

# **3 Truths and a Lie**

**Detective D.D. Warren**

**by Lisa Gardner, 1956–**

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"I don't know if I can do this."

"Really? It's a bunch of fiction writers. I think you've faced tougher opponents."

"Please! Have you read some of these thrillers? Blood and guts every page. Not to mention the keynote speaker's last name is Slaughter. That tells you something."

"You've faced worse."

"I don't know what to say. In their world, detectives only take on serial killers and DNA results are available in a matter of hours. Real-world policing isn't like that."

"Tell them that. Give them the truth."

"Yeah, because I'm going to explain to a bunch of crime addicts who Google things like 'the best way to dispose of a body' everything they're getting wrong in their novels. Try again. You have it easier." She scowled at him. "You get to talk about blood spatter. They're going to love you."

"I am naturally charming. And armed with a graphic crime scene photos. The advantage of having done this before."

D.D. glanced at her watch, scrubbed her palms on her jeans. "Thirty minutes. Thirty minutes till I face forty, fifty—"

"I'd say closer to a hundred."

"—rabid thriller writers. What am I going to say?"

Alex leaned over, kissed her cheek as they stood in line at the coffee bar. "I'm sure you'll think of something."

Then Alex's coffee order was called. And he left her to fend for herself.

"Writers' Police Academy," Boston detective D. D. Warren was muttering fifteen minutes later, coffee in one hand, map of the technical college in the other. "What kind of writers even want to go to a police academy? For the love of God, even cops can't wait to get out." She paused in front of the building that housed the lecture series. This "vacation" had been Alex's idea. Fly out to Wisconsin, of all places, and spend a weekend hanging out with hundreds of thriller writers talking shop. He'd been roped into it years ago by a forensic buddy, who swore it really was fun. Discuss latent prints, blood spatter, and favorite crime scenes with a bunch of aspiring novelists who were not only fascinated by police procedure but determined to get it right. As experts, D.D. and Alex got to attend for free. And as long as they were there, they could also attend some of the more interesting activities.

For example, the yearly Writer's Police Academy not only offered hourly lectures on things such as ballistics 101 but also partnered with the local sheriff's department to provide hands-on workshops: SWAT team training. Evasive driving techniques. Underwater evidence recovery. Alex had brought his wet suit. Personally, D.D. was looking forward to playing on the SWAT team's training course later in the afternoon.

But first she had to survive the morning. Where she got to play the part of the so-called expert, providing day-to-day details of a homicide detective's life. Which, in fact, was not nearly as interesting as most people/writers thought. D.D. read thrillers on occasion—when she had time to read. She enjoyed a good twisty plot. And if fictional detectives spent all their time playing cat-and-mouse with serial killers, all the better for leaving the real cares of her job behind.

Today, however, her job was to provide the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. She just hoped she didn't bore her students to death.

D.D. walked through glass doors, instantly replacing the hot August sun with frigid institutional temperatures. She'd forgotten this from her own academy days: the tendency to keep classrooms arctic, most likely to keep the occupants awake.

One flight of stairs, a turn here, a turn there, and she arrived at her designated classroom. Outside the sign read: *Boston Detective D. D. Warren's Insider's Guide to Policing*. Within, true to Alex's prediction, easily a hundred people waited, some having arrived early enough to snatch seats, the rest standing valiantly in any available space. Meaning she really had better open strong, or bit by bit, the standing ones would wander out again.

"What am I going to say?"

D.D. smiled bravely, clutched her coffee tighter, and headed for the front of the room. Along the way, she passed a petite blonde whose hairstyle D.D. wouldn't mind trying out for herself—the keynote speaker, Karin Slaughter, whose thrillers did live up to her name. And sitting next to her, a forensic anthropologist, Kathy Reichs, who already wrote things about decomp D.D. never wanted to know. Because a Writer's Police Academy had to offer more than just cops bursting everyone's bubbles, but also a few New York Times bestselling authors who already knew how to get the fictional job done.

"Insider's guide to policing," D.D. muttered under her breath. "Not going to work, not going to work, not going to work."

She made it to the front. Set down her coffee. Her bag. Eyed a whiteboard designed for her to write out scintillating details of a detective's job. Turn in your paperwork. Never piss off your boss. *Definitely* turn in your paperwork.

She turned, faced the room.

Yep, at least a hundred faces, all armed with iPads and laptops for note taking. Bestselling authors, new writers, every single one of them obsessed with crime and determined to get it right. What had Alex told her about his presentation last year? The bloodier his slides, the happier his audience.

D.D. took a deep breath. An insider's guide to policing was never going to cut it.

She opened her mouth, heard herself say: "I'm going to share with you today the strangest case I ever worked. It involves a seedy motel, a hooker, and a dismembered leg. What do you think?"

The people standing in the back quietly put down their bags, settled in against the wall.

"All right. Let's begin."

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"So you know that game, three truths and a lie? Most of the details of what I'm going to tell you will be the truth. One will be a lie. Since most of you like to write about detectives, this will be your chance to play one. First person to identify the lie will get a special prize."

Hand in the back. Male, six foot four, brown mop top, thick glasses. "What's the prize?" he asked.

"You'll have to win to find out."

Collective groan.

“Hey, aren’t you people supposed to be fans of suspense?”

D.D. took a sip of coffee. Collected her thoughts. “All right. Here’s a bit of policing one-oh-one. A crime starts with a call—say, to nine-one-one, maybe even a direct complaint to the department. Either way, uniformed patrol officers are the first responders. In this case, the night manager of the Best Getaway hotel in Boston contacted nine-one-one demanding an ambulance. Dispatch tried to get more information, but the man was too busy vomiting to answer questions. So the operator summoned emergency services as well as the first available officer. In this case, a rookie patrolman, Justin, three days on the job, got to be the one to find the body.

“You know what homicide detectives hate? What really, truly gets on our nerves?” D.D. gazed around the room. One by one, her audience members dutifully shook their heads. “First responders who trash our crime scenes. Don’t get me wrong. We respect EMTs. Of course we respect EMTs. But have you ever seen what they can do to a crime scene? Trampling across fields of evidence with backboards. Kneeling in blood spatter to check vitals, start CPR. Tossing aside packaging from bandages, gauze, life-saving injections. Hey, I’m not completely petty; I understand trying to save someone’s life comes first. The tricky part is that my job begins when, by definition, the EMTs efforts have failed. Except, of course, now my job is that much more difficult.”

Her audience nodded.

“But in this case, the rookie patrolman, Justin, saved me and my team a great deal of grief. He peered inside the motel room, noted the carnage, and, not being an idiot, called *off* the ambulance, as it wasn’t going to matter. Justin secured the scene, then notified dispatch to contact my unit instead. Job well done.

