

# **The 7<sup>th</sup> Month**

**by Lisa Gardner, 1956–**

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*Have you ever contemplated killing someone? Perhaps your snoring spouse, or overbearing boss, or that pretentious neighbor whose children really are smarter than yours? You probably convinced yourself it couldn't be done. Too messy, with the blood, the guts, the suddenly voiding bowels. Or too hard, what with fingerprinting, DNA, hair and fiber, and all the other types of newly developed forensic evidence. No way you'd ever get away with it. Take it from me, murder isn't that difficult. It's a matter of simple logistics. You must plan ahead, plot out each step, then make the necessary preparations. For example, the first thing you must do is select your victim. Blonde, brunette. Male, female. Someone you know well, someone you're about to know very well. Select your target. **This is step one.***

## Chapter 1

At first glance, Sergeant Detective D. D. Warren pegged the man to be either a white-collar criminal or a serial killer. White-collar, because he had the rounded shoulders and nervous hands of a browbeaten clerk, desperate to one day have his revenge. Serial killer, because his small stature and weak jawline spoke of a guy who probably preferred his lovers to be passive, e.g., dead, not to mention he was the right size to fit into a home's crawl space.

Currently, the man stood just inside the doors of Boston PD's homicide unit. D.D. sat behind the high-countered cherrywood receptionist's desk. He eyed her uneasily. She stared back.

"Er... I'm looking for a Boston detective," he said.

"Witness a crime, reporting a crime, or confessing to a crime?" she asked.

"Actually, I'm in need of an expert."

D.D. looked him up and down again. Upon closer inspection, the man's oversized brown suit was cut from a silk-wool blend with flecks of dark green. Shoes, shiny new Italian leather. Tie, mustard yellow designer silk. Some money had been spent on the wardrobe. Too bad it didn't do a thing for him.

"You've lost weight," she observed. "Judging by your chewed fingernails and the roll of Tums in your breast pocket, it's most likely due to stress. You're not sleeping, and are doing your best to compensate with caffeine and/or cocaine, hence the jitters. Shoes say you can afford cocaine. Breath argues for coffee addiction."

"Coffee," the man supplied hastily, his gaze dashing around the nearly empty detectives' bullpen. Lunchtime in Boston. Even cops had to eat. "So, can I speak with an investigator? Doesn't have to be a high-ranking official or anything," the man continued quickly. "Any detective will do. Probably. At least, I would think so. Just... a real honest-to-goodness Boston cop. Male. Well, female would work, I

suppose. But with some experience. Three to five years at least. That would be perfect.”

The man stopped talking. Sitting behind the desk, D.D. arched a brow, then folded her hands over her watermelon-sized belly while she contemplated just what she thought of such a request. Seven months pregnant, Boston’s best homicide cop was reduced to holding down the fort. At least Susan, the receptionist who was currently out to lunch, kept an emergency stash of Kit Kats in her lower left-hand drawer. Normally, D.D. would be raiding that chocolate supply, but at the moment, her stomach felt off.

Today was D-day. Alex had asked the question. She owed him an answer.

This morning. This afternoon. Anytime now.

She regarded the walk-in bundle of nerves instead. He was picking at a hangnail on his left thumb. Very soft hands, she thought. Nearly effeminate.

“Informant for the mob?” she asked him.

“No.”

“Embezzling from a financial firm?”

“Of course not!”

“Then I’m thinking serial killer.” She nodded decisively. “Yep. The kind of predator who preys on prostitutes, using a garrote fashioned from panty hose, or maybe a last-minute ambush via baseball bat. But absolutely, your victims are weaker than you, and murdering them is the only time you feel powerful.”

The man blinked his eyes several times. His mouth opened. Closed. Opened. He managed at last: “Who *are* you?”

“Your expert. You asked. Here I am. Sergeant Detective D.D. Warren.”

The man blinked a few more times. He finally closed the five-foot gap to the receptionist desk, peering over the edge of the counter, down to where D.D. sat with her hands around her enormous belly. His turn to be skeptical now: Could a pregnant receptionist really be a homicide detective? D.D. was getting that a lot these days, so she took pity and held up her badge. While he regarded her genuine, city-issued police shield, she continued her observations.

Definitely, the man in front of her had shed pounds, and not the good kind. His skin was washed out, like he spent all his time under fluorescent lights, and there were lines furrowed so deep into his brow, Botox was already too little too late. Maybe not a serial killer then, she amended, because clearly, he was no good at compartmentalization.

But he had problems and needed a detective. All in all, that, made him the most interesting thing to happen to D.D. in weeks.

The first three months of D.D.’s pregnancy, she’d suffered morning sickness so severe her diet had consisted of Gatorade and dry Cheerios. In her third trimester now, however, she felt great. She ate like a horse, had the energy of six people, and had even achieved the mysterious maternal glow mentioned in various baby books. Certainly, her short blond hair seemed thicker, curlier, and shinier. If she were a canine at Westminster, she was pretty sure she could win Best in Show.

Which made her current work limitations all the more grating. Sure, early on she’d vomited a few times at a couple of different crime scenes. But she didn’t think the scene where the guy had blown off his own head with a shotgun should be held against her. Her squadmates Phil and Neil had brought her tapioca

pudding for an entire week, just to rub it in. She'd saved each cup until her second trimester had brought an end to her nausea. Then she'd sat in front of Phil and Neil and calmly eaten every bite of brain pudding.

Sergeant Detective D.D. Warren had her mojo back.

The very next day, her boss had stuck her on desk duty. This is what motherhood did to the working detective. One moment, an invaluable member of the team. The next, a really fat paperweight.

Whose boyfriend... partner... father of her child wanted her to move in with him.

All she had to do was give Alex her answer. This morning. This afternoon. Anytime now.

Then, at forty-one years of age, D.D. would complete her transition from active, single, workaholic Boston cop, to everyone else's idea of domestic bliss.

The nervous, frazzled, guilty-of-something guy in front her was looking better and better all the time.

"So," D.D. stated, jarring the man's attention off her belly and back to her face. "I've told you mine. Now you tell me yours." She pointed to her credentials, which included her name, and the nervous man got the hint.

"Oh. Right. Don Bilger. Executive producer." He fished around inside his jacket pocket, producing the previously identified roll of Tums, flushing slightly, then managing to extract a business card: "Call me Donnie."

D.D. accepted the offered card. She read: *Donnie B. Productions*, followed by an address, phone number, Facebook page, and even Twitter hashmark. The modern world, she thought, where businesses occupied social media, instead of the yellow pages.

"What do you produce?" She set the card down on the counter between them.

"Entertainment products. TV, movies, videos, that sort of thing."

D.D. nodded. She'd heard that Boston had become a hotbed of filming, from feature movies to cable cop shows. The new New York, she'd read. Move over, *NYPD Blue*. Hello, *Rizzoli & Isles*. D.D. didn't watch much TV or get out to many movies. Too busy being summoned to real crimes.

"We need a cop," Donnie was trying again. "For technical advice. We had one, but... he seems to have gone missing. So we need another one. Immediately. Tonight, in fact."

"You *lost* a cop?"

"No, no, of course not. What I mean is... he went on vacation. Without calling and telling us. It happens in our line of work. Consulting is good money. People work a few days, get some fast cash, go have fun."

"How much fast cash did he get?"

Don rattled off a number; D.D. sat up straighter. The minute the man had mentioned needing an expert and working in film productions, she couldn't help but think of extra cash for the baby's nursery. But the number Donnie B. had just rattled off was closer to the baby's college fund.

She eyed him with new interest as well as fresh skepticism. "Who was the cop? Boston PD?"

"Retired. Samuel Chaibongsai. Hung up his shield years ago, I'm told."

D.D. didn't recognize the name, but there were more than a couple of retired Boston cops running around. "What was Samuel doing for you?"

“We’re filming a crime drama, *Cover Your Eyes*. Perhaps you’ve heard of it?”

“No.”

“Well, it’s about two detectives racing against the clock to catch a serial killer who’s returned from beyond the grave—”

“A dead serial killer?”

“That’s what everyone thinks, but it turns out that the body had been burned beyond recognition, meaning...”

“The serial killer faked his own death?”

“Exactly.” Talking about the movie, Donnie B. seemed to relax. The producer’s shoulders came down, his voice warmed up. “So, the murderer, the Gravestone Killer—”

“Because he’s from beyond the grave?”

“No, because he kills his victims by whacking them over the head with a piece of granite tombstone.”

“Of course.”

“He’s stalking pretty blond widows in Boston. They show up to mourn their loved ones, and he... well, *whack, whack*. But don’t worry,” Don added hastily, “the Boston detectives are on the case, and being the heroes of the movie—”

“They’ll send the Gravestone Killer back to the great beyond.”

The producer paused, stared at her. “Oh, I like that. Wait a minute. I’m going to write that down. May I use that? We might play with it a little...”

“Possibly. Keep talking about what you need, then we’ll establish terms.”

“Well, we’re shooting on a very tight deadline. And, of course, we want the movie to be as authentic as possible.”

“Hence death by tombstone.”

“So we prefer to have a police consultant on set. To assist our actors with those tiny little details only a cop would know.” Don’s voice warmed up again. “Think about any cop movie you’ve ever seen. What do they get wrong that sets your teeth on edge?”

“DNA test results in less than six months,” D.D. said immediately. “In real life, it takes several months, not to mention boatloads of budgets and reams of paperwork to get anything back from the lab. But in movies, TV shows, and crime novels it’s always DNA results in one chapter or less.”

“Exactly! As a technical consultant, you could assist with that kind of insider’s knowledge. Though, to be honest, in our movie the detectives get DNA evidence instantaneously by scanning the evidence with their state-of-the-art handheld forensic finders. The devices also work on fingerprints, blood spatter, and paint chips.”

