

Copyrighted Material

JOEL GOLDMAN

THE DEAD MAN

"I loved it."
ROBERT CRAIS

A JACK DAVIS THRILLER

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THE DEAD MAN

A NOVEL



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Dedication

*For my brothers and sisters,
Barry, Madeline, Susan, Tom, Stuart, and Tensy.*

Chapter One

December 1959

Sheriff Ed Beedles grabbed the barrel of his shotgun, yanking it from the rack in his patrol car. He knew Charlie Brennan well enough to know better, but there he was, standing in front of his brother's farmhouse not fifty feet in front of him, covered in blood, one arm wrapped over his ten-year-old niece, Maggie, clutching her like she was a hostage, the girl wearing nothing but a nightgown shivering in the cold. The dispatcher had taken Charlie's call thirty minutes ago, Charlie screaming at her that Sam and Gretchen were dead and that he had Maggie.

The Brennan place was twenty miles south of the sheriff's headquarters in the Johnson County courthouse in Olathe. He'd made good time, taking advantage of the new highway, Interstate 35, that had opened earlier in the year, making it to Spring Hill in twenty minutes, then heading west and busting it over the last few miles of rough county road. He fishtailed making the turn into the Brennans' property, tires spitting gravel and ice laid down in last week's storm, siren blaring, his head riding in his throat the last quarter mile to the farmhouse. He was first on the scene, his deputy Tom Goodell, and two ambulances five minutes behind.

It had been three weeks since the Clutter family had been slaughtered in their farmhouse near Holcomb. That was a good four hundred miles west, but there had been no arrests and every lawman in the state was on edge, scared the killers would strike again.

Still, Beedles knew it was more likely that Charlie had killed his brother and sister-in-law than some faceless maniacs, most murders being committed by people who knew their victims. He'd heard talk of trouble between the brothers, something about the land their parents left them, but as far as he knew, it was just talk.

He opened his car door and stepped out, keeping the door between him and Charlie, the shotgun invisible at his side. The farmhouse sat on a rise, sheltered on three sides from the wind by stands of maples and oaks. It had been daylight for an hour, the sky heavy and close with leaden clouds, the wind cold and stiff enough to make a man deaf.

"Let her go, Charlie," Beedles shouted.

"They're dead! Both of them." A rose mist floated off of Charlie, fresh blood mixing with the frozen air.

"Then we can't do anything for them but we can take care of Maggie. Now let her go."

Beedles didn't see a weapon in either of Charlie's hands but that didn't mean he was innocent or unarmed. He could be both and also be unhinged by what he'd seen, making him dangerous in another way.

Beedles started a slow walk toward Charlie and Maggie, keeping the shotgun aimed at the ground. His deputy and the ambulances would come storming into the yard any second, no way to tell how Charlie would react to the added commotion.

"It's no good," Charlie said, tightening his grip on the girl. "They're dead! Cut to pieces!"

"And that's a terrible thing. Let's not make it any worse."

Beedles closed the distance between them, leveling the shotgun at Charlie. Though he couldn't shoot Charlie without shredding Maggie with buckshot, he knew the sight of that gun pointed at Charlie couldn't help but make him focus on his mortality.

Charlie stared at the shotgun. "Ed, you don't think I killed them, do you?"

They were ten feet apart. Charlie's hands, arms, and chest were soaked in blood. Maggie's face was

streaked with crimson, honey-colored bangs falling over her eyes, her lips blue, her nightgown blood splattered. Beedles stepped closer, raising the shotgun at Charlie's face; Charlie's eyes opened wide like day lilies under the sun.

"I don't think anything, Charlie. I just want to have a look at Maggie, make sure she's okay. The you and I can talk about what happened. That be all right with you?"

Deputy Goodell's cruiser skidded to a stop, flanking Beedles, Charlie, and the girl. Using his open car door for cover, he drew his handgun, taking a two-fisted aim at Charlie Brennan.

"We okay, here, Sheriff?" Goodell asked.

"How about it, Charlie, we okay?" Beedles asked.

Charlie hung his head. "Yeah, we're okay."

Beedles lowered his shotgun, reaching for Maggie with his free hand. "Come here, sweetheart," he said.

Maggie slipped out from under Charlie's arm and put her hand in his. Beedles squeezed her hand and she squeezed his, surprising Beedles with her calm strength, as if the blood on her fingers was nail polish.

Over the next hours and days, Charlie Brennan told his story again and again to Sheriff Beedles, the district attorney, the polygraph examiner, and his lawyer, never changing a word, sentence, or paragraph. He and his brother had put their hard feelings behind. He'd come to pick up his brother; they could repair a bad stretch of fence they shared. No one answered when he rang the bell. The door was unlocked so he went in and called out for Sam and Gretchen. When they didn't respond, he went looking and found them stabbed to death in their bed. He got their blood on him when he cradled their bodies in his arms, going crazy at the sight of them. He found Maggie hiding in the bushes beneath his second floor bedroom. The polygraph examiner said that Charlie was truthful in all measures and no charges were filed against him.

Maggie Brennan's story corroborated her uncle. She said that she was awakened by cries coming from her parents' bedroom. Then she heard footsteps coming toward her bedroom. It was dark. Someone grabbed her but his hands were too wet and slippery with blood to hold her. She freed herself and ran onto the balcony off her bedroom, jumping over the rail, her only injury a sprained ankle. She ran into a nearby field, staying there until daylight, coming back and hiding in the bushes beneath her bedroom, too frightened to go inside the house, remaining there until her uncle found her. She spoke without tears; a doctor who examined her explained that she was too shocked to cry, assuring Beedles that it was best if she buried the memories of that night.

Beedles walked through the Brennan farmhouse dozens of times, re-creating the killer's path, tracing the blood trail from Sam and Gretchen's bedroom to Maggie's. He opened the French door onto her balcony, stood at the rail, and marveled at the courage of a ten-year-old girl to escape from the killer and jump from such a height.