“Boston homicide works as three-people squads. I’m a sergeant detective, meaning I’m the so-called leader of my squad, though my teammates, Phil and Neil, would love to argue. Each squad takes a turn being on call. That Saturday night, we were the lucky squad to be summoned at two A.M. to a sleazy motel in downtown Boston where the rooms rent by the hour.

“Now, policing is a matter of playing the odds. Hourly-rate hotel in that area of Boston, I’m already thinking drug overdose, or maybe pimp versus hooker or dealer versus dealer. These things happen. So I wasn’t totally shocked to walk into a bloody hotel room and discover the body of a naked man on the floor. What caught me off guard was that the body had been partially dismembered—the right leg hacked off just above the knee.

“Which had then been left behind in the room’s bathtub.”

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“All right.” D.D. made her voice brisk. “You guys are the aspiring crime aficionados. Picture yourself as a homicide detective walking into a crime scene. What’s the first thing you do?”

Hands shot in the air. She went with a middle-aged woman in the back, who stated immediately: “Secure the perimeter.”

“Partial credit,” D.D. granted. “In theory, the first responder establishes the perimeter. But screw the perimeter, screw the investigation, which is why I feel a need to at least check things out when I first appear. In this case, our rookie

officer Justin had been paying attention during training. He hadn't just cordoned off the room, but most of the parking lot. Aggressive? Maybe. But our DG—dead guy—had to get into the motel room somehow, right? So best to protect all entrances and exits from contamination. Next?"

"Establish a murder log," someone called out.

"Wow, you guys do watch a lot of TV. Partial credit again. Generally, a uniformed patrol officer or district detective will take this job, stationing themselves just inside of the crime scene tape and recording every person who crosses the line into the so-called murder book. Basically, upon arrival, every working officer, myself included, must supply a badge number for the log. You know why?"

"Locard's principle."

D.D. squinted the respondent in the front row. Attractive male, nice jacket, short wavy brown hair. She thought she recognized him as one of the speakers, Joe Finder, known for his clever thrillers.

"Show-off," she informed him. He grinned.

"Joe, here, is being technical about things. But yes, Locard's principle holds that everyone who enters a crime scene will transfer something to that scene—hair, fiber, fingerprints, you name it. It's the basic tenet behind forensic science: By working the scene, forensic experts can identify these transfer elements and then smart detectives like me can use that information to catch the bad guy. Of course, that same principle applies to even the good guys. Sure, we don gloves and, in the case of a really bloody scene, maybe hair caps and foot booties. But that doesn't mean we won't inevitably leave something behind. So the murder log has two functions. One, to help forensics sort out our footprints, maybe even a really stupid officer's fingerprint, from the relevant evidence gathered at the scene. Also, for legal reasons, you need a record of everyone at the scene. Now, here's a question, the rookie officer, having answered his first homicide call, having done a great job of setting up his first perimeter, then snaps a photo to show off to his buddies. One of the perks of the job, or do I now seize his phone?"

"Seize the phone," the room agreed.

"What about the leg?" someone else called out.

"You, sir, are bloodthirsty. The rest of the room gets extra credit. No personal photos of the scene. Any prosecutor will tell you cell phone photos, selfies, whatever, are the bane of their existence. Any photo of the scene is evidence, and all evidence is subject to discovery—meaning it must be turned over to the defense upon request. Rookie officer takes a photo, rookie officer never tells, so the defense never gets a chance to view it, and six months after trial, when the officer shares it to the wrong person at a bar, the defense lawyer now has grounds to overturn the conviction. Definitely no personal photos at the scene. So. I believe our DG is still missing a leg."

D.D. stopped. Took a sip of her coffee. Contemplated her audience. They were leaning forward eagerly. Alex had pegged them correctly. Thriller writers had a thing for gore.

"This is what a homicide detective really does upon entering a scene: prioritize. I have a motel room with a dead body that needs to be analyzed by both the crime scene techs as well as my squad. I have an entire building full of possible

witnesses, most of whom will deny everything, but I gotta ask. In this day and age, there's also video somewhere, which, sooner versus later, I want to pull. Lots of things to do, very little time to do it. So, I need to prioritize objectives, then devise strategy.

"In this case, I assigned patrol officers to go door-to-door for witnesses. Who heard what. If there's something of interest, the patrol officer will summon one of my detectives to conduct the actual questioning. In the meantime, I assign my squad mate Phil to meet with the night manager, drill him on what he knows about who checked into this room, and, oh yes, grab any and all video he can. Phil has a way with people, so even without a warrant, I'm sure he'll get the job done.

"That leaves me and my other partner, Neil, to work the room. Two detectives in a space this small are more than enough. Understand I already have crime scene techs everywhere, not to mention a photographer. Too many of us in the room and no one can get anything done. I've also held off the ME. Guy's dead, not going anyplace; the ME can remove the body, and the leg, when we're done. This is crime scene management. And frankly, it's one of the most important parts of my job. Just as with securing the perimeter, screw the management, screw the investigation. I'm not going to mess up my own investigation. Which brings us to...

"The leg."

D.D. paused, took another sip of coffee.

"No, see, of course you want the leg. I wanted to stare at the leg; Neil, a former EMT, definitely wanted to stare at the leg. But in my job, just like your novels, you can't skip ahead in the story. Leg is in the bathtub. Body's in front of the door. Meaning first, we gotta deal with the body.

"All right. Basic info. I judged the deceased to be a midfifties male, thinning brown hair, a little paunchy around the middle but decent muscle tone. No, I'm not ogling the dead. I'm trying to figure out who this guy is. Identify the victim. One of the first steps in my investigation. There's also a bunch of things I don't see—for example, needle marks. No way this guy is using. For lack of a better word, he's too healthy. He also has buffed nails, which indicates a level of income I don't expect at an hourly motel. Guy is facedown, and we won't roll him till the last minute. I can make out traces of blood around his neck and shoulders, but for now, the most obvious wound on him is the severed limb—right leg, amputated above the knee.

"Now, here's where things get interesting. For one thing, there's a tourniquet above the knee. And it appears to be a silk tie. My partner Neil does the honors of walking to the foot of the bed, where we can see a pile of clothes in plain sight. The stack includes a neatly folded pair of black slacks and a blue dress shirt. Neil reads off the labels. His best guess, he's looking at a thousand-dollar ensemble. And yeah, the tie is missing.

"I know what you guys want me to do. My husband, Alex Wilson, is a blood spatter expert. He warned me all about you. You want the leg. You're obsessed with the leg. Follow the blood trail back to the bathroom and the severed limb. Because, definitely, if you were writing this scene, some depraved psycho whacked off this guy's leg, then left him to bleed out, at which point our DG—maybe a CIA operative, or corporate informant—valiantly tied off his own bleeding stump and

crawled through a trail of his own blood, only to expire right in front of the door, inches from getting help.