D.D. frowned at him. “Ah, technically—”

“Tonight,” Donnie interrupted. “We shoot seven P.M. to seven A.M. It’s the graveyard sequence, absolutely critical to the plot. Show up, I’ll have the contract waiting. Per diem, plus expenses, plus all meals are provided. Wear a warm coat.”

Donnie didn’t wait for her reply. He picked up his business card, scrawled an address on the back and replaced it on the counter.

Most likely confident that no one, absolutely no one, turned down that kind of money, the movie producer pivoted on his heels and left.

D.D. looked at the card, then glanced at her watch. One fifteen P.M. She should call Alex, figure out the rest of her life, probably eat a Kit Kat.

Or...

She picked up the card, made a couple of calls, and with her boss's blessing, formulated her evening plans.

*What kind of killer are you? Always a central question. The quiet, distant type, stepping out of the shadows to fire three to center mass? Or up close and personal? Perhaps you've always been secretly turned on by the way light winks across a freshly sharpened blade. Will you approach your victim first? Engage in casual conversation, lowering her guard even as you lure her into your web? Or will you strike out of nowhere—hard, fast, fierce? Finally, will you linger, watching the last spark of life leave your victim's eye, feeling the whisper of her final, gasping scream? Or is this a clinical operation—in, out, done? Nothing personal, simply a matter of business. Take a small memento of the event, then be done with her. Destroy. Walk away. Never look back. Select your preferred methodology. **This is step two.***

## Chapter 2

D.D.'s cell phone rang just as she was pulling into Mattapan, an inner-city neighborhood in Boston, known for its stately triple-decker houses and on-again, off-again drug wars. The call was from her boss, Deputy Superintendent of Homicide Cal Horgan. He had news regarding Samuel Chaibongsai, and it wasn't good. Horgan asked her a couple of questions. She asked him a couple more. He informed her she should feel free to change her evening plans, return home, wash her hands of the movie biz.

She informed him that was the stupidest thing she'd ever heard. Knowing her as well as he did, he didn't take offense.

They worked out a few more details, the call ended, and fittingly enough, D.D. arrived at the film location: a large sprawling cemetery she already knew better than she'd like. Several years ago, she'd worked a major case on the grounds of an abandoned mental institute just across the street from this cemetery. A couple of drunk kids had managed to tumble into an underground pit that held six mummified remains. At first glance, she'd wondered if the bodies weren't the handiwork of a serial killer she and her then-partner, State Detective Bobby Dodge, had presumed dead.

Now, six thirty P.M., well after dark in November, D.D. parked her Crown Vic, got out, and stretched her lower back. In the past week or so, she was noticing more minor pains, some small episodes of shortness of breath. Probably because she had a fairly decent-sized life-form hanging off her spine, pummeling her lungs, playing soccer with her bladder. The usual baby games.

She rubbed her belly, tried to encourage the tight bands of muscle to relax. Long day, leading to a longer night. When she'd finally mustered the courage to call and talk to Alex, he hadn't been wild about her decision to pull an all-nighter on a film set. In his opinion, she should be taking things easy, curling up on the sofa with her feet on a pillow.

Another reason for her to move in with him, she'd thought, but hadn't said. So he could "take care of her"? Monitor her every move, give her plenty of superior male advice? Almost immediately, however, she'd recognized those thoughts as her baggage, not his. In the nearly year they'd been together, Alex had never been anything but patient and understanding of her various foibles. Even this afternoon, he hadn't brought up the question or pressured her for an answer.

He seemed to have taken the slow and steady approach to winning her over. Like the horse trainer with a particularly skittish mare. At least, he observed wryly one day, she hadn't bolted yet.

Honestly, D.D. wasn't trying to be stubborn. She was just...

Terrified.

Cemeteries, crime scenes, serial killers were the kind of dangers she understood. Problems to be faced, puzzles to be solved. White picket fences, cozy domestic scenes, a patient, understanding partner/spouse, on the other hand...

Well, everyone had their Achilles' heel.

Given the plunging temperature, D.D. had worn her warmest winter coat. Now, she attempted to button up the long black wool layer, but couldn't make the edges meet over her massive belly. She gave up, pulling on a pair of black knit gloves instead. Cemetery on one side. Former crime scene on another. It was enough to make even a hardened Boston cop feel superstitious.

Then D.D. caught the unmistakable glow of klieg lights, followed by the throaty growl of multiple generators kicking to life. The inner-city cemetery, surrounded by black wrought iron fencing and even taller skeletal trees, became less ghost story and more business locale. Movie people had clearly arrived and were getting to work.

D.D. followed the beams of light to the front of the cemetery, where the massive gates had already been pushed open and numerous groups of people were milling about, most dressed casually in jeans, turtlenecks, and bulky sweatshirts. Nobody paid her any attention, each individual with a job, each job demanding total focus.

She wandered about until she spotted a small brown shape lurking next to the tombstones.

"Donnie," she called out.

He turned, saw her, and immediately froze. He looked surprised, she thought. Then he looked guilty, which she thought was interesting, since she was here at his request.

"Detective Warren," he managed, quickly making some attempt to rearrange his features into a more neutral expression. "You came."

"You ask, the police commissioner delivers. I'm yours till morning."

The producer's gaze dropped to her protruding belly. "Do you... need anything?" he asked delicately.

"No, thank you. Big operation you got here tonight. How many people?"

“Hundred and four.”

“Seriously? How many scenes are you shooting?” D.D. turned, so she had Don to one side, the organized chaos to the other.

“Call sheet lists six scenes for this evening. The line schedule is based on location, of course, and given the nature of the movie’s serial killer, many scenes take place in the cemetery. Some, however, have been moved to the indoor set, as we’ll need special effects.”

D.D. arched a brow. She understood about half of what Don was saying, but figured that was enough. “So, these hundred and four people running around. Are they cast, crew, extras, whatever?”

“Most are crew. Lighting and electrical department alone involves more than a dozen guys. Then we have camera men, production assistants, sound department, props department, art department, costume and wardrobe, hair and makeup, the cast, the stand-ins, the director, the director of photography, the assistant director, the producer, the line producer...” Don’s voice trailed off. He seemed to be thinking. “Oh, and craft services, of course, mustn’t forget them.”

She eyed him blankly.

“Food, Detective. Crafty feeds us. I believe tonight’s menu includes nachos at eight to be followed by a Chinese buffet around one. Of course, Maggie and Margie will be happy to make you anything you’d like in between. Or you can simply grab snacks from their truck. Sugar, salt, no sugar, no salt, craft services has it all.”

Unlimited food, available in person or from a truck. Moviemaking finally made some sense. “Where’s the truck?” D.D. asked, looking around.

“The cemetery caretakers asked us not to bring our larger vehicles inside the perimeters,” Don said, his tone apologetic. “Crafty is parked around the corner. Everyone else is at base camp, which has been established across the street at the new school.”

D.D. almost laughed, just caught herself. The new school. Built above one serial killer’s favorite burial chamber. She wondered if Donnie had any idea his base camp was probably sitting on the former home of more dead bodies than his film set.

She caught a faintly chemical smell, traced it to her left, where fog machines had been put to work. Thick, white smoke poured out, sliding gracefully along the hard November ground before weaving among the closest headstones, pale granite markers appearing and disappearing into the billows.

Was it her imagination, or beside her, did Don shudder?

“Um, contract,” he muttered. “Must get you one. Come along, we’ll head to my office.”

“Where’s your office?”

“Base camp. Have my own trailer. Film leads should be in theirs by now, having reported for hair and makeup. I’ll introduce you, and you can get right to work.”

Donnie walked pretty fast for a small guy, D.D. thought. He ventured out wide, seeming to want to give the fast-rolling fake fog a wide berth. She followed in his wake, as they passed through the open wrought iron gates, back onto the darkened city street. Once they hit the sidewalk, he stopped suddenly, turning toward her.

“I’m sorry. Let me get a driver. You’ll be more comfortable.”



He waved in the direction of her rounded stomach, the way men did when feeling a need to acknowledge her pregnancy, without actually mentioning it. It was amazing, D.D. thought, how many times a day she had this exact same conversation. Her stomach was officially bigger than a soccer ball, but people still went out of their way not to directly state the obvious. It was as if they didn't want to be the first to tell her she was facing a major life change.

Don used a cell phone to summon a driver. It gave D.D. more time to take in her surroundings, the growing throng of locals collecting outside the cemetery to gawk. The lone, bored security guard, standing stoically next to the open gates. People moving with purpose, film credentials clearly visible on lanyards around their necks.

The cast and crew inside the cemetery. The audience loitering just outside. Everyone in their place.

A white van pulled up. Remove the benches inside, D.D. thought, and it would be the vehicle of choice of serial killers everywhere. She eyed Don with fresh interest, knowing things he didn't yet know that she knew, and climbed inside.

The drive took approximately two minutes. From outside the cemetery gates, to down and around to the new school. D.D. had never visited the building. After that first night, staring at the bodies of those poor little girls tied up in trash bags, she made it a point not to come to Mattapan.

Now she took in a vast parking lot filled with long lines of trailers, parked side by side in sets of two. Each one was white, approximately the same size and shape. Each one had a different name on the door. Some names were departments, wardrobe, hair and makeup, etc. Some names were people, the filming bigwigs, she figured, such as director, producer, major star.

Don marched by the trailers belonging to people, headed to the trailers belonging to departments. One of the last trailers was identified as Production. He opened the flimsy door, motioned for D.D. to enter. She pretended to be fiddling with her coat, allowing him the opportunity to go first, where she could keep him in her line of sight.

The inside of the trailer was one seven-by-eight office, attached to a closed door that ostensibly led to a similar-sized bedroom. Beige carpet, brown built-in sofa, brown and beige benches on either side of a Formica table. As decor went, the trailer fit the man.