Charlie Brennan sent Maggie to live with his sister in California. He never set foot on his brother's farm again, selling it in the spring and sending the money to his sister to pay for Maggie's upbringing. That night, he got drunk and was killed when he drove his pickup truck into a concrete culvert.

When Richard Hickock and Perry Smith were arrested for the Clutter family murders, Beedles drove to Garden City to question them. They denied the killings and there was no evidence to link them to the Brennan case.

No murder weapon was ever found. No one was ever charged with the murders of Sam and Gretchen Brennan. It wasn't the only unsolved crime during Beedles's years as sheriff but it was the one that woke him up at night until the day he died.

Chapter Two

January 2009

Maggie Brennan had been waiting to die for fifty years so when the lights went out while she was working late at night and the bell hanging on a hook above the front door jingled as it opened and slammed shut, loosing icy winter wind into the farmhouse, and heavy, steady footsteps trudged up the stairs toward her bedroom, she didn't call 911, cry out, or grab a letter opener to defend herself.

She'd dreamed of this moment often. The image of the killer was as hazy as it had been when she was ten years old, painting her cheeks with her parents' blood before she hurled herself off the balcony outside her bedroom, the killer never caught, never forgotten.

Her work as a neuroscientist researching the toll of trauma on the brain was a constant reminder that night. Her nightmares affirmed her unspeakable certainty that she would leave this life the same way as had her parents.

She rose from her chair, her voice quiet and calm when her killer appeared in the doorway. "Why did it take you so long?" she asked.

French doors opened behind her onto the balcony, the frozen earth two stories beneath sloping away from the house, rough and rocky. She swung the doors wide, stepping onto the balcony, her feet bare in the frigid air rippling through her thin nightgown, pickling her skin. Branches of an oak tree just beyond her reach swayed in the starless night, the eaves above her whining, complaining of the cold.

Her back was to the bedroom. She felt him approach, felt the wooden planks of the balcony sag, then felt a hand slide down the length of her neck, settling into the base of her spine, the push firm. She went over the rail and the unforgiving ground rushed to meet her.

She awoke, as she always did, the instant before impact, her mouth coated with bile. Why, she wondered, was it so easy to kill and so hard to die.

Chapter Three

"Jack, this job is perfect for you."

"I haven't had a perfect job since Sue Ellen Erickson asked me to carry her books home in the fifth grade."

Simon Alexander and I were having coffee late Friday afternoon on the Country Club Plaza, the gray day giving way to full night, snow coming down sideways. The after-Christmas sales were over and the quarter million multicolored lights that turned the Plaza's shops and restaurants into Disneyland from Thanksgiving through mid-January had gone dark. The sidewalks were empty. People with sense were home or on their way.

"You can set your own schedule, spend as much time as you want, take a break whenever you need to, you know..."

"Stop shaking."

"Yeah, that."

The FBI had retired me at age fifty because of a movement disorder that makes me shake sometimes bending me in half, sometimes strangling my speech, sometimes leaving me the hell alone. The cause and the cure are both mysteries, the symptoms a capricious mix of hiccups and hammer blows. The more I do, the more I shake but a friend once told me that the more you do, the more you do. So I put as much into my days as I can, accepting that it will rattle my cage. Some days are diamonds and some days are stones.

Simon was in the technology security business. He called me when his clients' problems got more complicated than a string of ones and zeros.

"I keep telling you, Simon, you don't have to dance around it. I shake. It's not a big deal." A flurry of mild tremors stutter-stepped my automatic denial. "Tell me about the job."

"You've heard of Milo Harper?"

"Kansas City's hometown billionaire. He offered Kate Scranton a job but she turned him down, saying she doesn't trust him."

"She'd do better reading astrology charts than her facial action coding system. If someone winks when they should blink, she thinks they're guilty of something they haven't even thought of doing."

"Trouble is, she's usually right. What else should I know about Harper?"

"We grew up together and were roommates at Stanford. He dropped out during our sophomore year. I stayed and got my degree while he left and got rich. Created one of those social networking sites and sold it for a couple of billion. I've done some work for him since he came back to Kansas City."

"You and a billionaire? I don't see it."

"Who knew? He was the tall, good-looking guy with wavy hair, a square chin, and pecs he could make dance. I was the short nebbish geek with early male pattern baldness whose idea of a good pickup line was would you like to play Simon says."

"How'd that work out for you?"

"It was the ones who said yes that scared me."

"Harper plowed a bunch of the money into that place . . . what's it called?"

"The Harper Institute of the Mind."

"He keeps trying to recruit Kate. She keeps telling him no but he keeps asking."

"That's Milo. He can charm you if he wants to but he doesn't care what you think about him as long as you've got talent. And he doesn't take no for an answer. He says the brain is the last frontier. He recruited some of the top people in the field, except, apparently, for Kate."

"What does he want from me? Is he short on guinea pigs?"

"No, but I told him you were available in case the lab rats got a better offer."

"Nice. Then what is it?"

"He's worried about one of his projects, something having to do with dreams."

"Who's having nightmares?"

"He is. Two of the volunteers participating in the project have died in the last month. According to the cops, one death was accidental and one was suicide."

"Bad luck, but what's that got to do with Harper and his institute?"

"Hopefully nothing, but the families have hired a lawyer named Jason Bolt who has sent Milo the proverbial get-out-your-checkbook-or-prepare-to-die letter. He wants someone to take another look, someone I suggested you."

I'd heard of Bolt. He'd made a fortune taking down corporations for everything from defective products to defrauding shareholders. He was one of a handful of lawyers who could force a settlement on the strength of his reputation.

"A billionaire takes your advice?"

Simon laughed. "I was the one who told him to quit school."

"What else did he tell you? Why does Bolt think these deaths could be tied to the institute?"

"I'm Milo's friend, not his priest. He doesn't tell me everything. He asked me for a name and I gave him yours."