“We don’t follow the blood trail. Sorry. But this is real-world policing, so I’m stuck with telling you the truth. Instead, we search the man’s clothes, then the bed, then the nightstand next to the bed. ID, people. Wallet, cell phone, car keys. We want to know who DG is.”

D.D. rolled her eyes, took another sip of coffee. Her audience was disappointed. They really did want the severed limb.

“Fine, you win. I’ll speed up. No wallet, no cell phone, no keys. So in addition to our DG being dismembered, we also assume he was robbed. And given the way the clothes are folded neatly on the bed, I already have some theories on that subject. But we’ll return to that. Because now, what you’ve all been waiting for. We follow the blood trail down the grimy carpet. We peer inside the tiny, freezing-cold, misty bathroom, where not one but two cockroaches are already making tracks through the blood.

“And we behold the severed leg. Packed in dry ice, in a plastic-lined tub.”

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Hand in the air. Mop top from the back.

“Yes,” D.D. called on him.

“Dry ice is the lie. I mean, who hacks off a limb and places it in dry ice?”

“Better yet, who brings dry ice to a squalid motel?” D.D. commented, then shook her head. “No, dry ice is not the lie, but I’ll be the first to admit, an unusual element at a crime scene. In addition to the dry ice, we found rubber gloves—blood-soaked—and a hacksaw—also blood-spattered—on the floor next to the toilet. In the sink, we discovered several round green pills. Being a savvy detective, my partner Neil ran the number stamped on the pills through the drug ID website and determined they were OxyContin.”

Fresh hand in the front.

“Yes.”

“The drugs are a lie. Who brings painkillers to a dismemberment?”

“Great question. Who indeed? The pills are not a lie, but a clue. Given the lack of a prescription bottle, most likely they’re illegal, a street buy, and, finally, something I would expect to find in this type of motel. Meaning maybe this is why our rich DG ended up in this place—for the narcotics.”

“Dry ice and painkillers,” someone commented from the back. “Hey, wait a minute—”

“No, no, no,” D.D. interrupted. “No skipping ahead. A crime scene is like a novel. One thing at a time here. So by this stage, my partner Phil is back from meeting with the night manager. He has the name DG used to rent the room: George Clooney. We went out on a limb and agreed this was an alias. Man paid cash, of course. And yes, there’s a video camera for the parking lot, which the night manager let Phil watch. Unfortunately, all Phil can see is the back of a man, carrying an enormous duffel bag, walking down to the room, then unlocking the door. DG definitely has two legs at this point, and appears to be a well-dressed gentleman, maybe a business executive. But that’s about all Phil can tell.

“At this stage, Phil and I exit the motel room to allow the ME to move in. I leave Neil behind, because, being a former EMT, he likes to conduct his own study of the body.

“Neil gets the body. Phil and I fan out around the parking lot to see if we can find DG’s vehicle, which would hopefully include registration information with his name. But we strike out. If DG drove, he didn’t park out front. I get the bright idea to have a patrol officer canvass the nearby area and shoot photos of the license plates. We can check back in twenty-four hours and see which vehicles have never moved—maybe one of them belongs to the deceased.

“Now, we reach a lull in our investigative efforts. We have an unidentified DG missing a limb. Yeah, we have some leads. Dry ice for one. Can’t be that many places where you can buy it. We can visit the nearest distributors, see if one of them can identify our DG, but that’ll have to wait till morning business hours and I don’t want to wait. I’m a homicide detective. I need leads I can pursue now, because every single hour that goes by decreases the odds of me solving the case.”

“What about the duffel bag?” a woman toward the back spoke up. “You said the video shows the man carrying a duffel bag, but you never mentioned it in the room.”

“Ah, give that woman a prize. Where is the duffel bag, because it’s not in the room. It’s missing, much like that man’s wallet.”

D.D. paused, let her audience think it out.

“Phil has to watch more of the security tape,” someone called out. “Someone must’ve arrived after the man.”

“Phil is not an idiot. Phil watched the rest of the tape. No one arrived after our DG.”

Karin Slaughter did the honors. “Then the person arrived before. The second person was already waiting for the man. It’s not who entered the room after the dead guy. It’s who exited.”

“And we’re back to partial credit. Upon further investigation, turns out the security video is a digital loop. Records over itself every two hours. So it’s possible someone arrived before our DG and the security camera had already recorded over it. Your theory is correct: Most likely, our mysterious second person arrived before the deceased.”

“Then exited after the murder,” someone else in the room prodded.

D.D. shrugged. “You would think so, except here is where things get complicated: On video, we can watch the complete sequence of the DG entering the room with duffel bag, to night manager appearing, then barfing, to rookie officer taking control of the scene. In that entire span, no second person magically exits the room.”

“That’s not possible.” A man in the back of the room.

“Fair enough. No one exited out the front. But the motel room has a rear window. Small. Certainly nothing a grown man could fit through. But when Phil and I reenter the room to address this issue, we discover the window unlocked and slightly ajar. As if, yes, someone had recently opened it. Which is right about the same time that Neil discovers the glitter.”

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“What do we know at this point? Sometimes in an active investigation, you need to stop, back up, take stock. We have a presumably wealthy DG discovered on the floor of an hourly-rate strip motel. We know he arrived alone, on foot, with a duffel bag. Once inside the room, the man removed his clothes. Given how neatly they’re folded, I’m guessing he did it willingly. We know the man had illegally obtained drugs. He wouldn’t be the first successful type to develop an addiction to prescription narcotics, so maybe he’s an addict. We know something definitely went wrong that resulted in the man’s leg being sawed off and stuck in a bathtub. At which point he made a valiant attempt to save his own life by fashioning a tourniquet? This series of events is murky for me. But we definitely know his duffel bag, wallet, personal possessions—say, cell phone and/or keys—are all missing. And now, thanks to Neil, we know the silk tie used to fashion the tourniquet is streaked not with just blood but silver glitter.”

“That’s the lie.” Fresh voice from the front. “If the tie is soaked in blood, how can you see the glitter?”

“Glitter is sparkly. Blood isn’t. Now, I’m not an expert in trace evidence. The forensics value of glitter is beyond me. What I do know is there’s no obvious source of silver glitter in the rest of the motel room. Meaning...”

“Locard’s principle.” Finder again.

“Exactly. The glitter must have come from our perpetrator. Who then exited out of a very small rear window, with the DG’s personal possessions in tow. A theory that gains even more credence when we find traces of blood and glitter on the windowsill. Come on, people, tell me what I need to know.”

“The hooker,” half of the room volunteered.

D.D. nodded her approval. “Told you. This is a story involving a seedy motel, a hooker, and a dismembered leg. And now, it’s time to identify our first person of interest, the hooker.”