Don produced a twenty-page contract from the top of the table, then a pen. D.D. started skimming.

"Have you heard from your other cop, yet?" she asked casually. "Chaibongsai."

"No," Don said. He bent over the table, shuffling more piles of paper. He seemed intent on keeping busy.

"When'd you last see him?"

"He was on set the day before yesterday. We shot daytime scenes in a local office building that we've turned into police headquarters."

"How'd he look?" D.D. asked. She stopped skimming the contract. Watched Don.

"I don't know. How does someone look?" Don was definitely turned away from her now, shoulders rounded, gaze averted.

"He interact with the cast and crew?"

“I guess so. Samuel usually sat at video village—”

“Video village?”

“The bank of monitors where you can see what’s being filmed. His job was to look for mistakes. For example, he’d point out that a real cop wouldn’t stand that way, exposing his gun to a suspect. When the director yelled cut, he’d glance at Samuel. If Samuel saw any issues, he’d say so, then have a one-on-one with the actor. Otherwise, filming would continue.”

“He have any one-on-ones his last day?”

“Couple.”

“What about?”

“I don’t know. He talked to the director, then to Gary, not me.”

“Gary?”

“Gary Masters, our star. Perhaps you know him from *Boyz of Bel Air*? Sitcom in the eighties about two white kids from the Bronx who move to Bel Air?”

Don finally turned around. D.D. eyed him closely.

“Never saw it. Gary Masters. He good? Easy to work with?”

“Pro,” Don said immediately. “He started in commercials at six months, meaning he’s literally been acting all his life.”

“Maybe he didn’t like being corrected by a cop?”

“No. Gary seemed into it, considered Samuel to be his own personal character consultant. You don’t always get that on a set.”

“What about the director?”

“Ron Lafavre.”

“Sounds like Chaibongsai had final say on some scenes. Did that irk him?”

“Ron’s who asked for a police expert, so I wouldn’t think so.”

“Any other issues crop up that last day?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you get through your scenes? Cameras worked, sound rolled, cast was happy? No mishaps, however minor?”

Don’s turn to regard her closely. “No... Detective, are you having second thoughts about being our expert? Because we really do need one, so—”

“Not at all, not at all.” She waved her hand.

Don continued to frown at her. “Are you worried that Chaibongsai will return? Because if so, I have to admit, we’d go back to him, as he’s familiar with the project. But you’d be compensated for time worked, of course.”

“I’m not worried about that,” D.D. said immediately.

“Then...”

“Chaibongsai isn’t coming back.” She took a step closer in the small trailer. Allowed her pregnant bulk to crowd Don a little, force him back against the table. His hands were where she could see them, and while he may not have noticed it yet, she wore her firearm in a shoulder holster underneath her open coat, easily accessible.

She wasn’t scared of Don Bilger, though. She was curious.

“Samuel Chaibongsai is dead,” she said, watching the producer’s nervous face. “I got the call on my way here. Landlord found his body. Looks like he was beaten to death by some kind of blunt object. For example, a baseball bat.”

*What do you need to get the job done? Murder weapon of choice, of course, based on your preferred methodology. But what else? Gloves, thin latex for maximum dexterity, while limiting evidence transfer. Hat, not a bad idea for containing any shedding hair. But what else? Now you must consider your victim choice as well as methodology. Is he or she a fighter? Perhaps you require restraints, or a secondary weapon to stun your victim into submission. Or perhaps the right disguise to help lower defenses, draw your victim in. I recommend a suit; there's something about a man in a suit that almost always inspires trust. Do not love your shoes. Chances are, they will have to be tossed as the soles leave behind imprints. Also, consider the moments after your first strike. If you plan on spending some time with your victim, you will want to gather ancillary items such as duct tape, rope, pliers, perhaps a lighter, and/or a camera. Do you want a Taser? A plastic bag for bloody clothes? Pack your murder kit. **This is step three.***

## Chapter 3

A very subdued Don Bilger led D.D. from his white trailer back outside to the waiting transport van. Normally, D.D. would've preferred walking, but her back was still bothering her, the baby seeming to have gained three pounds in just the past hour, so driving to the "green room," where the stars hung out until summoned on set, sounded good.

D.D. had never signed the movie contract. Originally, when she'd spoken to her boss, Deputy Superintendent of Homicide Cal Horgan, she'd been okayed to play consultant on her personal time for private pay. But the discovery of Chaibongsai's body had changed all that.

Already her squadmates Phil and Neil were at the scene, studying the body, processing the basics. Uniformed officers would start with the canvassing of neighbors. Lists would be made of known contacts, and detectives further deployed to track down Chaibongsai's family, friends, associates. By definition, the investigation would lead to the movie set, Chaibongsai's last place of employment.

When Horgan had called with the news of the murder, as well as the suggestion that D.D. go home, she'd argued for continuing on in order to conduct basic reconnaissance. Instead of playing film consultant, she'd spend the next twelve hours identifying key players and getting the lay of movie land. Then, come seven A.M., when the cast and crew were exhausted from having worked all night, D.D.'s fellow detectives would descend and, based on D.D.'s intel, quickly overwhelm the weakest links and strongest targets. Badda bing, badda boom. Case wrapped in time for breakfast.

Besides, D.D. argued with her boss, she wasn't going to be alone all night, surrounded by potential murder suspects. Shortly after nine, when Alex finished teaching his criminology class, he planned to join her on set. That was his

approach to these things: If she wouldn't stay home with him, then he'd work late with her.

You had to respect a man like that. Probably even love him, which might logically lead to living together, especially considering, you know, the baby.

They would become a family.

And she'd become the new and improved D.D. Warren. Sharing closet space, filing official police paperwork, warming desk chairs.

Telling herself she didn't miss her independence, or the absolute adrenaline rush of working a crime scene until the odd hours of the morning, diligently sifting through every piece of evidence while simultaneously breaking down the suspect's supposedly airtight alibi until six A.M., the sun rising and another killer being led away in wrist restraints.

Truth be told, D.D. knew she loved Alex. He was sexy and smart. Patient and kind. No question he'd be a great father, while no doubt she'd bumble and stumble as a mom. She feared, however, that moving in with a man would become the first step to leaving her job.

And she just couldn't imagine not being a cop.

Even now, striding across a dark, cold city street, heading into an overlit cemetery with billowing fog and roaring generators and endless rows of pale gray tombstones, there was no place else she'd rather be. Beside her, Donnie B. was growing more and more nervous. And D.D. was more and more stoked to be the investigator breathing down his scrawny neck.

Donnie worked his way around the fake fog again. He led her to a large enclosed tent, like the kind used for weddings. An open flap had been tied back to serve as the entrance. He ducked in, muttering, "Welcome to the green room."

The green room wasn't green. Just a white tent. Half a dozen brown metal folding chairs had been set up on the ground. A long card table held a collection of snacks and various drinks, including an urn filled with hot coffee.

Three people currently sat in the chairs. One male, two females. All approximately thirty to forty years of age. The man was dressed in dark slacks, a blue collared shirt and light brown jacket that didn't completely cover the very large sidearm holstered at his right hip. The dark-haired woman was similarly garbed—wardrobe's equivalent of a detective's costume, D.D. determined. The other female, a thin, knockout blonde, wore all black and was hard to see in the shadows between the hanging lights.

"Gary Masters?" D.D. asked the man, assuming he was the male lead.

"Don't I wish. Joe Talte. Stand-in." He rose, shook her hand. He was wearing black leather gloves. Because it was cold? Maybe.

"Stand-in?" D.D. quizzed.

Don did the honors. "This is Joe, Melissa, and Natalie. They're the stand-ins for the three leads. Meaning, they'll go on set first, taking up position on the markers so that the lighting and camera crews can make their final adjustments before shooting begins."

"But you're in costume." D.D. stated the obvious.

Joe smiled at her. He had a good smile, charismatic, like an actor. With his short cropped sandy brown hair, strong tanned face, and bright blue eyes, he definitely looked enough like a cop to play one on TV. "Our wardrobe needs to be

consistent with the actors' outfits to assist with lighting," he explained to her. "If I was wearing a black jacket, for example, that would bounce light differently than a tan one. So in the end, it's easier to dress consistently; otherwise the crew can't get their job done."

"But the gun?" D.D. peered at it closely. One of the largest, craziest sidearms she'd ever seen.

"From props," he assured her. "Does it make me look tough? 'Cause that's the idea."

"Total badass."

He smiled again. Grinned really. Took her all in, even the enormous rounded belly, and poured on the charm. Joe Talte, D.D. decided, was a dangerous man.

"So you're like understudies for the stars," D.D. tried out. "Do you like it?"

All three immediately nodded.

"We get a lot of time in front of the director," said Melissa, the brunette dressed as a detective. "Not to mention the experience of making a feature film. You never know. Stand-in today..."

"Star tomorrow," Natalie, the gorgeous blonde, finished for her. She trilled the word "star" in a way that indicated she'd practiced it before. Many times, D.D. would guess, probably while standing in front of her dresser mirror.

"I play the victim that gets away," Natalie continued, gesturing to her tightly fitted black dress, with matching hose and, of course, three-inch stilettos. "Tonight's the scene where my character, the widow Deborah, first visits her husband's grave to leave a red rose—it's their anniversary. Except the Gravestone Killer attacks. She barely gets away."

Natalie tossed back her wavy blond hair as if to emphasize the drama of her narrow escape. Getting into character, D.D. figured, but already she had a feeling the thin, elegant blonde was the naturally dramatic type.

"That's scene one," Don reported, from the doorway. "What they're setting up now."

"Later in the movie," Joe picked up, "the cops"—he gestured to himself and the other stand-in, Melissa—"decide to bait the Gravestone Killer by having Deborah return to her husband's grave. That's scene thirty-two, which we'll film after scene one."