"You know him. What's your sense of this?"

"Milo is a passionate guy. He loves the institute. The look in his eyes, the way he talks about it, you'd think it was his child, like the walls were papered with his DNA. When he called me, he sounded like a parent whose kid had gone missing."

I knew that fear, how it leeches into your bones, like poison with an eternal half-life. But the Harper Institute of the Mind didn't have dimples, skinned knees, or a smile that could light up a room and break your heart at the same time. It was bricks, mortar, and money.

"Is he married? Does he have kids?"

"Neither. He's married to the job. His first kid was the business he built and sold. Now he has the institute. It's not an accident that the abbreviation for Harper Institute of the Mind is HIM."

My doctor told me that the only way I could control the shakes was to change my lifestyle, to slow down. That was fourteen months ago and I still hadn't found the sweet spot between alive and dead. The work Simon sent me tilted the scale toward alive but sometimes it's better to let the scale swing the other way. Rich people who substitute the things they build, create, and run for the relationships they never had can be more irrational than any overprotective parent.

"I think I'll pass."

"Why? Because of Kate Scranton? Give me a break. I was there for your last fight. I'm surprised there were any survivors."

I laughed. "We're a work in progress. I'm having dinner with her tomorrow night. The problem is that she sees things in me that I don't always want her to see."

"The micro-expressions that she claims give away your secrets?"

"Yeah. It's how her brain is wired. Sometimes I don't handle it very well but I still respect her judgment. Plus, rich guys like Harper who think they can buy people the same way they buy buildings can get crazy when things don't go their way and I don't do crazy."

"At least talk to him. I told him that you would call him tonight. All you have to do is check out the dream project and he'll take it from there."

"I load the gun and he pulls the trigger."

"Just like when you were at the FBI and the U.S. attorney made the call. Why the attack of middle

age angst? You've spent your whole life going after bad guys."

"I always knew whose side I was on and I was a lot better at figuring out the truth. Those lines aren't as bright when a billionaire draws them."

"There was a philosopher who claimed that it was impossible to determine whether some things are true or false. He proved it by saying that all men are liars. If he was telling the truth, then he was a liar."

"Yeah, but that doesn't make not knowing any easier."

Simon took a breath, leaning toward me. "This isn't about Wendy."

Wendy was my daughter. She died early last year, twenty-plus years after her brother Kevin was murdered by a sex offender masquerading as a trustworthy neighbor. Every FBI agent in the Kansas City office attended the funeral, some out of respect, others because Wendy had been a fugitive, the last suspected member of a drug ring I'd helped take down before the Bureau kicked me to the curb, the only loose end being five million dollars that had disappeared into the ether. They were convinced she stole the money.

I never stopped thinking about her, wistful memories sometimes crossing into haunting flashbacks so real they stopped me in my tracks or dreams too vivid for sleep. A snatch of conversation, a familiar fragrance, even a sad-eyed junkie could put me back with her, replaying the moment, hoping for a different ending.

"I know that."

"Then talk to him. That's all I'm asking."

Simon had been good to me. I owed him that much. "Okay."

"Great." He leaned back in his chair. "So, how you doing with the . . ."

"Shaking? Every day is an adventure."

"How about that group of retired cops you told me about? You still get together with them?"

"We have lunch once a month. Somebody presents a case. Maybe one that was never solved or one where maybe the wrong guy took the fall. We play cop again, trying to put it together."

"Any cold cases get solved that way?"

"No, but a lot of beer gets put away so everyone goes home feeling good about that."

My cell phone rang, the caller ID reading *Private*. I flipped the phone open.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Davis, this is Milo Harper."

"Hang on a second." I covered the phone. "It's your roommate. I thought he was waiting for my call."

"I forgot to tell you. He's a little impatient. I gave him your number."

Simon headed for the door. I put the phone back to my ear.

"Call me Jack."

"For now, I'll call you late. I've been waiting to hear from you."

I gritted my teeth. I'd promised Simon I would talk to Harper. I didn't promise to be nice. "Simon just finished telling me about your situation."

"Fine. I'll meet you for dinner at McCormick and Schmick at seven-thirty and don't be late."

Chapter Four

Milo Harper was waiting for me in a booth, juggling screens on his Mac laptop while talking into a wireless headset, one hand darting in and out of an open briefcase on the seat, glancing at papers, jotting notes in a pocket-size journal. He motioned me into the booth, not breaking his multitasking stride. I slid in across from him, reached over the table, and closed his laptop. He clicked off his headset, scanning me with penetrating, dark eyes that didn't miss, the corner of his mouth twitching with what passed as a smile.

"That's called confirmation bias. What you did, closing my laptop. As predictable as the rising sun."

"You're clairvoyant?"

"Not necessary if you know how the mind works. My phone call primed you to dislike me. You didn't want to come here, especially on a miserable night like this, but you came anyway, probably out of a sense of obligation to Simon. Instead of greeting you at the door like the hero he makes you out to be, I'm sitting here making good use of my time. But you see that as further proof that I'm a rude jerk. That's confirmation bias."

"It wasn't just the phone call."

"What else?"

"Kate Scranton sends her regards."

Harper straightened. He still had the wavy hair and square chin. If he still had the pecs they were hidden under a bulky sweater. He was near my height, six feet, though thinner with a long angular face washed out with an indoor pallor earned from a lifetime spent in front of a computer screen. He hadn't shaved for a few days. The salt and pepper growth that gave actors a patina of cool clung to his sallo cheeks, aging him.

"Interesting. A woman who turns down my job offer trumps a man who thinks the only thing you're missing is a cape and a red S on your chest."

I leaned back against the booth. "I'm here but that doesn't mean that Kate's wrong or that Simon's right."

"No, it doesn't. And, I didn't believe Simon anyway." He pointed to a menu. "You want to order?"

I shook my head. "I'm not staying. Tell me about your problem. I'll tell you if I'm interested."