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“First thing we do is call the district detectives. In most urban police departments, you have a vice unit, which covers such crimes as prostitution. In Boston, however, ‘morality’ offenses are handled by the various district offices. Basically, the local detectives. Given that working girls, much like cops, stick to certain beats, all we have to do is provide the address of the motel and we receive a couple of names in a matter of minutes. Now we’re off and running again. Phil and I leave Neil with the body, and hit the streets.

“We locate the first potential girl, Sasha, almost immediately, working two blocks from the motel, and pissed that the police presence is scaring off her business. She’s too composed to be who we’re looking for. Instead, in the interest of getting rid of the patrol cars sooner versus later, she agrees to tell us where several of the girls hole up. There’s an apartment building not far away. Falling apart, rotten plumbing, and even shittier management, we’re told, but that’s where most of the girls live.

“Phil and I head over. We start going door-to-door, knocking, banging, and getting nowhere. Till the third floor. When we come upon a door with blood on the knob.

“We identify ourselves. We order the occupant to open up.

“Then, when nothing happens, Phil races downstairs to wake the manager. Now technically speaking, a landlord doesn’t have the authority to grant police access to an apartment without the tenant’s permission—that would violate the tenant’s expectation of privacy, otherwise known as the Fourth Amendment. But the blood on the doorknob combined with the fact no one is answering our calls works in our favor, providing something called exigent circumstances. We can argue that the blood trail plus lack of response gave us reason to believe the safety of the person inside was at imminent risk, so of course we had to access the apartment. It wasn’t for our sake; it was for the occupant’s. Honest! Trust me when I say the building manager isn’t going to argue with us. And as long as we can make a reasonable argument before a judge...

“Manager unlocks the door, mutters about having to clean up blood ... again ... then disappears back down the hall. Whatever is going to happen next, he doesn’t want to know. Phil assumes the lead, I take his back, and we get down to business.

“First thing we spot upon entering is a black duffel sitting near the door. After that, the dank, one-bedroom appears empty. Neither of us, however, are buying it. Inch by inch, we scour the unit. Sure enough, fifteen minutes later we discover Harmony LaFab, as she’s called, hiding under her bed. I do the honors of grabbing her ankle and dragging her out.

“Harmony turns out to be five foot nothing, rail thin, with more poufy blond hair than bones in her body and, yes, arms streaked with blood. She’s definitely who we’ve been looking for.

“Now this is the crazy part: I don’t even get a chance to read her her rights before she starts talking.

“It’s not what you think, it’s not what you think, it’s not what you think,’ she babbles immediately.

“It never is,’ I assure her, reaching for my cuffs.

“But I didn’t do nothing. Just brought the Oxy. The leg... He did it himself. Swear to God. Fool idiot chewed up a bunch of Oxy, then sawed his own damn leg off!”

• • •

“Back to our game. Three truths and a lie. How are we doing?”

“She’s lying,” a woman to the left spoke up immediately. “She’s covered in blood, has the victim’s possessions. Of course she’s lying.”

“It’s a good theory,” D.D. agreed. “Certainly, it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve had an obvious murder suspect who still felt a need to deny, deny, deny. Most of the stories I get from suspects, witnesses, even the victim’s supposed loved ones, involve at least some lies. But in my experience, it’s always a mistake to rush to judgment. Even when dealing with a blood-soaked suspect, first thing a good detective does is listen.

“This is the story we get from Harmony LaFab: The night manager of the seedy motel has a side gig. He sells illegal drugs. Also, he sets up business for the local girls for a fee. Harmony’s evening starts with a call from the manager. He has a customer who wants Oxy, plus some companionship. Manager—let’s call him Shaggy—told his customer to return in two hours. During this window, Harmony

is put in charge of the drugs and goes to the room—allowing enough time to pass to delete her presence from the security video. Eliminating questions for both her and the night manager, right?

“According to Harmony, when our DG first enters, she’s a little surprised. Not by the nice clothes—her clientele runs the gamut—but that the guy is beaming. He seems both extremely happy and a bit nervous. The prospect of drugs, sex, who knows, but in Harmony’s line of work, very few people are as up as this guy.

“He sets down the duffel bag, then he starts talking. It’s the strangest proposition Harmony has ever heard—and trust me when I say a woman in her line of work gets a lot of unusual propositions. First, he wants to see the Oxy. He wants to know the dose, which he then proceeds to look up on his phone. Apparently, far from being an addict, he claims he doesn’t have much experience. He’d like to know her professional opinion on how many he should take to effectively dull the worst of the pain but remain conscious.

“Conscious for what, Harmony wants to know.

“DG opens the black duffel bag to reveal a small cooler of dry ice, rubber gloves, a knife, a hacksaw, and a hammer. Harmony starts to freak out. Oh no, oh no, oh no, the guy rushes to assure her. This has nothing to do with her. It’s all for him. The whole evening, the Oxy, the setup, it’s about his leg. It doesn’t belong to him. It never has. From the time he was a toddler, he knew his leg was alien. He’s tried to adapt, he assured her. To convince himself, even if he couldn’t love it, he should accept it, pretend it was a prosthetic or maybe a plastic leg. He even saw a therapist for a while. But nothing has worked. And he just can’t keep living with an alien anymore. The leg must come off. It’s time.

“He’ll do the hard part. He just needs a little help from her. And in return, he’ll pay her five thousand dollars. For one night’s work. Deal?

“Harmony doesn’t know what to say. She’s still pretty confused. Then there’s not really time for talking. The man is already in motion. First, he downs three Oxy with a handful of water from the sink. He’s worried it’ll either be too much or not enough, so he says he must move quickly. He lines the tub with a trash bag, then, donning the rubber gloves, dumps in the dry ice. He’s very polite, according to Harmony. Warns her not to touch the dry ice with her bare hands. It freezes at a temperature even lower than regular ice and can cause instant frostbite.

“He positions his tools in the bathtub. Then he comes back out to the main room and carefully removes all his clothing. This is it, Harmony figures. Man’ll want a quickie, some sort of last hurrah with both legs intact before he completes his journey to the land of completely crazy.

“But no, he piles his clothes neatly. Carries his phone back to the bathroom and sets it on the toilet seat. Then he comes back and picks up the tie. He’s getting a little bit sloppy now, his eyelids heavy as the Oxy starts to kick in, but if anything that seems to make him more determined.

“This is what he’s going to do, he explains to Harmony: He’s going to fashion a tourniquet with the tie above his right knee to eliminate blood flow to his lower leg. Then, he’s going to position himself on the edge of the bathtub, which, having seen green slime rimming the tub, Harmony already knows is the action of a desperate man. He’s going to place his lower leg in the bath of dry ice.