"Scene thirty-two?" D.D. asked. "Of how many scenes?"

"A hundred and eighty-nine."

"Meaning baiting the killer obviously doesn't work. What goes wrong?"

Joe grinned at her. "You'll have to stick around to find out."

She rolled her eyes. D.D. had done some digging into Donnie's production company. She knew that the film had started shooting three weeks ago and that Chaibongsai had received one paycheck for two weeks of work. Meaning the cast and crew had had three weeks to get to know one another, form friendships, and, apparently, make enemies. Given that Samuel had been hired to help primarily with the male lead, she decided to quiz Joe first on Chaibongsai's involvement.

"You work with the cop consultant?" she asked him.

"Chaibongsai? Nope. I'm just a stand-in. Authenticity is above my pay grade. He worked directly with Gary."

"What about hanging around on set?"

“His territory was video village. The promised land. Again, we’re second team. We’re lucky to get the green room.”

“Meals?”

“Cast and crew eat together,” Joe granted. “But people are staggering in and out over the course of an hour, depending on their schedules. I sat next to Chaibongsai once. That was it.”

“You local?” she asked him, then stretched out the question to include Melissa and Natalie as well.

As a unit, they nodded.

“What about others on set?”

“Lighting and electrical,” Don spoke up. “Some of the production crew, including PAs. Craft services, hair and makeup. But most of the cast and crew flew in for the shoot. The director, Ron, has his own camera crew out of L.A., sound is from New Orleans, wardrobe from New York. Not sure about the rest.”

D.D. looked at him. “Where’s everyone staying?”

“A hotel in Boston that gives us a group rate.” Donnie shrugged. “It’s why we’re working such long hours. Cast and crew are here to get this done, then everyone goes home again.”

D.D. nodded, frowning slightly to herself. A suspect pool from all over made life trickier. Who had Chaibongsai gotten close to in the past three weeks, and how had that led to his death?

A new person entered the tent, headset clamped over his ears. “Second team, on set,” the kid announced, and all three stand-ins rose. “New shoot schedule: We’re starting with scene thirty-two, then scene one.”

Donnie immediately appeared annoyed, hustling over to the kid. “Why the change?”

“Stephanie’s running late.” The production assistant shrugged his shoulders. “Scene thirty-two starts with the detectives in action, so easiest to go there first. But director also wants Natalie, so we can work out lighting on the tombstone.”

Stephanie must be the actress playing the widow, D.D. deduced. She made a mental note. One actress late to set. Just a movie star being a movie star... or related to the murder?

The change in scene order didn’t seem to be a big deal, at least not to the stand-ins. Joe and Melissa shrugged, while Natalie seemed genuinely thrilled to be assisting with the lighting of a tombstone. Go figure, D.D. thought.

D.D. followed Donnie out of the green room to a brightly lit area containing a towering Styrofoam-carved tombstone and carpets of fake fog. Joe and Melissa took up positions behind real tombstones, detectives on the job. Natalie, as the widow, sank to her knees in front of the gray-painted foam masterpiece, her fingers coming to rest on a single red rose.

Tendrils of fake fog immediately enveloped her, and this time, even D.D. shivered.

Joe, Melissa, and Natalie started rehearsing the scene. Donnie led D.D. to video village, where they could watch the action live on camera. First thing D.D. noticed was that the stand-ins didn’t just hit marks, but delivered their lines with genuine inflection and emotion. Natalie in particular was very convincing as the young widow, grieving her husband’s tragic death without ever saying a word.

When the first scene ended with Joe and Melissa leaping over tombstones, D.D. wanted to clap. Instead, the director yelled about needing another light by the tombstone while the director of photography grumbled that the camera man needed a different lens. Joe, Melissa, and Natalie simply walked back to their first marks and took up position again.

And again. And again. And again. Same scene, performed a dozen times and counting, and they weren't even filming yet. The glamorous world of moviemaking, D.D. quickly realized, was about as exciting as watching paint dry.

D.D. sighed, rubbing her lower back absently as she struggled to get her bulk comfortable in the canvas director's chair.

Eight P.M. Full dark beyond the reach of the lights. Temperature already at forty and still plunging with mid-November glee. On set with a very nervous producer and a cast of one hundred and four possible murder suspects.

This is where Samuel Chaibongsai had sat, day after day, scene after scene. Looking for blatant procedural inconsistencies. A former cop turned entertainment consultant. The job he used to do, the job he was now paid to do. One man, two occupational views.

Then, she was struck by another thought. If scene one was about the murderer's first attack, and scene thirty-two was about baiting the same murderer, then where was the actor, or even the stand-in, for the Gravestone Killer?

Because suddenly, D.D. was staring at the whitewashed face of a demented man, looming out from behind the fake tombstone and raising an ax over Natalie's bowed head.

*Murder is a full-body experience. Your pulse rate will spike, your skin flushes with heat, your palms dampen with sweat. Beforehand, it is not uncommon to have second thoughts, pre-party jitters so to speak. Once the process has started, however, crossing the street, sneaking into the backyard, prying open that never completely secured window... A calm will descend. A predatory Zen state, where the air tastes crisper, the smell of her shampoo registers sharper, while the sound of her first muffled scream, caught in the latex-covered palm of your hand... Sound and scent will become snapshots, frozen forever in your mind. A slide show of sensory indulgence, her panting breath, matching the equal racing of your heart, her kicking struggles, the corresponding flex of muscle and power in your own limbs. Her sheer, desperate need to escape. Your own equally compulsive, biological imperative to kill. You will feel stronger, hear better, smell sharper, taste finer, and see crisper than ever before. As long as you stay in control. No panic, no frenzy, no mistakes. Ride the ride to her last, gasping, gurgling breath. Killing is about power, but it is also about self-control. Mentally prepare for the physiological overload. **This is step four.***

## Chapter 4

D.D. was out of the director's chair before she could stop herself. She wasn't thinking about the fact that she was a very pregnant woman who should probably sit on the sidelines, hands folded primly over rounded middle. Instead, she saw danger and she responded as a cop. Out of her chair, moving across the hard-packed ground, registering the tang of chemical fog upon her tongue, the sound of a genuinely panicked scream in her ears.

Gun out, hustling her awkward bulk around video village, beyond the glow of the klieg lights and into the dim shadows of the vast cemetery, where she would be out of the killer's sight, while he would be fully illuminated in hers.

Perhaps one second had passed, with the blond actress screaming, and camera crew still filming, while others around the set straightened up from texting, talking, loitering, and started to eye the scene uneasily.

"No, no, no," the stand-in wailed, hands up, defensively, twisting away from the looming figure.

"Cut," the director yelled. "I need to see her face. Again, but this time, turn toward the camera!"

Except Natalie was now garbling hysterically in some foreign language, while the white-faced man brought the ax down hard, just missing the blonde's head as he sliced off a chunk of foam tombstone.

D.D. looped out far right, trying to line up a shot. But a hundred and four crewmen seemed to translate to a hundred and four obstacles. Cameras, lights, dollies, equipment, tombstones . . . Couldn't get a shot, couldn't get a shot, couldn't get a shot.

"Cut, cut, *cut!*" the director yelled. "Hey, why's he attacking my tombstone?"

Natalie was staggering to her feet, hands still over her head as she screamed more words D.D. didn't understand. The blonde seemed to have recovered slightly. Less hysteria, more rage as she faced off against her attacker.

Then, a fresh wave of fog rolled over the scene. Natalie disappeared, the white-faced figure along with her.

To D.D.'s left, charming stand-in Joe Talte suddenly materialized, vaulting over tombstones, hurtling himself straight toward the cloud bank. D.D. mentally calculated his trajectory and put herself on an opposing course, the second arm of the vice, now closing in on the ax man.

Her gun was useless given the crowd, so she kept it low to her side as she hustled her bulky form around the tombstones, approaching from behind. She was counting on Joe to get to the scene first. If he could get the ax man down, then D.D. could cover him with her weapon.

A fresh gust of wind. The fog cleared just in time to show Natalie staggering back while her attacker turned and fled toward the rear of the cemetery, Joe in hot pursuit. The ax man ducked behind a large oak tree, dodging left, then appeared again straight in front of D.D.

Gun up. Acrid taste of fake fog. Damp smell of fresh-turned earth. Shocked expression of one white-faced fleeing man, suddenly confronting a very large, pregnant woman with a flapping black overcoat and rock-steady Glock 9.

"Halt, Boston Police."

"Wh—wh—wh—oomph!"



Joe Talte had arrived. He leapt through the air, wrapped his arms around the ax man's shoulders and took him down. Both men fell hard. Joe got up first.

The stand-in drew his sidearm. At the last second, he seemed to remember it was only a prop. Hastily, he holstered it again, then glanced around to see if anyone had seen him.

"I got him," D.D. spoke up, voice loud, authoritative.

Joe glanced behind for the first time, spotting her. He nodded once, curt acknowledgment, then stood aside, given her official capacity and, better yet, her real handgun.

She noticed that his breathing had already settled, and that his hands remained in front of him, legs spread shoulder-width apart for balance. If ax man came up, Joe would be taking him down again.

Ax man didn't try to get up. Instead, sprawled on the ground, he groaned.

D.D. stepped closer to Joe.

Her heart was pounding too hard from the short burst of adrenaline. She could feel a stitch developing in the left side of her stomach, not to mention a now sharper ache in the small of her back. Running after the ax man hadn't been a great idea. Bending over to cuff him would be an even worse one.

The baby had spoken. Time to stop playing cop and return to the business of being a mom.

She had a couple of zip ties in her coat pocket. She held them out to Joe and let him do the honors. Later, she hoped Alex and her boss would be pleased with her common sense. In the meantime, she noted that Joe didn't need any instructions in how to use zip ties to restrain a grown man.