Our server appeared, asking for our order and his tip with a smile, not saying a word. Harper laid his menu on the table, traced his finger down the selections, stopping at the lobster, raised his eyebrows at me, giving me another chance. I shook my head, Harper shrugged at the waiter and the waiter shrugged back, closing the curtain on our pantomime with another smile before leaving.

"Three people, three brains, not a word spoken, a million . . ."

I raised my hand. "I get it. A brain is a terrible thing to waste."

Harper grinned. "I can't help it. The human brain is the greatest evolutionary achievement and the mind, which is what the brain does, goes it one better. Spend some time with me and you'll learn to appreciate the mental organs. We study everything from basic brain anatomy, structure, and chemistry to behavioral disorders, genetic disorders, and anything else having to do with how the brain and the mind work and don't work. Most places that do brain research focus on one or two things. I'm trying to do it all because it's all connected, one neural miracle."

"Including dreams," I said.

"Including dreams and memory. I've got PhDs like Anthony Corliss who specialize in something called lucid dreaming. It's a way of recognizing when you are dreaming and then learning how to control your dreams."

"Can he make dreams come true?"

~~"Not yet, but he's trying. He's working with Maggie Brennan, another PhD, who's an expert on memory and posttraumatic stress disorder. The brain makes memories, decides which ones to keep and which ones to toss out. Memories, especially traumatic ones, get a workout in our dreams. We're researching whether people can learn to control their nightmares and manage their traumatic memories through lucid dreaming."~~

Maggie Brennan's name had the nagging familiarity of something I had heard, forgotten, and now wished I hadn't. It would come to me, probably in the middle of the night, waking me up, only to be forgotten again by morning.

"Simon told me that two people who've participated in the project have died."

"Tom Delaney shot himself and Regina Blair fell off the top ledge of a three-story parking deck that was under construction. Both had responded to an ad we placed for volunteers."

"What did they have to do?"

"Talk to us about their dreams. Fill out questionnaires. Spend a few nights sleeping in our lab wearing an electroencephalograph skullcap so we can monitor their brain activity while they're dreaming. Learn lucid dreaming techniques and participate in some additional lab studies, brain scans, and group discussions to measure how they respond."

"Doesn't sound too dangerous."

"It isn't, but this is America and when bad things happen, people hire lawyers. The Delaney and Blair families hired Jason Bolt. You ever hear of him?"

"I have. He carries some weight."

"A lot of weight. He calls himself Lightning Bolt."

I laughed. "Nobody does that! He hits that hard?"

"Worse. Lightning never strikes twice. Bolt does. He tagged me for eight figures a few years ago in a shareholder lawsuit. He called to tell me that he's going to sue me, the institute, Anthony Corliss, Maggie Brennan, and their two research assistants."

"What makes him think Delaney's and Blair's deaths have anything to do with the institute?"

"Volunteers are videotaped describing their dreams. Some of them are pretty graphic nightmares. Those are the ones our researchers are particularly interested in studying. Delaney's and Blair's dreams came true."

"How so?"

"Both of them died the way they dreamed they would. Bolt claims he has an expert witness who will testify that lucid dreaming breaks down inhibitions against dangerous behavior and causes people like Delaney and Blair to act out their nightmares."

"I assume the police investigated both deaths. What did they come up with?"

"Delaney was a suicide and Blair was an accident."

"Did the police know about the videotapes?"

"Not the first time around but Bolt stirred things up so they took another look. A detective named Paul McNair asked to see the tapes and we made them available."

I'd worked with McNair on a joint task force a few years ago. He was a clock watcher, putting in his time until retirement. Not someone who'd be anxious to turn an easy case into a tough one.

"What was McNair's take?"

"That Delaney killed himself and that Blair got too close to the edge and fell."

Chapter Five

I nodded, knowing how little use cops, including ones that weren't lazy, have for dreams when we can make our cases with smoking guns, DNA, and confessions. "Did Delaney leave a note?"

"No. McNair said that not everyone who commits suicide leaves a note."

"He's right. About twenty-five percent don't. What was Regina Blair doing on the parking deck?"

"She was an architect for the general contractor for the three-story garage and an adjacent office building. Both were under construction. The police said she was inspecting the top floor of the garage when she slipped and fell."

"Anyone see it happen?"

"Not according to Detective McNair. It happened early on a Sunday morning." He fished McNair's business card out of his briefcase and handed it to me. "He can tell you more about it than I can."

"Where do I fit in?"

"I need to know as much as I can about Delaney and Blair—anything that will help us prove we have nothing to do with their deaths."

"What do you know about them so far?"

"Delaney was thirty-two, lived alone, and was a newspaper distributor for the *Kansas City Star*. Got a Purple Heart doing two tours in Iraq with the National Guard. He was the oldest of three kids. He went to high school at Rockhurst."

"The private Catholic school?"

"Right. He cut a wide swath there. He played football and basketball and he was on the debate team. His parents have established a scholarship there in his honor. Bolt says they're going to contribute anything they get in the lawsuit to the scholarship fund."

"What about Regina Blair?"

"She was thirty-five. She and her husband live up north at Riss Lake. She had a baby last year. They were active in their church and she volunteered for Big Brothers and Sisters. Her husband teaches at Park University."

"A boy scout and a girl scout. Not much chance I'll find anything in their backgrounds that you can use."

"I'm not looking for dirt. I want to know more about them than their credentials for getting into heaven. I want to know why Delaney dreamed about killing himself and what made Blair so afraid of heights. That could help us."

"What if your institute is responsible?"

"Then we'll pay what we owe and fix what's wrong with our project."

"Don't you have lawyers and an insurance company to take care of that?"

"We have a ten-million-dollar deductible and the right to control the investigation and handling of any claim. I've got the lawyers but I need you for the investigation. Your title will be director of security. You can start Monday morning. I'll pay you double what you were making at the FBI. Your office will be down the hall from mine. You'll have free rein to go where you want to go and talk to whomever you want. When this is over, I'd like you to stay but that's up to you."