“This will hurt, he tells her. Even with the Oxy in his system, it will be excruciating. In fact, maybe he should take another right now. Just to be safe. Because he’s got to do it. It’s very important. The limb must freeze.

“Because as painful as the dry ice will be, it’s nothing compared to how it will feel if he saws through his leg unfrozen.

“Harmony doesn’t know what to do. For one thing, she’s still not sure she believes him. Who cuts off their own leg? Who goes through life thinking their own limb is an alien? But as she watches, the man calmly wraps his silk tie above his knee and pulls it so tight, she can watch his thigh turn red, while below the knee, his lower leg slowly but surely goes white.

“Perfect,’ the man declares.

“Now, in order for her to earn the five thousand dollars, this is what he needs. He’ll do the hard part, don’t worry. But ... this is going to be difficult. He’s studied it, researched it, planned it. And based on everything he’s read, as much as he wants his own leg gone, the process is agonizing and it’s going to come down to a matter of will.

“He’d like her to hold his hand. Perhaps dole out more painkillers, in case he needs them. He’d really appreciate it. For the record, he doesn’t want to die. He just wants the leg gone. He’s willing to do the amputation part himself, but based on what he’s read, he might pass out. It’s a distinct possibility. At which time, he needs her to call nine-one-one for him. He has it all programmed in his phone, ready to go. She just needs to hit the button.

“Now here’s the catch. When the EMTs arrive, they won’t just load him on the stretcher, they’ll take his leg, too. Medical protocol. Save the limb to be reattached. And because the limb will just be frozen, maybe some crack surgeon will be able to sew it back on while the man’s unconscious and can’t protest.

“Basically, he needs her to take the hammer to the leg. Given its frozen state, it should shatter easily. At least according to what he’s read online. So if she could please deliver a couple of good whacks to the offensive body part, that should do it. He’ll finally be free.

“Harmony doesn’t know what to think. Harmony doesn’t know what to say. While she’s sitting there, still trying to sort this out in her mind, the man reaches inside the duffel bag and withdraws a stack of cash. Thousand dollars, he tells her. A show of good faith. When he gets out of the hospital, he’ll bring her the other four. He’s good for it. And frankly, it’s a small price to pay to finally feel whole.

“Harmony’s pretty sure the guy is nuts. But cash is cash, and no one, not the night manager, not anyone, knows about this money, which makes it even better. The beginnings of a nest egg, maybe even a way out if the idiot actually lives. He seems just crazy enough to be that lucky.

“He gives her the money. Then he limps his way to the bathroom, and positions himself on the edge of the tub. He picks up one of the threadbare washcloths, folds it three times—a makeshift gag to keep himself from screaming, he informs her. Can’t have the cops, or the ambulance, arriving too soon.

“A final check of tools. Butcher knife, saw, hammer, all within reach. Should he take another Oxy, now that the moment is here? Except he’s already feeling loopy, and this will require a steady hand. Plus, he’s afraid if he takes too much, not

being an experienced user, he'll vomit them back up again. So the four he's already taken will have to do.

"He wants the amputation as clean as possible, he informs her. It will make for a better fit for the prosthetic.

"Harmony doesn't talk. Doesn't say a word. She's got a thousand in cash clutched in her fist as the guy uses both hands to lift his right leg, swing it over the edge of the tub, and dump it in the dry ice.

"It hurts. She can tell immediately. His teeth dig into the washcloth, the cords stand out on his neck. She's sure he's screaming, though no sound comes out. But he doesn't pull his leg out. If anything, he plunges it deeper into the tub, all the way up to his twisted tie.

"It felt cool against her cheeks, that's mostly what she remembers. The ice in the bathtub was smoking, but it felt cool against her cheeks.

"The man thrashes his head, beats it against the walls. At first she thinks this is it, he's having some kind of fit, game over. But apparently, it's just his way of riding through the pain, because next thing she knows, he has the butcher knife in his hands.

"He removes the gag, stares at her wild eyed. 'Hit me. Hit the leg,' he orders her. 'Hard!'

"She does, jabbing a patch of exposed shin with her nail.

"I don't feel it!' He's excited. 'Try the hammer next.'

"She picks it up, gives the lower limb an experimental tap. Nothing. Crazy guy is a happy camper. He sticks the washcloth back in his mouth, picks up the knife instead.

"Harmony is less certain about this part. Apparently, she's not very good with blood. What she knows is that the second he slices into his thigh, there's blood, skin, and *meat*. Definitely meat. She starts freaking out, already backing up, but the guy keeps on cutting. Deeper and deeper. It's like a traffic accident, she tells us. She can't bear to watch, and yet she can't look away.

"Except all of a sudden, it's too much. And not just for her but for him, as well. He drops the knife, groaning, shaking uncontrollably.

"I can't, I can't. No, oh no.' It's like the guy is possessed. He wants to cut himself, but he can't cut himself, and now he's pissed off.

"Smash the leg, smash the leg,' he starts yelling at her, while at the same time he attempts to hit nine-one-one on his phone. 'You can still damage it enough. Come on!'

"But Harmony can't take it anymore. She bolts back into the bedroom, hammer in one hand, cash in the other. She just wants out of here. Right as she hits the door, it occurs to her the video cameras will see her. And given all the blood and madness going on in the bathroom, no way does she want to be tied to this scene. Then she spies the window.

"Harmony is a woman with survival instincts. It only takes her an instant to toss everything in the nearby duffel bag. Then, with both hands free, she pops open the window, tosses out the duffel bag, and shimmies through after it. Thirty seconds later, she's bolting down the street.

"What about her client? We demand to know.

"She assumed an ambulance was already on its way for him.

“And his wallet, his cell phone?”

“She frowns at us, shakes her head. She doesn’t have any wallet or cell phone. She has the black duffel bag. Take it, now. Money, too. Take it all. Hell, she never wants to think about that room again. Then, at the last second, she catches herself. And the guy? Did the EMTs get there in time?”

“I study her for a while. Guy didn’t make it, I inform her. He finished the job, got his leg off. But he must’ve never completed his call to emergency services because he ended up bleeding out trying to crawl to door for help.

“Harmony appears puzzled. That doesn’t make any sense. She knows he reached nine-one-one. She heard the female operator talking to him. Plus, the man had already thrown the knife to the side. When she shimmied through the window, the guy wasn’t trying to hack off his leg anymore. He was fighting to live.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“All right.” D.D. surveyed her audience. “Your turn to play detective. If you were me, what would you do next?”

Hands shot in the air. She picked several at random.

“Trace the nine-one-one call” was the first offering.

“Good idea, except you know how many calls are generated per hour in a city the size of Boston? We can get a recording of the call, but that’ll take time. Other ideas.”

“Arrest the hooker.”

“Follow up with the motel manager.”

“Return to the scene and find the guy’s car so you have his identity.”