With the attacker's hands secured in front of him, Joe hefted the groaning suspect to his feet. And D.D. found herself face-to-face with a vampire.

"It was my girlfriend's idea," Will Kent was lamenting ten minutes later, sitting in a cold metal folding chair in the middle of the green room, hands still tied, security guard looming at his shoulder. Six feet tall, probably one eighty, with a face painted chalk white, natural eye color obscured by jet-black contact lenses, not to mention a set of presumably fake fangs pressed into blood red lips, the wannabe actor looked like a freak show and talked with a lisp.

D.D. and Joe had led him back to the set to discover the crew in disarray, Natalie unharmed but in hysterics, and the director studying the outtakes to see if any of them might be usable.

"I mean, I was busy the day of the audition," the twenty-year-old continued to whine/lisp, "and my schedule's lousy anyway for callbacks. So Rhonda said I should sneak in, show you what I can do." Will glanced at the director, Ron LaFavre, his gaze hopeful. At some point during the tussle, probably when Joe Talte had body slammed him, Will had bit his lip with his prosthetic fangs. The blood smeared on his chin lent a nice touch to his costume.

"A vampire?" the director said.

"Well sure. Vampires are hot, you know. Exactly what you need to make this movie pop. Anyone can be a Gravestone Killer. A vampire, on the other hand, really rocks. Besides," Will added belatedly, trying to scratch at his leg with his tied hands, "my werewolf costume's at the cleaners."

"A vampire," the director said.

“How’d you get in the cemetery?” D.D. wanted to know.

“Backside. There’s a hole in the fence. Most of the locals know about it.”

“When’d you enter?”

“Shortly after six, before the grounds got too busy. I made a little shelter by a row of bushes. Been hanging out in my sleeping bag for hours, you know, just trying to stay warm until it was time for action.”

“How did you know it was time for action?”

“Heard the director yell action.” Will looked at D.D. as if she were an idiot. “It’s a cemetery. Sounds travels.”

D.D. frowned at him. “What about the real Gravestone Killer?” she asked him.

“What about the real killer?” the kid said.

“Did you see him? Maybe interfere with his ability to show up on set?” D.D. looked around the green room, at the director, who had a faraway look on his face; at Donnie Bilger, who was clutching a cup of coffee for dear life; and at Joe Talte, who’d asserted himself into the situation with such authority, no one even questioned his right to be here. “Isn’t the Gravestone Killer part of the scenes on the schedule tonight? Has anyone seen him?”

“A vampire,” the director said again.

Don was frowning, looking at Joe as if he would know.

“Haven’t seen him around,” Joe muttered. “Mark Smerznak is his name. And yeah, he should be here.”

“I’ll have a PA check his trailer,” Donnie said, already sliding out his cell phone and exiting the green room.

No sooner had the producer exited than Natalie came striding in. D.D. gave the blonde credit. She had her chin up, her hair tossed back, and man, could she cover ground in three-inch heels.

Natalie marched straight up to the vampire-costumed kid, and without looking at the director, the security guard, D.D., or Joe, slapped the kid hard across the face. Kid rocked back. When he righted himself, he had a fresh drop of blood on his split lip.

Natalie spat, said a word which needed no translation, then sailed grandly back out of the green room.

“Well,” D.D. said.

“A good actress knows how to exit,” Joe agreed.

The kid shook it off. He returned his attention to the director. “So... did I get the part?”

Ron Lafavre stood. He ignored Will, addressing the security guard instead. “Toss him. And don’t let the gate hit his ass on the way out.”

Then Ron turned to D.D. and Joe. “A vampire!” he declared, and strode from the tent. He was quickly followed by the security guard, dragging a dejected kid in his wake.

“Stupid girlfriend,” Will muttered.

“Stupid you,” the security guard corrected.

The tent flap closed. Only D.D. and Joe remained.

D.D. took a seat.

Joe took a seat.

“Is it just me,” she asked, “or all movie people crazy?”

“Movie people are crazy.”

She nodded. Made sense. She sat back, rubbed the sides of her aching belly. Then she said, “So, how long you been a cop?”

*Of course, killing only takes so long. Sooner or later, the deed is done. Maybe you're exultant, cranked up on power and adrenaline. Maybe you're eerily calm. You once had a problem. Now, you don't. There remains, however, a key issue before you: What to do with the body? Leave it in the open, risking the discovery of any evidence you unwittingly transferred? Or dispose of the remains in some manner that buys you time, perhaps even calls into question that a homicide has occurred? The “missing wife” versus the murdered spouse. While this undoubtedly sounds like a safer strategy, moving a body involves its own dangers, including the risk of being spotted by witnesses, let alone transferring yet more evidence. In the end, it boils down to a question of style as well as logistics. First, are you proud of your handiwork? Would you like the world to see? Or are you an immediate prime suspect, meaning confusing the issue for as long as possible is clearly to your advantage. Second, do you even have the means to transport a body? Deadweight, as the saying goes, is surprisingly difficult to lift or carry. If the body is bigger than you, disposal may involve a chain saw and a bath tub, which is not for the faint at heart. Think. Consider. Weigh risk versus rewards. Then, make arrangements for disposing or exposing the body. **This is step five.***

## Chapter 5

Filming was delayed an hour. The fake tombstone had suffered damage from the actor wannabe's fake ax and was in need of repair. Natalie had to return to makeup for a complete do over, not to mention a stiff drink. And given all that had just happened, the director had come to an exciting conclusion: The Gravestone Killer would now be a vampire.

“Very hot, very happening,” the director declared. “Trends solidly with our target demographic of eighteen- to twenty-six-year-olds. Not to mention, a werewolf would involve new casting.”

The director left to consult with the Gravestone Killer actor, Mark Smerznak, on his new role. Mark had just made it to set, arriving two hours late as apparently his day job at a local restaurant had gone into overtime. Donnie had pounced on the actor and whisked him away to makeup, where he had entered as a tired-looking bartender, and would emerge as a vampiric serial killer.

In the meantime, D.D. and Joe had plenty of time to talk. She led him out of the cemetery, away from the chaos, to the relative privacy of her parked Crown Vic. They stood beside it, alone in a pool of darkness between streetlights, where D.D. stopped using her nice voice and got straight down to business.

“Who?” she said, jamming a finger into his chest.

“Joe Thieriault, FBI.” He smiled, still charming, but also sheepish.

“Why?”

“What do you know about movie financing?”

“Nada.”

“Well, movies cost money. Anywhere from a couple mil for the going-straight-to-video production to hundreds of millions for feature films starring A-list actors. Cruise, Pitt, Depp.”

“Brad Pitt’s not on set.”

“Exactly. *Cover Your Eyes* is a nice modest twenty-million dollar affair. Big-budget enough to have some cool special effects, low-budget enough to retain campy charm, but better yet, remain a credible financial vehicle in the eyes of tax officials. That’s what this is really about.”

“You said you were FBI, not IRS.”

“Yeah, because IRS handles tax fraud, whereas FBI handles money laundering.”

D.D. stared at him a moment. “The movie is a front. It’s not what’s being filmed; it’s how it’s being funded.”

“Exactly. Boston has a long history of being home to the finest crime families. From Irish gangs to Italian mobs to transplanted Russian oligarchs, we attract only the most ruthless criminal masterminds. And powerful crime lords have a tendency to be very smart. Meaning, they understand modern banking, and the imperative to make bad money good. Hence, filmmaking.”

“How?” D.D. asked, genuinely puzzled. She was a homicide detective, not a fraud investigator.

“It’s a paper game, really. Say you’re Crime Boss A, and you have two million in illegal gains you’d like to make legal gains. You pretend to “loan” half a million to a major producer to finance a film. The film will then earn one point five million dollars in legal profit, even if it never sells a single ticket. Basically, Crime Boss A hands over two million in illegitimate funds, in order to get back one point five in ‘real profit.’”

D.D. had to think about it. “Crime Boss *donates* two million dollars; half a million goes to the film as an investment expense, one point five million is eventually returned to him as a legal gain—his own money, once dirty, now cleaned up as the earnings of a reputable business enterprise. What happens to the half a million paid to the movie?”

“It goes into the movie producer’s biz as a legitimate investment, which the producer can then skim, waste, manage wisely, whatever. And business profits abound.”

D.D. was still frowning. “But how can anyone guarantee the movie makes money? I mean, if a film costs twenty million to make, and never sells a single ticket, won’t the IRS question the one point five million paid to the gangster as a return on investment?”

“Notice Donnie’s wound a little tight?”

“Noticed.”

“That’s because guaranteeing profit would be his job. He has two issues, really. One, he needs to be putting together a paper trail so convincing no IRS auditor will ever question Crime Boss A’s great business savvy. Two, as the person directly

laundering the money, Donnie needs to make sure he doesn't, say, lose any socks in the dryer."

D.D.'s eyes rounded. "No way!"

"Foxwoods. Bad round of blackjack. For about a month straight. You'd think Donnie B. would know when to walk away."

"He gambled away a crime lord's dirty money?"

"About a quarter of a million dollars, according to sources."

"Whose?"

"Andréas Chernkoff."

D.D.'s eyes rounded further. She'd heard of Chernkoff, or the Chernobyl of the North, as he liked to be called. He'd arrived in Boston eight years back, intent on conquering new territory, while expanding his empire from caviar and vodka into high-end call girls and cocaine. He liked to say that local investigators were jealous of his car collection. Local investigators were mostly jealous they couldn't pin a thing to a man who routinely thumbed his nose in their direction.

"Doesn't he have a reputation for cutting off ears?" D.D. asked now.

"And big toes," Joe said. "I don't think Donnie is sleeping well at night."