Before I could respond, a spasm twisted my head sideways and down, locking my chin against my raised shoulder. I waited for it to pass, time and my body both held hostage, the cycle repeating twice more in a twisted game of catch and release.

"I've got a..."

"Movement disorder called tics. Simon told me. The brain can be a real bitch. It's okay."

"You aren't concerned that I'll shake when I should shoot?"

Harper smiled. "Superman was allergic to kryptonite and things worked out for him."

He reached into his briefcase again and slid a skinny black binder onto the table. "These are summaries of the projects we're working on, plus the names and contact information for the people running each one."

"Why do I need to talk to everyone when this case is only about the dream project?"

"I want to make certain we don't have problems with any of the work we're doing, not just the dream project, and I don't want to broadcast that we may be getting sued so I told the project directors that I hired you to review our internal security procedures to make certain our intellectual property is protected. I sent everyone a memo telling them to cooperate with you."

"I haven't said yes."

"Why wouldn't you? Kate Scranton won't work for me but Simon Alexander will. I'd call that a wash in the who-do-you-listen-to sweepstakes."

"I listen to my friends but I make my own decisions. You might not like that. You don't like people telling you how to do your job. Same goes for me. I start looking for one thing and I may find another you don't want found. You need to be in control and something like this doesn't want to be controlled."

"Open the binder. Read the tabs out loud."

They were organized alphabetically by subject matter. He interrupted me when I got to Alzheimer's.

"Makes tics look like a walk in the park."

"It's not about the work you're doing. I'm sure it's all important."

"Some more important to me than others."

I looked at him, saw how his eyes changed from lively to hot, how his face darkened.

"You? You're what—forty?"

"Forty-one. Six to ten percent of Alzheimer patients are under age sixty-five and that number is only going to go up. A few are younger than fifty and the youngest on record was twenty-nine."

"I don't know what a person your age who has Alzheimer's is supposed to look like, but you act like you're on top of your game."

He held up the small journal he'd been writing in when I arrived. "I try to write everything down here on my laptop or my iPhone. I even use a Web service called Jott. I call a phone number and record what I want to remember and they send me an e-mail with my verbatim message and, if I want, a text message reminder. Even with all of that, I'm one step away from pinning notes to my sweatshirt and leaving bread crumbs to find my way home. The trouble with memory loss is that you don't remember what you've forgotten until it's too late."

"Who else knows about your condition?"

"For now, no one besides you and my doctors. The institute is only one of my investments. I've got a lot of balls in the air and I don't know how much longer I can keep juggling them."

"I'm sorry."

He flattened his palms on the table, his fingertips arching, hanging on. "People are always sorry but that doesn't change what's happening to you or me. You're going to shake for the rest of your long life but I'm going to spend the rest of my dwindling years disappearing one brain cell, one memory at a time until I won't recognize you or me. The research we're doing might, just might, stop all of that, not for me, then for someone else, and I'll be damned if I'm going to risk people's lives or the future of the institute. I don't care what I have to do. I thought you would understand that better than anyone."

Harper was right. I had been primed not to like him whether it was because of Kate or his phone call or the rotten weather or the fear of putting myself on the line again, a shaking and shaken man, uncertain if I could do more so I could do more, too concerned about myself than fellow travelers like Milo Harper. I closed the binder, tucked it under my arm, and stood.

"I do. I'll see you Monday morning at eight."

Chapter Six

The hooded light over my front door was on when I came home, bathing the snow that had fallen during the day and drifted onto the porch in soft yellow. More light shone through the curtains in the living room that fronted the house and around the edges of the blinds in the bedroom on the east end of the second floor. The bedroom window looked down on the driveway where I was parked.

The lights had been off when I left earlier in the day. I lived alone except for my dog, Ruby, who knew when it was time to eat but not how to flick a switch. Ruby is a cockapoo—half cocker spaniel, half poodle—a breed that dilutes the poodle's high canine IQ with the cocker spaniel's indiscriminate affection, the combination a perfect antiwatch dog. If someone were robbing me, Ruby would help him pack up my stuff.

I sat in the car, studying the front door and windows. No one peeked at me. It had stopped snowing. My headlights bounced off the white powder and ice crystals swirling in the wind like frozen dust mites.

I wondered who had been in my house and if they were still there; the effort stalled when the dizziness caught up to me. No one knows what causes tics. In terms I can understand, there's a short somewhere in my brain's wiring that does more than kick me from the inside out as if something is trying to escape. At times, it blurs my brain, gumming up the neurons and hijacking the synapses, feeling like a burst of fever that slows me down to a crawl. I leaned back against the car seat, squeezing my eyes closed, waiting for the fog to lift, my body shuddering with aftershocks when it did a few minutes later.

I looked at the house again. Nothing had changed. I got out of the car, the cold air picking me up. There were footprints in the snow leading from the curb, through the front yard and to the door. The street was empty.

Lorraine Trent owned the house. She was a biology professor who was spending a year in Africa doing research. She had needed a tenant and I had needed a furnished place to live after my divorce. When I signed the lease, she gave me the only key. I doubted that she had come back eight months ahead of schedule.

The house is in Brookside, a friendly midtown neighborhood with well-kept houses built fifty years or more ago and shops and restaurants you can walk to, including a dime store with its original creaking wood plank floor. For all its charm, Brookside wasn't immune to crime.

Two kinds of thieves leave the front porch light on while they rob a house. The first kind wants the neighbors to think that nothing unusual is going on while they're in the house. Those thieves are smart enough to have transportation and there was none, unless the getaway driver was waiting to be summoned from around the corner. The second kind is too high to think straight, content to get off with whatever he can carry. Either way, I had to assume that the thief was armed.