“Hey, can’t you trace his prints?”

D.D. held up a quieting hand. “Actually, the first thing we did was take custody of the black duffel bag. And we did book Harmony LaFab, basically for distributing illegal drugs, to which she’d willingly confessed. Did I think she’d killed the guy? Honestly, I doubted she had the strength, let alone mental fortitude, to hack off anyone’s leg. At the same time, however, she was our best lead, and we didn’t want her to go anywhere. So we called for a patrol officer to give Miss LaFab a one-way trip to the district office, and then we searched the duffel bag.

“Which turned out to have a name scrawled in black Sharpie on the inside label. Steven Wrobleski. We ran the name through the system, got an address, then Phil and I went for a ride.

“Wrobleski lived out in the burbs, Lexington to be exact. For those of you who don’t know Boston, Lexington is a nice town. Kind of place with grand old colonials, white picket fences, a historical town green. Basically, the address fit the suit, which was our first hint we were on the right track.

“Next up was the fact that when we pulled up at four thirty in the morning, the lights were on. We didn’t even have to knock before the door opened and a woman appeared. Fifty years of age, expensive hair, even more expensive loungewear. The kind of well-kept woman who spends her days doing a lot of yoga and not much else. She took one look at us and said, ‘Are you here about my husband? Is Steven okay? Because I’ve been calling his cell phone for hours now and he won’t answer. He always answers. Oh my God, what happened?’

“This is the hard part of the job. Dealing with distraught loved ones. You think it will get easier. It doesn’t. And while it’s understandable that this woman has questions, that they all have questions, the bottom line is, you’re not there to answer their queries. You’re there to answer your own.

“We requested to come inside. I escorted the woman into her own kitchen, had her take a seat at the table. Phil, who’s a pro at this, went to work making coffee. You don’t ask, you just do. Take charge. Which, most of the time, starts to calm people down.

“The woman’s name was Eve, and yes, she was Steven wife. She produced a picture, which resembled our DG. Best she knew, her husband, a partner at a Boston consulting firm, had been staying late to work. But when he still hadn’t returned home by midnight, she’d grown concerned. She’d called his cell phone numerous times without receiving an answer. According to her, that was extremely unusual. Steven was responsible and, even when working late, checked in. She’d got an increasingly bad feeling about things. For the past few hours, she’d simply been waiting for either the phone to finally ring or the cops to show up at her door. Then, she looked right at me. ‘It was his leg, wasn’t it?’ she said. ‘He finally went and did something awful to that damn leg.’

“Who in this room has heard about BIID?” D.D. looked around.

Older gentleman to the left. “Body integrity identity disorder. Basically, it’s people who want to amputate their own limbs.”

The room stirred.

“No way!”

“Crazy.”

“That’s gotta be the lie.”

“No lie,” D.D. assured them.

“It’s real,” the man seconded. “I used it in a book.”

“Of course you did. The syndrome is rare, but it’s genuine. For whatever reason, a person feels part of them isn’t real. Maybe a hand, or a foot, or a leg, or even both legs. Some experts consider it a psychological disorder, maybe brought on by trauma. Others are moving more toward a neurological disorder. Kind of the reverse of phantom limb pain. Except, instead of feeling sensation in a limb that’s no longer there, sufferers of BIID can’t relate to a limb that is present.

“According to Eve, her husband claimed that for as long as he had memory, he was convinced his right leg wasn’t his own. When he was a little kid, he thought it might be robotic. Then, for a bit, he worried it was some kind of alien transplant. But he hated it. Wished it to be gone, to such a degree he would only take pictures from the waist up. Even on their wedding day. Because if his leg was in the photo, then it wasn’t a picture of him.

“She worried about him, of course, urged him to seek help. As a counselor who specializes in substance abuse, she did some outreach and found him a therapist. For a while, that appeared to be working. He didn’t talk about the leg as much, seemed more upbeat. For the record, he was a great husband, successful, smart, considerate. He didn’t drink. He didn’t do drugs. He just had this one thing: He hated his own leg.

“And tonight, when he didn’t answer his phone, and hour turned into hour without him returning home, it had come to her: why he no longer talked about

the leg so much. Not because his condition didn't still bother him, but because he'd finally decided to do something about it."

"Suicide high," someone in the room murmured.

D.D. nodded her head. "People with a history of depression often appear happiest right before they commit suicide. Not because their depression has passed, but because they've finally chosen a course of action.

"With Eve's permission, Phil took a look at the computer in Steven's home office. And sure enough, he found in the browser history a chat room devoted to sufferers of BIID. Topics included self-amputation, the recommended method being to tie off the body part with a tourniquet, then submerge it in dry ice. And yeah, it'll take some massive painkillers to see it through, but if you can keep the limb in the dry ice long enough, you can damage it to the point a surgeon will have no choice but to remove it for you. Because reputable doctors won't remove a healthy limb, even if you claim it doesn't belong to you."

"So the DG killed himself?" someone called out. "Because of a psychological disorder?"

D.D. regarded the room. "What do you think? Did the DG kill himself?"

"Where's his wallet, where's his phone?" a woman to her right asked immediately.

"Exactly, where is his wallet, where is his phone? Because we've already searched Harmony LaFab's place. She had his duffel bag and his cash. But no wallet, no phone. And what about her claims of him reaching nine-one-one? Because Eve agrees with Harmony. Sufferers of BIID don't want to die. They just want to get rid of the offending body part. So what exactly went down in that motel room?"

"Which is why Phil and I left the victim's wife and returned to the night manager."

\* \* \* \* \*

"All right." D.D. polished off her coffee, set it aside. She glanced at the clock on the rear wall. Fifteen minutes left, which was about right. "Know how I mentioned a big part of a detective's job is crime scene management? Screw up working the scene, screw up the investigation? Now, welcome to the second half of the job, except this part is more art, less science. Suspect interrogation. This is where a good detective truly earns her paycheck.

"Our first person of interest was Harmony LaFab. Hardly had to work for that one. A traumatized, strung-out prostitute, she needed to tell us her story. Our job was simply to listen—though trust me when I tell you some detectives would've still ruined the moment, feeling a need to talk over the witness. Doing less is often doing more, which was the best strategy with Harmony LaFab.

"Now, however, we're returning to the motel night manager, Shaggy. Phil had already talked to the man once, getting permission to watch the video footage. According to Phil, Shaggy, whose real name involves more vowels than consonants, is a stringy, midthirties Eastern European male, most likely raised in a country where cops are the enemies and your best shot at getting ahead involves selling out your own mom. In other words, Shaggy won't be volunteering anything for our benefit. This is going to take work.



“First off, we want to be as prepared as possible. So while I drove, Phil called our other squad mate, Neil, to get the latest on COD—cause of death. The ME wouldn’t be making an official ruling for days, but that doesn’t mean we can’t get some expert guesses to guide our discussion.