D.D. thought about the producer's obvious nerves, which now made sense.

"Who knows about all this? I mean, there are a hundred and four people running around this movie set. Are we talking half real movie biz, half plants, what?"

"Oh all movie biz. Director is legit, actors legit, crew legit. A real movie is being made based on a real script and financed by some real investors. Just not all law-abiding investors. Donnie, as the executive producer, is the money man. From what I can tell, he's bitten off more than he can chew. Probably was approached by one of Chernkoff's financial minions and offered a staggering sum to finance his latest project. Being a short-term thinker, Donnie said yes. Later, the fine print probably became clearer to him. Including the risk to not only his professional reputation but also his ability to remain among the living."

"Donnie's pretty desperate?"

"Day by day, I've watched him become wiser and wiser to the mess he's made."

"And Samuel Chaibongsai," D.D. pressed. "The cop consultant? Surely he started to figure out not everything about the set was up-and-up. Including"—she pinned Joe with her gaze—"I bet he made you."

"Day four," Joe confessed. "Guess I really can't quit my day job for the big screen."

"What did he say?"

The federal agent shrugged. "Much like you. Pulled me aside. Said he could tell I had on-the-job experience. I came clean. Chaibongsai seemed legit. I wasn't worried about him."

"Have much did you reveal?"

"Federal agent, working a fraud investigation. Chaibongsai was old school, a retired beat cop. White-collar crime was enough to cool his curiosity. Drugs, prostitution, gambling, those crimes he would've found interesting. Fraud... I believe his exact words were *Better you than me, buddy.*"

D.D. didn't like it. She shook her head, chewing her lower lip. "He was found murdered tonight," she informed the FBI agent. "No way that's coincidence. Maybe

after Samuel's discussion with you, he did a little digging on his own. Old beat cops love to show up young feds."

Joe appeared shaken at the news of Chaibongsai's death. "He never came to me with anything," the undercover agent said, a shade defensively.

"Maybe because he was killed before he had the chance."

"That's a lot of maybes."

"Two mil is a lot of motive."

Joe hesitated. "How was he killed?"

"Beat to death with a blunt instrument, possibly a baseball bat. In his own apartment. Landlord found the body. Apparently, the unit below his noticed a drip."

Joe thinned his lips, shook his head, thinned his lips again, then sighed heavily. "Sounds like something Chernkoff's henchmen would do."

"You must have backgrounded Chaibongsai," D.D. said, "before you 'came out' to him."

The fed nodded. "Nothing in his record or file to indicate he was anything other than a good cop. Retired well respected, with full bennies. No signs of gambling, drinking, no unexplained income in the bank account."

"He was a good man," D.D. stated. "Biggest risk factor being his current movie consulting job, where he found himself working a project funded by a Russian crime boss and under investigation by a federal agent."

Joe wouldn't look at her anymore. He stared at the dark sidewalk, nodded curtly.

"Think he pressed Donnie?" D.D. asked. "Asked too many questions, pushed Don too far?"

"I would think he would know better than to do that."

"Like you said, he was a patrol officer, not a trained investigator."

Joe glanced up at her. "Give patrol officers more credit for basic survival skills. Anyone can see Donnie's losing it. Real question is: Why hasn't Chernkoff dropped the hammer yet? Surely he's gotta view Don as a weak link by now."

"Night's young," D.D. said. "Maybe the murder and mayhem is just beginning." A new thought occurred to her. "Wait a minute, there's at least one other person who must know you're not a real actor—the casting director. Do you think before Chaibongsai talked to you, he talked to him... her?"

"Her, Sally Clarkson," Joe filled in. "But even she doesn't know. One of the movie investors owed us a favor. He 'encouraged' Sally to hire me as the stand-in. There were three of us who were prepared for the undercover gig, but once we saw who they cast as the lead actor, I was the best physical match for the stand-in position, so I got the job."

"You think you're clean?" D.D. pressed. "Only one who knows your 'real identity' was Chaibongsai? Never had the sense of anyone on set paying special attention to you, seeming to watch your every move, maybe rifle through your things?"

"I left my fed creds at home," Joe informed her dryly. "Hey, I know how to do my job."

"Fine. So how many weeks later, what have you got to show for it?"

She gave him a skeptical look. He glared at her right back.

“Look, maybe I haven’t had a major break, but there haven’t been any issues, either. I mean, not before tonight, and well, the discovery of Chaibongsai’s body. Shit.” Joe suddenly raked his hand through his hair. “This is getting out of hand. Whatever’s going on, with the funding, laundering, Donnie Bilger. If this is step one, it’s only going to get worse.”

“Time to rattle the cage,” D.D. declared.

“What cage?”

“Donnie’s, of course.”

“How? With what? We still don’t know anything.”

“Ah, but I know someone who knows something.” D.D. whipped out her cell phone. It was three minutes after nine. Meaning Alex was done teaching his class and ready to head to Mattapan.

“What do you know about blood spatter?” she asked federal agent Joe Thieriault.

“Nothing.”

“Then wait till you meet the father of my child. You’re gonna love him. Better yet, by the time he’s done with Donnie Bilger, our producer friend won’t just talk, he’ll sing. Which gives us about twenty minutes to prepare for the show.”

*For those who like to plan ahead, it’s always good to establish an alibi. I have two suggestions: First, place a call right before approaching the target victim. You can choose a friend or family member, but a business relationship or associate will have more credibility when testifying later on the witness stand. Of course you’re calling from your cell phone, and you’ll want to keep the conversation brief to make it difficult to later pinpoint the geographic location of the call. Your goal is to establish tone of voice. You want to sound crisp, calm, controlled. Just another morning, afternoon, evening. That way, later, the associate can testify before a jury of your peers that during the time of the murder, you were in fact talking to him by phone. And no, you didn’t sound stressed out, anxious, frantic, enraged. You sounded A-okay normal. Juries like to hear these things. Because we all know murderers can’t be normal right? They can only be freaks with stooped shoulders, disfiguring scars, and the complete inability to make eye contact. That’s the kind of monster a jury wants to find guilty of murder. Not a charming, well-dressed, well-spoken person like you. Now, if you don’t trust yourself enough to engage in a rational phone conversation in the minutes before engaging in murder, there is a second approach: Once you’ve incapacitated your victim, finish the deed while listening to the radio or watching TV in the victim’s own bedroom/ car/ office/ motel room. Later, when the police question you, you can say you were at home watching TV or listening to the radio. The cops, of course, will demand to know what channel, which show, what songs, peppering you with questions in hopes of tripping you up. Either you will fail to provide enough specific information or, later, when they cross-reference your answers with the local TV guide or radio playlists for that date or time, they will be able to prove you lied. You, of course, will have plenty of accurate details to supply. “Why, I was*

*watching The Simpsons on Fox... You know, the episode where Homer tries to strangle Bart.” It’s tending these little details that enables one to get away with murder. Carefully consider what must be done before, during, and after the killing. Plan accordingly. Concoct an alibi. **This is step six.***

## Chapter 6

D.D. was a sap. Maybe it was hormones or a pregnant woman’s biological response to the father of her unborn child, but each time she saw Alex, her heart skipped a beat. Didn’t matter that it was nearly ten P.M., freezing-ass cold, and they stood outside a fake-fogged cemetery. She took in her man, his salt-and-pepper hair, trim build currently hunched beneath a charcoal gray wool coat, strong legs striding toward her, and she beamed like a giddy school girl, awaiting the star quarterback’s approach.

“I thought you said he was a teacher,” Joe said beside her. They remained next to D.D.’s car, where they could confer with Alex in private. It was dark here, the wind kicking up and delivering a knife-edged chill. Joe, wearing only a thin sports jacket, was shivering hard. D.D., carrying around her own private heater in the form of an incubating baby, felt great.

“Teaches crime scene management at the police academy,” D.D. supplied.

“He doesn’t look like a teacher.”

“He still likes to get out in the field. That’s how we met. Family annihilation. Husband took out three kids and his wife with a kitchen knife, before shooting himself point-blank in the head.”

Joe glanced sideways at her. “That’s your romantic first-meet story?”

D.D. rolled her eyes. “Fraud investigators. No stomach for real crime.”

Alex drew to a halt in front of them. He glanced at D.D. first, the warmth of his smile reaching his blue eyes. And she felt herself melt a little bit more. No lecture or whiff of censure that it was ten P.M. on D-Day and she still hadn’t given him an answer. Instead, she asked for help, he came. She smiled at him, and he beamed back with his entire body.

She was an idiot. Stubborn, foolish, but worse than all that, a scared ninny. When had Sergeant Detective D. D. Warren ever allowed herself to behave so cowardly? When had she ever tolerated fear?

Beside her, Joe cleared his throat. Belatedly, D.D. and Alex turned to him.

Alex stuck out a hand. “Alex Wilson.”

“Joe Thieriault,” the FBI agent said.

The men didn’t exchange titles or departments, given that in the dark it was difficult to know who else might be listening. They finished shaking hands, then Alex enveloped D.D. in a quick hug. “How are you feeling?” he murmured in her ear.

“Jazzed. Cranked up. Ready to rumble. Oh, and if anyone says anything about me possibly chasing a vampire through the cemetery... total exaggeration. Joe did all the heavy lifting, right Joe?”

“Right,” Joe agreed.



D.D. decided the federal agent was a good guy after all.

Quickly, she and Joe brought Alex up to speed. The idea of crime bosses using major film projects to launder money didn't faze him the least. D.D. explained about Chaibongai's murder, and movie producer Donnie Bilger's prime suspect status. Alex had a couple of questions, then he was ready to go. Joe nodded his approval. D.D. got out her cell phone and arranged for Donnie to meet her back at his trailer. She'd never signed the initial contract, she reminded him. Of course, they should get that done.