I would have felt better if my gun was holstered against my back instead of locked in a case on a shelf in my bedroom closet. Both Kansas and Missouri allowed concealed carry and I had a permit. After I left the Bureau, I quit carrying unless I had a reason. Seemed like a good idea at the time. At the moment, it was a bad idea, increasing the odds that I might get shot with my own gun.

Part of being an FBI agent is having the balls to kick in the door even if it's your own door. Another part is having the sense to wait until someone can watch your back when you put your heel to the door jamb. Part of being an ex-FBI agent with a bad case of the jumping beans is missing kicking in the door so much that you decide not to wait for help.

It was my door and I missed it that much. I was standing on my driveway, ankle deep snow seeping

into my shoes, calculating the odds that I could take whoever had invaded my house and not liking the numbers. My days were manageable, my nights not so much. I flipped open my cell phone to call the cops, hearing the conversation in my head before I dialed.

"You say the lights are on in your house?"

"Yes, Officer. Over the front door, in the living room, and one of the upstairs bedrooms."

"And you're afraid to go inside your house when the lights are on? Most people, it's the other way around."

I stuck the phone in my pocket, cut through the snow, and stopped at the front door, which was opened a crack, enough that I could hear a man and a woman shouting at each other. Another woman shrieked *he's got a gun!* I slammed my shoulder into the door. My momentum carried me inside, my snow-packed shoes flying out from under me as I slid across the hardwood floor into the bottom of the stairs leading to the second floor.

A woman had been sitting on my landlady's couch, her feet on my landlady's coffee table, eating popcorn and watching my landlady's television. The images on the screen were frozen, two women and a man struggling over a gun. She'd stopped the action with my landlady's remote control and bolted to her feet.

She looked to be in her early thirties, lean and muscled with light brown curly hair framing a round face, her eyes wide open and curious but not afraid, her arms hanging loose at her sides, a compact light featherweight. She shifted her weight, subtly setting herself for a confrontation. I recognized the automatic response of someone who has been trained and under the gun.

"Who the hell are you?" she asked me.

Ruby sprang off the couch and into my lap, planted her front paws on my chest, and licked my face cleaning my chin and both cheeks.

"I'm Jack Davis. I live here. Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Lucy Trent and this is my house."

"I don't think so. I mean you may be Lucy Trent but this isn't your house. I rented this place from Lorraine Trent."

"She's my stepmother."

I pulled myself off the floor, taking a breath and holding onto the stairway banister.

"She's my landlady."

Another burst of shakes whipped through me.

"Are you okay? Why are you shaking?"

"It's what I do."

"All the time?"

I walked into the living room. Lorraine Trent had called it the living den, the house not big enough for both a living room and a den. She'd bragged about the new hardwood floors, the fresh paint, and the new appliances that justified the rent she was charging me.

"No. Not all the time."

I was within arm's reach of her but Lucy didn't back up or relax, telling me with a wry smile that she didn't consider a middle-aged man with the shakes to be much of a threat.

"Well that's a relief. I'd hate to put someone on the street who shakes all the time."

Chapter Seven

"Don't be in such a hurry. Follow me," I told her. I kept the lease in the top drawer of a desk in the kitchen. I showed it to her. "Like I said. It's my house for another eight months."

She skimmed it, nodding at the signatures. "My turn."

She led the way to the bedroom that overlooked the driveway. A duffel bag and backpack lay on the bed. She rummaged through the backpack, handing me an envelope. I opened it. Inside was a copy of the deed to the house naming Lucy Trent as the owner.

"Lorraine didn't say anything to me about this."

"Don't feel bad. She didn't say anything to me about you but, then again, we don't talk much. My father left my mother for her when I was ten. Kind of chilled the whole stepmother-stepdaughter bonding thing. Dad's will provided she could live in the house for five years after he died. Then the house went to me. The five years was up four months ago. I wasn't ready to move back until now."

"She said she was a biologist, that she was going to Africa to do research for a year."

"With luck, she'll lose her passport."

I sat on the bed, another tremor rippling through me. My ex-wife, Joy, and I bought a house in the suburbs when the FBI transferred me to Kansas City. We sold it when we got divorced, the proceeds paying our debts and our lawyers and putting a small stake in both our pockets. Either of us could have left, picked a place without the raw memories of our failed marriage and dead children, but Kansas City was a good place to heal. The pace was easy, the people friendly. The city was comfortable and comforting, like a soft sweatshirt on a cool day.

The house I'd rented was part of that fabric. The fireplace, the overstuffed furniture, and the tree that towered over the front and back, home to enough birds and squirrels for Ruby to chase until she was exhausted, were all part of the balm.

"I'll buy it. The house, I mean. Plus the furniture, everything."

She laughed. "If you could afford that, you wouldn't be renting."

Ruby found us, first jumping on Lucy who was standing in the middle of the room, then leaping onto the bed, sticking her nose in my face.

"That doesn't sound like no. It sounds like how much."

She put her hands on her hips. "All it sounds like is that I'm not going to kick you out tonight."

"Suppose I come up with enough money to make you an offer to sell?"

"I have a rule, Jack. I only deal with what's in front of me."

"Fair enough."

My cell phone rang. I flipped it open and recognized the voice.

"Jack, it's Ammara Iverson."

Ammara had been one of my agents when I ran the Violent Crimes Squad in the FBI's Kansas City office. Most of my Bureau friendships had faded once the shared work that held them together ended. Ammara was different. Though we hadn't seen each other very often, the bond was still there.

"Hey, it's great to hear your voice. What's up?"

"You doing anything?"

"Just trying to decide whether to buy a house or get evicted from it. Why?"

"I've got a dead man wants to talk to you."

The dead man was what my squad called the scene of a homicide, the scene telling us what the victim couldn't. Ammara knew that I trusted the dead man more than anyone or anything but she didn't explain why she was calling me.

"Tell the dead man I'm retired."

~~"You might wish you weren't when you talk to this one. You better get over here."~~ She hung up after giving me the address and directions.