“According to Neil, COD appeared to be exsanguination from lower-leg amputation. Now, this is where things get interesting. For one thing, last we’d heard from Harmony LaFab, Wroblewski had started the deed with the butcher knife, but lost heart before ever reaching bone. According to her statement, when she fled the scene he’d already tossed aside the knife and was begging nine-one-one to save him.

“But the leg definitely ended up severed. Furthermore, Neil discovered scratch marks on the bone consistent with the teeth of the bloody hacksaw recovered from the scene. Meaning someone—Wroblewski? our mysterious wallet thief?—finished the job at hand. And to add even more insult to injury, at some point in the leg-removal process, the tourniquet was loosened. For those of you trained in first aid, a proper tourniquet needs to be twisted tightly—you can use, say, a pencil or a stick to twist the knot tight enough to cut off blood flow, then tie it off. In Wroblewski’s case, he’d definitely need to pinch off the major arteries in the leg before hacking away at his lower extremity.

“Instead, Neil found only a knotted silk tie serving as the tourniquet. Except this didn’t make sense to him. What kind of man goes to the trouble to research dry ice, only to botch a basic tourniquet?

“So he went back to the bathroom and searched the floor on his hands and knees. Where Neil discovered, behind the toilet, a bloody plastic pen bearing the name of the consulting firm where Wroblewski worked. Neil’s theory: Wroblewski had fashioned a proper tourniquet using the pen to get the necessary torque. But at some point, someone removed the pen, loosening the knot, and leading to catastrophic blood loss. Needless to say, Neil bagged the pen for prints.

“Phil and I don’t want to wait for this report. Not to mention, finding a usable print on a bloody pen is a long shot. But that’s okay. One of my favorite interrogation strategies is bluffing. And between Harmony’s testimony and Neil’s theories, we are good to go.

“Arriving back at the motel, we don’t waste any time. We discover Shaggy sitting in the back office, clutching a mug of coffee that, based on smell alone, is spiked with way more than cream and sugar. He’s sweaty, clearly agitated and trying not to show it. Like a lot of players watching their house of cards go up in smoke, he decides his best defense is a strong offense.

“Right out of the gate, he states his demands: The police officers need to go. Ambulance, ME, everyone. We’re hurting his business, we’re infringing upon his rights. Take the security footage, bag the bedding, rip up the carpet, remove whatever we want, but get the hell out. Now, now, now!

“We let him talk. True to Phil’s assessment, Shaggy’s wound a little tight. Overgrown brown hair, thick brow, hollowed-out cheeks. Man’s probably not just supplying illegal narcotics but also using. And with all these cops around, he’s behind on his nightly fix. Meaning the more we drag things out, the more strung out our new favorite suspect is about to become.

“We ask stupid questions. Why not? We’re detectives, we deserve to have some fun. I ask about childhood pets, favorite brand of coffee. What does he think of *Dancing with the Stars*, and are Bostonians the worst drivers in the world, which has been my theory for a while, or are they truly worse in his homeland of Hungary?”

“He chugs his coffee. Practically licks the mug to get out the last remnant of vodka. And then, when the mug starts shaking uncontrollably in his hands, we go in for the kill.

“We know what he did. Everything he did. How he set up Wrobleski with illegal narcotics. How he’d arranged to have Harmony already waiting for Wrobleski in the room, Oxy in hand. Except, how could he have anticipated Wrobleski’s true fetish? Come on, a guy who wants to amputate a healthy limb?”

“Of course Harmony freaked out and fled from the room. Which left Shaggy on the hook. He’s got a crazy, mutilated businessman summoning ambulances and cops to his property. For a guy with Shaggy’s interests, no way that’s going to end well. Which is why when he went to the room and discovered Wrobleski begging nine-one-one for rescue, Shaggy disconnected the call, then loosened the man’s tourniquet, letting Wrobleski’s own actions take care of the rest. Better for the EMTs to recover a dead body than one able to testify six months later at a criminal trial.

“Shaggy denies everything. Of course he does. With his hands trembling and his eyes darting everywhere, he’s all no, no, no. He did nothing, he knows nothing. Whole thing, very unfortunate, very tragic, but not his fault. Definitely not his fault.”

D.D. paused, glanced at her audience. “What do you think? We have eight minutes left. Did Shaggy do it?”

“No,” half the room called out. The other half remained silent, hedging their bets.

“Why?”

“The video,” an elderly woman in the back called out. “If he’d entered the motel room as you described, you would’ve seen him on the security tape.”

“We do have him entering once, then vomiting. Maybe he was very quick to grab the phone, loosen the tourniquet.”

“Blood evidence,” another person called out. “On his shoes, but also, there’d be a trail from the room to his office.”

“Good point. If Shaggy had walked all the way to the bathroom, the soles of his shoes would’ve been covered in blood. Sure, he could’ve changed after the fact, but we’d still see bloody footprints leading from the motel room back to his office. Or, maybe realizing that issue, he could’ve removed his shoes altogether, except of course, we’d see that on the video tape—a man walking with shoes in his hands. Basically, it turns out that Shaggy has a pretty decent alibi: the security footage. For that matter, we have a pretty good riddle. Because no matter how many times we watch the video feed, the chain of events remains clear. Only three people enter Wrobleski’s room: Wrobleski; then, over an hour later, the night manager, Shaggy; then, fifteen minutes after him, rookie officer Justin.”

“What about the rear window?” the elderly woman asked.

“Very tiny. Might work for the Harmony LaFabs of the world, but definitely not for a grown man such as Shaggy.”

“So”—D.D. surveyed the room—“who killed Wrobleski? Who finished sawing off his leg, loosened his tourniquet, then grabbed his phone and wallet and fled?”

“What about the EMTs?” someone called out. “If Wrobleski reached nine-one-one the way the girl said, where’s the ambulance?”

“The responding officer called off the ambulance,” another writer pointed out.

D.D. shook her head. “It’s true that Justin called off emergency services upon arriving on the scene—but remember, he wasn’t activated by a dying man’s call to nine-one-one. Justin was dispatched after the call center was contacted by the vomiting night manager, Shaggy. So your question is the right question: What happened to Wrobleski’s call?”

“You need to listen to the nine-one-one recordings,” several people called out.

“No. I don’t.” D.D. glanced at the rear clock again. “Five minutes and counting. Come on, people. At least one of you should know who killed Wrobleski by now. I certainly did.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Here’s a question for you. Do cops read books?”

Apparently, it was a trick question, because her audience regarded her blankly.

D.D. tried again: “Do we read your books?”

A tentative hand in the back. “I’ve interviewed detectives who are readers, but most of them seem to prefer action and adventure. Or there was this female sergeant who loved romance. But as for thrillers ... most say they get enough suspense on the job.”