Donnie had grumbled, but agreed to see her there.

Then D.D., Joe, and Alex climbed into D.D.'s car, and she drove them over to base camp.

This time of night, with just the dim parking lot lights illuminating the space, D.D. found the endless rows of twin white trailers to be eerie. Like a bad science experiment. Pod after pod after pod. She shivered as she pulled into the rear of the parking lot, then killed the car lights.

Five minutes later, the set van pulled up, and Donnie B. stepped out. He never glanced their way. Just climbed the metal step to his trailer, yanking open the door. One more minute, then D.D. looked over at Alex and nodded.

D.D. and Joe went first. D.D. rapped three times hard on the trailer door.

Don opened it almost immediately, nodding at her, frowning at Joe.

"Just escorting a pretty lady," Joe said easily. "Didn't want her to walk over alone, you know."

"You *walked* over," Don exclaimed, the idea of a pregnant woman using her own two feet distracting him.

D.D. smiled at him, then pushed her way in, Joe following quickly behind her. Door closed, then the three of them stood in a space designed for six people max. Given the rounded bulk of D.D.'s stomach, it made for tight quarters.

Don had the contract out on the table. He handed her a pen, tapped the signature line impatiently.

"Director is hoping to resume within the next fifteen minutes," he said crisply. He stared at Joe. "Shouldn't you be in makeup? We've had enough of a delay tonight. Time is money, you know!"

D.D. made a big show of fiddling with the pen. It was blue ink, did Don have black? Wait, she had the perfect pen in her coat, just let her find it. She started patting down her coat pockets.

Her stomach was still bothering her, she registered vaguely. In all the excitement, she'd forgotten about dinner. Maybe she should check out this whole craft services business. Chinese food at one A.M. Except just the thought of pork chow mein made her feel suddenly nauseous.

She focused on looking for just the right black pen, as Donnie B. grew twitchier and twitchier.

A fresh, loud knock on the trailer door.

Don frowned at Joe and D.D., as if they knew something they weren't telling. Both made a big deal of shrugging.

Finally, with an exasperated sigh, Donnie marched across the small space to the door and yanked it open.

Alex Wilson stood there.

“Don Bilger? Boston PD.” Alex flashed a badge, D.D.’s credentials, actually, but snapped the black leather billfold shut before Don could react. “Got a couple of questions for you, Mr. Bilger. If I may?”

Don looked over at D.D. Standing beside the table, she shrugged again.

The producer stepped back uneasily and Alex joined them in the tight space, door banging shut behind him.

“Do you two know each other or something?” Don asked, his gaze going between D.D. and Alex.

“Detective,” Alex said formally, nodding in her direction.

“Dr. Wilson,” she replied, her tone equally proper. “Dr. Wilson is one of our experts,” she informed Don. “What’s your specialty again? That’s right. Blood spatter.”

“Blood spatter?” Donnie’s eyes grew wide.

D.D. ignored him, focusing on Alex instead. “Is there something we can do for you, Dr. Wilson?”

“I’m afraid I have some questions for Mr. Bilger.”

D.D. immediately turned toward the movie producer. She’d taken a couple of steps away from the table, moving into the center of the space. Between her, Alex, and Joe, they had Bilger pinned against the far wall, against the built-in sofa. He hit it with the back of his knees, and sank down, seeming to resign himself to the inevitable.

“How tall are you, Mr. Bilger?” Alex asked sternly.

“Um, five ten.”

“Please stand up.”

“Fine, fine, five eight and a half.”

“May I see your hands, Mr. Bilger?”

“But, but—”

“Your hands, Mr. Bilger.”

Wide-eyed, Don Bilger held out his hands. Alex didn’t make any move to touch them, just appeared to study them.

“I see you have a ring on your right ring finger. Oval, with two small diamonds.”

“Signet ring. A gift...” Bilger couldn’t seem to pull himself together. His breathing had escalated, his chest rising and falling in a series of nervous pants.

“Are you familiar with cast-off, Mr. Bilger?”

“Wh-wh-what?”

“When a murder weapon, moving at a certain speed and trajectory comes to a sudden stop, for example at the top arc of an attacker’s swing, any liquid, say blood, will continue the initial speed and trajectory as it flies from the murder weapon onto a stationary object, such as the ceiling, floors, walls, or furniture at the murder scene.”

“Messy,” Bilger mumbled.

“Indeed. Murder is a messy business, especially when it involves a baseball bat caving in a grown man’s skull. Which, for the record, results in cast-off of both blood and brains.”

Bilger, still not breathing well, turned a distinct shade of green.

Interestingly enough, so did D.D.

“Now,” Alex continued crisply, “while blood and brains are messy, they’re also very useful to a crime scene expert. Did you know that each blood droplet formed by cast-off contains a distinct head and distinct tail, much like the shape of sperm? The sharper tail end always points back to the origin of the stain, meaning by studying the size and direction of the blood droplets, an expert such as myself can determine many things about both the attack and the attacker.”

Alex paused, peered down at Bilger, who was now nearly cowering on the sofa.

“Yes,” Alex said softly, as if speaking to himself. “A height of five eight and a half would be exactly correct for the murderer of Samuel Chaibongsai.”

“But, but—” Bilger protested weakly.

“Of course, a crime scene as brutal and graphic as a man bludgeoned to death yields many types of blood evidence. In addition to droplets of cast-off, there were several large, distinct areas of bloodstain. Including an imprint against the wall, as if the murderer brushed against it... with the back of his bloody hand, which was wearing a single flat-topped ring studded with two small diamonds.”

Alex suddenly stepped forward, grabbing Bilger’s hand. “How long did it take you to get the blood out, Mr. Bilger? Soak it in jewelry cleaner, or just a quick rinse? Because blood is a very tricky substance, and I bet you didn’t get it all. Somewhere, embedded around one of those tiny, tiny little vanity diamonds, is enough of Samuel Chaibongsai’s blood to put you away for life.”

“But I didn’t, but I didn’t—” Bilger moaned.

“We know about your contact with Chernkoff,” D.D. boomed, jerking Bilger’s attention to her. Her stomach ached now. She rubbed it unconsciously, as she continued to speak: “How much did he offer you, Donnie? How much money was Samuel Chaibongsai’s life worth? One million, two million dollars?”

“You don’t understand...”

“I know, I know,” D.D. continued. “You’re a good guy, you’d never do such a thing. But then you were at Foxwoods, had a little run of bad luck.”

Donnie’s head whipped up. She thought his eyes were going to bulge out of his head with surprise. He stared at her slack-jawed, a drowning man, finally realizing he was beyond the reach of a life rope, and going under quickly.

“I screwed up,” he whispered.

D.D. again: “How bad, Donnie? Tell me. Give me something to work with, and maybe I can do something for you.”

“Three hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars,” Bilger whispered.

“You lost three hundred and seventy-five *thousand* dollars?”

“At Foxwoods,” he mumbled.

D.D. caught the distinction. “At Foxwoods? Does that mean you gambled at other casinos as well?”

“Mmmm, maybe.”

“Mmmm, how much?”

“Six hundred ninety-seven thousand,” Donnie rattled off quickly. “But I got a lead on a horse—”

“Donnie Bilger! You lost nearly seven hundred thousand dollars that belonged to Andréas Chernkoff? Are you nuts?”

Bilger looked up at her miserably. “It’s a disease, you know. I need treatment. Maybe, I could just... go away...”

“When did Chaibongsai find out?” D.D. pounced. Her stomach muscles squeezed queasily. She rubbed them again.

“I don’t know—”

“Seven hundred thousand dollars. That’s a lot of incentive to keep him quiet. Given that the moment Chernkoff gets word, your death will be long and slow.”

“But that’s just the thing—”

“Was it a baseball bat? Pick it up at a local sporting goods store? You might as well tell us. We’re going to find out.”

“He knows.”

“Samuel, of course—”

“No, no. Chernkoff. He knows. Found out. ’Bout four weeks ago. And you’re right, I thought he was gonna kill me, but he called in a favor instead.”

D.D. paused, dumbfounded. On each side of her, she could feel Alex and Joe grow equally still.

“What kind of favor is worth seven hundred grand? Did you kill Chaibongsai for money?”

Donnie paled further and looked like he was about to keel over. “No, god no. I got his girlfriend a part. Except, the part wasn’t quite good enough. She got mad. Really, really mad. And, um,” Donnie licked his lips nervously. “And maybe, um, maybe you should turn around, ’cause she’s standing right behind you.”

*Stop thinking. Stop worrying, stop fearing, stop preparing, stop planning, stop reading this fucking murder blog. Kill. **This is your final step.***

## Chapter 7

D.D. turned around first. The space was small, crowded. She could feel Alex, his shoulder solid and reassuring next to hers. She could see Joe, just two steps to the side. In a space so small, filled with three trained law enforcement officers, how scared could she be?

Then she saw the gun, pointed straight at the enormous mound of her spasming belly, and she registered the blond stand-in, Natalie, holding the gun, and D.D. nearly stopped breathing. Instinctively, her hands clasped her stomach, her interlocked fingers no match for a bullet, of course, but when you were an expectant mom, what else could you do?

Alex took an automatic step forward, half of his body muscling in front of D.D.’s, pushing her back behind him.

“Don’t move!” Natalie said instantly, the high, brittle edge to her voice spooking D.D. even more than the actress’s white-knuckled grip on the 9mm.

“Hey, Natalie,” Joe spoke up. His tone strove for congeniality, but came out forced. In theory, he knew Natalie better than all of them, having worked with her these past few weeks. Better yet, his true identity remained under wraps, giving him the element of surprise.

D.D. eased closer to Alex, trying to give Joe more room to maneuver.

Natalie stood in the bedroom doorway of the trailer. Apparently she'd been here even before they'd arrived, giving her plenty of time to listen to their shakedown of Donnie B. Now, her pale face was grim, her blue eyes resolute.