The FBI had rules for everything including the handling of crime scenes. Preserving the integrity of the physical evidence was critical to solving a crime and getting a conviction. Access to the scene was tightly controlled. Ex-FBI agents didn't qualify. Whatever her reasons, Ammara wanted me inside the yellow tape.

Lucy watched me throughout my brief conversation, making no pretense of not listening.

"Who's the dead man?"

"Inside joke. I've got to go meet a friend of mine."

"What are you retired from?"

"The FBI."

"Your friend with the FBI?"

"For someone who's throwing me out of my house, you ask a lot of questions."

"Best way I know to learn."

"Find another teacher."

I stood for an instant before muscle contractions jackknifed my head to my knees. I reached for something to hold onto, finding Lucy's arm, her steady grip stabilizing me.

"I'll drive," she said. "You're in no shape."

Some lessons are forced on me. One of them is accepting help when I didn't have a choice. I was in worse condition than the snow-packed streets. If Ammara needed me, my first concern was getting there, not who drove. The contractions released me.

"Okay, let's go."

Chapter Eight

Kansas City covers a lot of territory from the airport north of the Missouri River, to the NASCA track across the state line in western Wyandotte County, Kansas, to the Truman Sports Complex in eastern Jackson County, Missouri. There are better than forty municipalities spread over five counties and two states, enough for everyone to claim a fiefdom yet many will tell a stranger that they live in Kansas City rather than Raytown, Prairie Village, Independence, or Overland Park.

The southern reaches aren't identified with an iconic landmark. On the Kansas side, they are defined by large, new, and expensive rooftops sheltering more per capita disposable income than many of the country's zip codes, extending beyond the eye's reach much as prairie grasses must have in another time. The rooftops on the Missouri side are smaller, older, and modest, covering the working middle class. The address Ammara gave me was for one of these.

Despite its reach, you could drive from one edge of the metropolitan area to the other in forty-five minutes, sixty in traffic. Snow changed that. The storm had singled out midtown where six inches had fallen. As we crept south, the accumulation was less, the streets more navigable. The slow drive gave my body time to stuff the clown back into the jack-in-the-box. My breathing eased, my muscles relaxed, my head cleared. I was back in control.

Lucy limited her questions to the directions Ammara had given me. I watched her as she drove, turning into a skid when ice grabbed the tires, grinning as we spun. I wondered how she had earned her swagger. She carried herself like someone who came from my world, someone who was trained for the perpetual scrum between the good guys and the bad guys, someone who knew the dead man.

Uniformed cops had established a perimeter, closing off traffic at both ends of the block. They let us through after checking with Ammara. Lucy pulled into a driveway across the street and opened her door.

"Stay in the car," I told her. She held onto the door handle, one foot on the pavement, sizing me up again, her eyes hard, her mouth firm, the look letting me know that she'd damn well go if she wanted. "Listen, I appreciate that you drove. But you have to wait here. This isn't your show."

She eased back and smiled. "You're right. Sorry."

"Habit?"

"Yeah."

"Thought so."

The house sat back from the curb on a slight rise, the front door shrouded by a low-pitched roof jutting over a deep set front porch, most of which was screened in, an irregular wall of bushes and stunted trees, leafless in winter, dividing the far property line from the neighbor to the west. Stone pillars of inlaid Missouri limestone supported both front corners. Two dormers poked out of the roof signaling an attic long ago converted to bedrooms.

A walkway led from the driveway across the middle of the lawn, three steps completing the journey to the narrow front door. The storm had petered out by the time it reached this part of the city, dusting old snow with a sprinkling of new. Patches of dark ice hid on the walk, waiting patiently for hurried, careless feet.

Ammara was waiting for me on the front porch, standing next to another uniformed cop in charge of the crime scene sign-in sheet taped onto the front door. Her black leather jacket was open, her FBI shield hanging on a chain around her neck, a green turtleneck sweater highlighting her ebony skin. She had the height, reach, and power to have been an All American volleyball player in college, traits she used to her advantage during ten years with the Bureau, the last three in Kansas City.

I hadn't seen her since Wendy's funeral. She hugged me long and hard that day, skipping the platitudes that time healed all wounds and that heaven was a better place and that Wendy was finally at peace because we both knew they were total bullshit. That day was personal. Today was business and we both knew the difference.

"Thanks for coming, Jack."

"You made it sound irresistible. What do you got?"

"Walter Enoch. Fifty-four years old. Worked for the post office as a mail carrier."

FBI agents, cops, DEA, it didn't matter, we all liked to tell stories. There was no fun in cutting the chase whether the news was good or bad so there was no point in pushing her.

"What happened to him?"

"He died. Probably yesterday, probably of natural causes but we won't know for certain until we get the autopsy results."

"So why the yellow tape and why did you call me?"

"Come inside."

Mail was stacked like cord wood in the entry hall. More stacks narrowed the passage on the stairs to the second floor.

"The guy was a mail carrier but he never opened his mail?" I asked.

"No. The guy was a mail carrier who stole other people's mail, which he didn't open. It'll take a month or more to sort through all of it, figure out what to throw away and what to try to deliver. Some of this stuff goes back years. A whole lot of people are going to find out whether better late than never really is better. This is just part of it."

We walked into the dining room. The table was buried under a mountain of magazines and catalogs. Foothills made of unopened bills, checks, coupons, sweepstakes, and credit card offers spread from the dining room into the kitchen. Unread love letters, thank-you notes, demands, denials, rejection letters, acceptances, rants, raves, promises, apologies, and more were piled in silent drifts against the windowsills, yellowed and coated with dust.

More mail sealed off bookcases, a fireplace, and a television in the den. The ceiling light was yellow and faint, the walls paneled with dark pine.