“Fair enough. I read. *Goodnight Moon*, mostly. Though lately I’ve been mixing in some Dr. Seuss—I have a toddler. But before my work life became consumed with homicide and my personal life all about my son, I definitely loved reading mysteries. Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Erle Stanley Gardner, Raymond Chandler. Pretty much any detective on the job loves a good puzzle. First we grew up reading about them, then we trained for jobs where we got to work them. Which is what we have here, right? The classic dead body in a locked room? According to the security tape, Steven Wrobleski entered that motel room alive. Only two other people walk through the door after him: our night manager, Shaggy, and rookie cop, Justin, neither of whom were in there long enough to hack off limbs or loosen tourniquets.

“And yet we know someone else had to be present. Someone who finished the amputation Wrobleski started, then pocketed his cell phone and wallet. Assuming we believe Harmony LaFab’s story.”

“She’s the liar!” Several voices, all at once.

“She was already in the room!”

“Maybe there was even more money. She gave you guys the duffel bag with a thousand dollars cash, but Wrobleski entered with ten grand. She kept the rest.”

“Like that theory,” D.D. assured the speaker, “and in the coming days, we’ll track down the exact amount of Wrobleski’s cash withdrawal, just to be sure.

“For the record, however, I believe Harmony. In your books, when you write about detectives having hunches, that part is exactly right. I’ve never met an

experienced homicide detective who didn't have some kind of nose for this job. We definitely go by our gut. Then we back up and prove it, because trust me when I say prosecutors aren't nearly so open-minded about these things. In this case, I believed Harmony's story. She was just plain too fragile to have been our killer.

"But here's the deal, the question we haven't gotten around to asking yet, and surely the question you should all be considering: Harmony is a prostitute. The motel is a seedy rent-by-the-hour joint in the proverbial bad section of town. Then we got the drug dealer-slash-night manager. Now look at our victim. Steven Wrobleski. Successful business consultant, thousand-dollar suit, gorgeous home out in the burbs.

"How did that victim make it to this establishment? How did he even hear of such a place?"

"Internet." First response. "In those chat rooms discussing where to cut off limbs."

"Good guess. But no. Phil read them. Chatter was all about process and, if anything, assumed you were hacking off the offending body part in the comfort of your own house. So why come to a skanky motel? Frankly, it risked infection."

"Drugs," man in front spoke up quietly. "Wrobleski needed narcotics. Can't buy those at the same place as hacksaws and hammers."

D.D. nodded. "Exactly. The final ingredient for this venture was painkillers—and the boards were explicit there was no way the person would be able to withstand the pain of the dry ice without them. So Wrobleski, our successful, high-functioning consultant, needed illegal drugs."

She stared at her audience. Stared and stared and stared. One minute to the end of class. Thirty seconds. Fifteen.

Hand in the back, exactly what she'd been waiting for.

"The wife," a young girl called out. "She worked with addicts, right? A counselor? She would know where to get illegal drugs. Wrobleski asked his wife to help with the drugs. She sent him to the motel."

"Ding, ding, ding, give the woman a prize. What else?"

Buzzer sounded. But no one in the room moved.

"Female operator!" Now they were getting it, the room buzzing with energy. Exactly how D.D. and her squad mates felt with a case that finally came together.

"Wrobleski hadn't reached nine-one-one," someone called out excitedly. "He'd called home!"

"Which we proved by three o'clock the next day," D.D. assured them, "by pulling records of all calls, texts, and voice mails from Wrobleski's cellular provider. We never did find his phone, by the way. But as Wrobleski's wife learned the hard way, we don't need the physical unit. Just the call records, available from any cellular provider company.

"And the final nail in the coffin?" she called out as people gathered up their belongings.

"Silver glitter," volunteered the tall man with the mop top.

"Silver glitter," D.D. agreed. "Recovered from the silk tie forming the tourniquet, remember? Except Harmony never helped tie off the leg. The transfer of evidence came from the killer—when she was pulling out the pen, loosening up the knot in order to hasten her husband's demise. We executed a search warrant on Eve

Wrobleski's home and recovered a bloody Canyon Ranch tracksuit from her garbage, complete with glittery trim. After her husband had called her, panic-stricken, she'd told him to wait, she'd come help. Together, they'd get this done. She knew where he was because she'd sent him there. Making it very easy for her to park blocks away, walk down the back alley, and shimmy in the rear window left open by Harmony LaFab. She approached her distressed and doped-up husband, splayed on the edge of the tub. Maybe he thought she'd hold his hand until the ambulance came. Or talk him out of his madness. Instead, she picked up the hacksaw and did it. Sawed through the limb. The damn offending limb that had become the bane of her existence. In her own words, if she had to listen to him talk about his right leg one more time...

"Wrobleski might have lost his courage that night. But his wife hadn't. Unfortunately for him, she wasn't just over the leg; She was also over him. Leg off, she loosened the tourniquet around his thigh, picked up his phone, his wallet, and disappeared back through the rear window. Given his long history of actively discussing self-amputation, she figured his death would be ruled accidental. Just another BIID sufferer driven to extremes.

"Her husband would be dead, his leg buried with him, and she could finally get on with her life aided by a multimillion-dollar life insurance policy. Frankly, it wasn't a bad plan. If only she hadn't been so partial to expensive tracksuits with shimmery trim."

D.D. picked up her bag. Time was up, her audience moving toward the door.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Several of the writers halted. "What's the lie? You said three truths and a lie. So what part of the story is a lie?"

"You tell me. That's the deal."

"The wanting to cut off his own leg. That was real."

"BIID is very real," she assured them.

"Seedy motel is probably real."

"Have a couple of those in Boston, definitely."

"Shaggy the drug dealer?"

"Nah, he's both real and still out there. Can't solve all the problems in the world."

"Harmony LaFab?"

"Name is an alias. You're writers—does that count as a lie, or more like an occupational requirement? Last I heard, Harmony was enrolled in beauty school. Nothing like watching a guy take a knife to his own limb to make someone reconsider her line of work."

"Is it the glitter?" someone else spoke up. "I mean, can you really trace glitter?"

"Want to have some fun? Attend my husband Alex's lecture on blood spatter. Ask him about glitter as trace evidence. I'm telling you now, the man will practically levitate with excitement."

"So what's the lie?"

Time to go now, the doorway and hall stacking up with the next class waiting to enter.

D.D. smiled. Followed her own students to the door.

"The lie was implicit in the story. Why did the wife do what she did? Because she honestly believed she could get away with murder.

“That’s the lie. For your savvy detectives in your thrillers, and for me and my squad dedicated to the job. Killers can be as creative and clever as they want. We’re always gonna get ’em in the end.”

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