While they'd been talking, she'd obviously done some thinking, and D.D. had a feeling they wouldn't like the conclusion she'd reached.

"You," she pointed her gun at D.D. "Gun, now."

D.D. made a big show of opening up the left side of her long winter's coat. Reaching slowly, very slowly for her shoulder-holstered weapon. Not resisting, but not rushing things, either.

"I'm confused," Joe spoke up again, clearly trying to distract Natalie. He turned toward Alex. "You said Donnie was the killer. Right height given the blood spatter, the smear caused by the signet ring. So how come she's the one holding the gun?"

"I might have lied about the blood spatter evidence," Alex replied. "It's possible, I haven't even visited the scene. You actors play cops, why can't we cops be actors? Of course, there is real evidence. What's it going to tell us, Natalie?"

"Shut up. Just... shut up."

"You killed Chaibongsai," D.D. stated, forcing the blonde's attention to ping-pong between the three of them. When cornered, distract, buy time, pray for the life of your unborn child. Abruptly, the muscles around her stomach spasmed harder, as if feeling her tension. Her eyes widened at the unexpected pain, then she forced herself to breathe deeply. Relax. Be cool, calm, in control.

"Gun," Natalie yelled.

Reluctantly, D.D. handed it over. The blonde took it, then turned to Alex. "You, too."

"Lab geek," he tried, still playing to his cover. "No gun."

Natalie narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Take off your coat," she ordered.

"But I'm cold."

Natalie pulled the trigger. A bullet flew within an inch of Alex's shoulder and added new ventilation to the trailer. Behind D.D., Donnie Bilger made a low, moaning sound which would probably precede a fainting spell. D.D. didn't spare him a glance. She kept her hands on her clenching stomach, and her eyes on the homicidal blonde.

Alex calmly opened his jacket to reveal a gunless torso.

"Not an active-duty officer," he said, which, as an academy professor, was the truth. "I don't carry a weapon."

Natalie grunted, finally seeming to relax a fraction. She kept the gun pointed at D.D., as she chewed her lower lip and seemed to contemplate next steps.

"Samuel promised to help me," she said bitterly. "Teach me some cop tricks. I could take over the female lead. Why not? I'm good enough! Samuel said he would help, put in a good word, assist with *private* lessons. Men," Natalie spat angrily. "Always only want one thing, especially from blondes."

"I hear you," D.D. muttered, gesturing to her swollen, achy belly.

"Shut up. You're a cop. Men respect you."

"Oh, honey—"

"Shut up!"

D.D. gave up trying to play the sister card, thinning her lips as her belly contracted again. Long. Hard. She panted lightly. Alex glanced back, gaze clearly questioning. She did her best to summon a reassuring smile.

Then it occurred to her: Her lower back pain all day, lack of appetite, on-again, off-again stomachache. Just over seven months. Twenty-nine weeks. Oh no, oh no, oh no.

"I arrived this afternoon at Samuel's place for more *rehearsal*," Natalie was exclaiming. As her agitation grew, a faint accent colored her words. Eastern European, D.D. thought. Perhaps Russian. "Except this time, Samuel was all, I know who you are, I know who your boyfriend is, how you got your job. He was all... big cop. Big man around town. He'd do me a *favor*. All I had to do was sleep with him, and he'd keep my 'casting couch' a secret.

"*Pull-eeze*," the woman stated, holding herself further erect in her black widow's costume. "I am Andréas Chernkoff's girlfriend. Like I need some retired beat cop for protection. Andréas, he likes me for a reason. I'm not afraid of blood. And I can handle my own dirty work. Plus," the actress added, "I do a Google search: How to kill a man. Find a most excellent website. Everything you need to know. So of course, I go out, buy a baseball bat, show Samuel I am already diva material."

"How'd you get the drop on a cop?" D.D. couldn't help but ask. The bands of her stomach muscles were tightening again. A slow, definitive ache. In the way true partners could, Alex was on to her discomfort. Slowly but surely, he was nudging her farther and farther behind him. Parenthood, D.D. was discovering, happened way before birth. She was keenly aware that both she and Alex were in jeopardy. And already, stubbornly, resiliently, she was plotting ways for her child to live. They were expendable. The baby, *no*.

"Vodka," Natalie said. "He nodded off. I picked up the bat, went to work. It's not so hard, almost like breaking a watermelon. Oh, I have an alibi," the aspiring actress finished brightly. "I was at home, watching *M\*A\*S\*H*. That silly Hawkeye."

D.D. peered out at the woman from behind Alex's shoulder. Natalie seemed genuinely pleased with herself. She had killed a cop, and she was proud of it. D.D. made a mental note never to work as a film consultant ever again. Then she held on to her stomach, as the bands tightened impossibly hard, and a shooting pain raced up her spine.

Oh, yeah. Definitely in trouble. Right now.

In front of her, Alex tensed, as if preparing for action. She wanted to grab his coat. She wanted to yell *No, I can't do this without you*. But the iron bands of her stomach had squeezed the breath from her lungs and she couldn't talk, couldn't speak. She panted, like a cow calving, she thought in the back of her mind.

As Alex took a step forward.

As Joe said, "Hey, Natalie, I got an idea—"

And Donnie Bilger yelled, "Nooooo!"

The film producer careened off the sofa. He shoved D.D. to the ground, where she dropped like a sack of bricks, still holding her stomach, still panting. Then he was charging Natalie, body ducked low, aiming for the legs, as Joe and Alex, recognizing the opportunity, went high.

The gun: *Boom, boom, boom*.

Then Natalie was screaming and falling backwards and Joe was cursing and Alex was saying nothing at all.

*Please speak. Please curse, please scream, please exclaim*, D.D. willed with all of her heart. But nothing from Alex as Natalie went down, and the gun got kicked across the floor of the trailer, and D.D. on her hands and knees, resiliently tracked it down between labor pains.

She got the gun. Clutched it between her hands. Turned to kill the woman who'd harmed her Alex, except Alex was there, standing up, holding a kicking and squirming Natalie between him and Joe, while Donnie Bilger sat up before her, eyes opened, but dazed, as he held a hand to the blood on his forehead.

"She shot me," he said.

"I'd help," D.D. ground out, "but I think... maybe... I could use an ambulance."

Alex, still standing, but going pale. "D.D.?"

"Hey, Joe," D.D. gasped, "think you can handle booking?"

"Been known to have some competence," he answered.

"Oh, good. Hey, Alex, think you can handle becoming a father?"

"It's too early!" he blurted out.

"Yeah. Not disagreeing. Oh, would you look at that. Breaking water... is just like breaking water."

Donnie Bilger chose that moment to pass out cold.

D.D., however, remained absolutely, positively awake. As Boston police, then FBI agents flooded the scene. Natalie was stuffed into the back of a patrol car right about the same time D.D. was stuffed into the back of an ambulance.

Alex went with her, holding her hand and reminding both of them to breathe.

Six hours later, they named the baby Jack.

The Boston FBI field office sent flowers to the hospital. So did Donnie Bilger.

So did Chernkoff. One of his last moves before he was arrested for money laundering, with Donnie Bilger becoming the key witness for the prosecution.

Alex read her the story in the newspaper the next day, as D.D. lay in the hospital bed, nursing Jack. Born six weeks early, their boy was impossibly small, more kitten than baby, she thought. He'd been whisked away to the NICU first thing, some issue with stabilizing his blood sugar levels. But this morning he was back, and she was holding him; the doctors said all was well, and she wasn't sure she'd ever felt as happy.

"What about Natalie?" she demanded now, still gazing down at her fuzz-topped child.

"Arraigned for murder, currently being held without bail."

"Great, a drama queen in jail. Hope they pay the COs double."

"Maybe they'll organize a play on life skills. Could be a valuable educational opportunity for all."

"We should investigate the murder blog," D.D. said. "Natalie said she found some script online that helped her plot out Chaibongsai's killing. Call me crazy, but we should investigate that."

"Internet postings fall under freedom of speech."

"I'm not saying we arrest the blogger for the postings. I'm saying we search the blogger's basement for dead bodies, then nail him for those crimes."

Alex folded up the paper, tucked it under his arm. "You know you're nursing our child."

"Yeah." She glanced down. Ten impossibly tiny fingers, ten impossibly tiny toes. She counted them at least every hour.

"And you're discussing dead bodies in crawl spaces."

She looked at Alex. The next word came out flat: "Yeah."

He said, "I love you."

"Really?"

"Really."

"But I'm in a maternity ward, holding our newborn, talking violent crime."

"I didn't realize I was having any trouble following the conversation."

"Alex, I'm a cop. I can't quit, I can't give it up. I love you, and I really, really, *really* love him. But I'm a cop."

"I know, D.D. And I'm partial to blood spatter." Alex moved closer, taking a seat on the edge of the hospital bed, where he could touch her cheek, then brush the top of Jack's downy head. "I love you, Sergeant Detective D. D. Warren. It would make me happy if both you and Jack moved into my house. And I'm only saying my house, because your condo is too small. Or we could buy, or rent, or build a place on the moon if you prefer. But I love you. And I really, really, *really* love him, and I want us to be together. A criminalist, a detective, and a baby boy who's going to grow up in a very interesting family."

"I don't like being scared," D.D. mumbled.

Alex smiled down at her and their now sleeping child. "Honey, we're parents. Better get used to it."

D.D. and Jack went home to Alex's house. Her squadmates Phil and Neil helped pack up the few things she had in her condo, while a couple of neighbors helped paint the nursery. In a matter of days, it was done.

Sergeant Detective D. D. Warren, on maternity leave, sharing closet space.

Life is good, she decided, holding her baby close.

And for six whole weeks, it was.

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