Walter Enoch's body, rank with the rotten, gaseous odor of decomposition, was slumped in a recliner upholstered in a blue and red tartan plaid shoved against one wall. His gray, bloodless face was hairless, ruttled and ribbed with flesh bunched into ridges around his eyes, stretched thin around his mouth, his cheeks pocked and mottled, the residue of severe burns. A large plastic bin with U.S. POSTAL SERVICE stenciled on the sides sat next to the chair.

"Who found him?" I asked.

"His supervisor came to check on him when he didn't show up for work. When no one answered, he called the cops. They forced the door and the supervisor identified the body. There was no sign of foul play but KCPD treated it as a crime scene because of the stolen mail. That makes it federal so they called the Bureau. I was the first agent on the scene and I found this in his lap."

She handed me a plastic evidence bag containing an empty square-shaped pink envelope, the kind that would be used for a greeting card or personal stationery. It was addressed to me at the house I had lived in before the divorce, the handwriting so familiar it hurt. A postal sticker forwarding it to my new address was pasted beneath the old one. A burst of shakes bolted from my belly to my breast, my question stumbling out of my mouth.

"What was inside the envelope?"

"I don't know. It was empty when I found it. The only name in the return address is the initials MG. Any idea whose initials they are?"

I took a deep breath. "Yeah. MG stands for Monkey Girl. It was a nickname I gave Wendy when she

was little. She had a stuffed animal, a monkey that she never let go of. She called it Monkey Girl to
The handwriting is hers."

I didn't tell her that Wendy kept Monkey Girl until the day she died or that I had claimed it as my inheritance. I had pictures of Wendy growing up taken at birthday parties, holidays, and for no reason at all. They chronicled her life, visual confirmation of moments in time. Monkey Girl was more than that. Its fake fur and rubber face was a link between the two of us, an indelible reminder of silly names and games, happy times and infinite possibilities.

"Then take a look at the postmark."

The postmark was hard to read because the ink was smeared and the plastic bag made it look like it was underwater. I held it close, angled it in the light and stopped breathing. The envelope and whatever had been inside it had been mailed to me from New York City a month ago, ten months after I buried my daughter.

"You said that the envelope was empty when you found it."

"And, it was in Enoch's lap."

"Maybe he was reading whatever was inside the envelope when he died," I said.

"Then we should have found it on him or next to him and we didn't. We haven't been through everything in the house, but we didn't find anything on the surface of this mess that matches up with the envelope. And none of the rest of the stolen mail has been opened."

I looked at Ammara, now understanding why she had called me. An empty envelope addressed to me by my deceased daughter was cause enough for an investigation. Finding it in the lap of a dead man whose job was to deliver the mail and whose hobby was stealing the mail but not opening it was a bonanza of coincidences. I hated coincidences. They deceived you with their convenient explanations for things that weren't so easily understood.

"You think someone took whatever was in the envelope?" I asked.

"What do you think?"

I surveyed the mail in the den, thought about the unopened stacks and piles I'd seen in the rest of the house.

"I think that makes the most sense based on what we see so far."

"So do I. If we're right, whoever took your mail could have been here when Walter died."

I nodded. "Most people would have tried to help him, called an ambulance, done something."

"Unless they wanted Enoch to die," Lucy Trent said.

Chapter Nine

Ammara and I were facing Enoch's body, our backs to Lucy, unaware she was watching and listening. We turned around. She was standing in the entryway from the dining room to the den, one hand in her coat pocket, the other at her side, palming her cell phone, rotating it in a slow arc, the cell phone camera capturing the scene with faint whirrs and clicks. I glanced at Ammara to see whether she realized what Lucy was doing but her eyes were fixed over Lucy's shoulder, searching for the soon-to-be-demoted street cop that let Lucy past the yellow tape.

"There's always that," I said, wondering why Lucy was photographing the scene and why my instincts told me not to bust her.

"I got bored waiting for you in the car," Lucy said.

"Who's she and what's she doing in the middle of my dead man?" Ammara asked me.

"It's complicated," I said.

"Not really," Lucy said as she slipped her phone into the purse slung over her shoulder. "I'm Lucy Trent. I own the house where Jack lives until I kick him out, which could happen sooner rather than later the way things are going. I drove him out here because he was shaking too badly to do it himself. That's not so complicated."

"This is a crime scene," Ammara told her. "Authorized personnel only and you aren't authorized."

Lucy smiled and nodded. "So that's what the dead man means. Crime scene. I like it."

Ammara took two steps toward Lucy. I cut her off, my back to Lucy again. "It's okay."

Ammara leaned in toward me, her voice hard but too quiet for Lucy to hear us. "What do you mean it's okay? This is my scene, not yours. Your invitation didn't include a date."

"Understood," I said, my voice matching hers. "I'll handle it."

"Good. Do it now. I don't want your landlady polluting my crime scene."

I raised my hands in surrender. "No problem. One thing. I'd appreciate it if you'd keep me in the loop."

She took a deep breath. "You know the rules, Jack. You're a civilian. I'll tell you as much as I can without compromising the investigation."

"Which means you think that whatever was in that envelope has something to do with the money the Bureau says Wendy stole. You were at her funeral. You saw the date on the postmark. What? You think she rose from the dead and took the bus to New York so she could mail a letter to me confessing to being a thief and telling me where she hid the money?"

"You can make it sound crazy, Jack, but it's what you taught me. Collect the evidence. Follow where it leads. Let someone else higher up the food chain decide what to do with it."

We stared at each other, her face impassive, our friendship trumped by the job, another thing I had taught her. I nodded, conceding the moment.

"Let's go," I told Lucy.

We gave Walter Enoch's gargoyle death mask a last look.

"He was somebody's nightmare," Lucy said. "Glad he wasn't mine."

"What was that about?" she asked me when we were back in the car.

"The dead guy was a mailman who stole mail instead of delivering it."

"What's that got to do with you?"

"He stole my mail—at least one letter anyway. The envelope was found on his body but it was empty. Ammara Iverson, the agent you pissed off, thought I might know what was in it."

"Did you?"

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