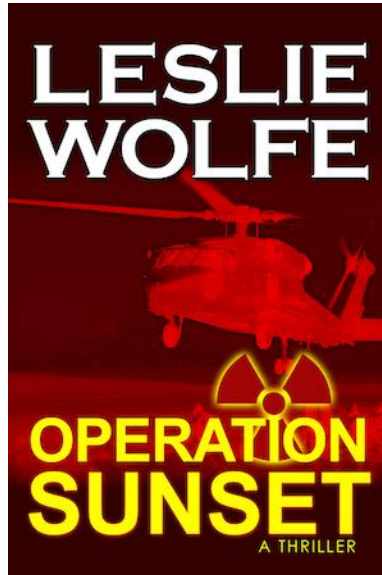
Myatlev stared into the grainy eyes of the woman in the photo. Not watching those defiant eyes blur as life left her body, not hearing her whimper and weep, not having her lying at his feet, begging for her life, that just didn’t seem right. Why should Ivan have that privilege?

“Never mind, I’ll take care of this one myself.”

“You sure, boss?”

“Yeah. I want to hear her scream.”

He doesn't just want her dead. He wants her country burned to the ground.



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