Cut and Dry

A Lawyer making a killing

S. Lasher & Associates, #2

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental

The most important relationship that I have ever known is with my sister, Christi. This one is for her.

"*The predatory gaze of the psychopath lacks emotions and is as cold as a reptile's blank stare. Reptiles are missing the limbic parts of their brains, where memories, emotions, and socializing and parental instincts reside. In other words, serial killers are aptly described as 'cold-blooded,' just like their scaly reptilian brethren.*"

—Crime Library

"*After I'm dead, they're going to open up my head and find that just like we've been saying, a part of my brain is black and dry and dead.*"

—Bobby Joe Long, serial killer

Fact:

The brain of a serial killer is different than ours. Brain activity is different. Brain patterns are different. Thinking and behavior is different. Movement in the brain is different.

Many serial killers claim that monsters live inside of them, that voices in their heads make them kill.

Fiction:
Meet Shane Lasher.

Prologue

Who am I?

"*Demons do not exist anymore than gods do, being only the psychic activities of man.*"
—Sigmund Freud, Psychiatrist

I am the monster that lives inside of Shane Lasher. With my sharp claws, fangs, and cold, wet tendrils, I conjoined to his inner workings.

Perhaps Shane Lasher was crazy. Perhaps I was only a figment of his mind. Perhaps I was the collection of evil activities in his brain.

On the other hand, maybe I was a real, living, breathing reptile, a natural part of evolution. Was Shane Lasher the monster or was I?

By day, Shane Lasher defended criminals. He worked as a lawyer at his dead father's firm, Lasher & Associates. He was good-looking, smart, and famous. Defendants sought after his services because he had an impeccable track record. He won most of his cases.

By night, Shane Lasher killed serial killers.

Behind Shane's eyes, cheeks, nose, and mouth, I smiled. I liked to watch killers think that they had gotten away with murder. Then I would hunt them down and kill them.

I was not a good monster. But Shane was a good guy. For now, we coexisted.

The two of us lived in this body.

Human beings only used 10% of their brains. Imagine what they could accomplish if they executed control over the other 90%.

That was where I came in. I lived in Shane's brain. I lived in the 90% region of Shane's mind.

Most of the time, I sat back and watched Shane live his life. He made his own choices. As long as he never crossed me, as long as he followed my guidelines, then we wouldn't have a problem.

I guess that you could say that I was his copilot.

As Shane's daily life went on, I watched him live it. When the moment came that he needed to kill, I stepped in and took control.

I did the killing.

Shane observed, researched, and investigated the bad guys. I hunted, stalked, and murdered them. Together, we were the perfect killing machine.
We were like Jekyll and Hyde.

Shane investigated our clients' cases. He used his lawyer skills and his investigative mind to discover their innocence or guilt.

I used my powers to track them and kill them.

I could see the murderers whenever I closed Shane's eyes. Like a dream, I envisioned them doing things. I never saw their faces, only what they did.

I shared a connection with them like a cellular network. They transmitted images to a signal. And I received it. They were like nodes. And as far as I knew, I was the only receiver. This power allowed me a backstage pass into their murderous lives.

Sometimes, his clients were innocent. Whenever this happened, Shane fought tooth and nail to prove their innocence. He got some kind of satisfaction from it. Defending an innocent client fed his good side.

Last year I killed the StoneCutter. He was the most dangerous opponent that I had ever faced. He would be the most dangerous one that I'd ever face.

At least that was what I thought.

Chapter 1

Out of the Woods.

"*I made my fantasy life more powerful than my real one.*"
—Jeffrey Dahmer, Cannibal

More than ten years ago, a man came home in the rain. He wore an FBI gold shield clipped to his belt, which was unusual for an FBI agent. They tended to keep their badges in billfolds. He had both versions.

A Glock 22 rested in a gun holster clipped to his belt. It was on the opposite side of his badge.

He stumbled about in his front yard. The man was in a drunken state. He and his fellow agents had been out celebrating.

They celebrated the conviction of Carl Reagan.

Carl was a serial killer who had been wanted for years. He was called the ID Killer. He killed and then stole the identity of his victims. He moved around from one region of the country to the next. He lived using the stolen identities.

He acquired new credit cards, bank accounts, and even driver's licenses made with his new name.

I slithered in Shane's head as he slept. I watched the events unfold before me.

Shane had been asleep for an hour. The vision I saw took place back when Shane was a second-year law student. Study and sleep seemed to be all he did. So I watched with great interest any and every case of murder that came to our attention.

The FBI agent stumbled up the walkway to a Jeffersonian townhouse. He left his car parked near a tow-away zone across the street.

His breath reeked of alcohol.

Back then my visions were not as potent as they are now. So I wasn't able to distinguish the kind of alcohol from the smell on his breath. From the look of things it was something strong.

The FBI agent stumbled up his front steps and fumbled around in his pockets looking for his keys. While he searched for them, he found his mobile phone instead.

He loved his phone. It was a brand new Blackberry. He was one of the only agents to have one. Most still had Nokia flip phones.

He pulled out the Blackberry and looked at the screen. He had four missed calls and three text messages.

He must have forgotten that he had turned off his phone because it was switched to vibrate. He looked at it and switched it back to ring.

The screen lit up and he typed in the code to unlock it.

The calls and text messages were all from his wife, Millie. The screen didn't give a last name, but I know it was his wife because the first text read:

Hi honey.
I saw on TV that Carl Reagan was convicted. Congratulations :)

The FBI agent smiled. Then his smile turned to terror as he read the next text message. It said:

Answer the phone!

The next text message read:

There is a noise outside.
Is that you?
I tried calling you!

And the final message read:

SOMEONE IS HERE!

That was when the real horror crossed his face. He noticed something else on his screen. It was not the text messages themselves but something far worse.

Suddenly, he was shaken out of his drunken state. Sobriety engulfed him like a burst of flames. Adrenaline shot through him and his posture straightened.

That was when I realized what the horror was that had taken control over his body. I saw what he saw on his phone.

It was the time stamp on the last text message. It was more than two hours ago.

Millie hadn't texted one time after that. Not once. She hadn't even called.

She had thought that someone had broken into their house and pleaded for him to answer his phone. Then she had ceased her communications.

Something was very wrong.

The FBI agent put the Blackberry phone back in his pocket. He reached deep into the next pocket and found his keys. He opened the front door and brandished his Glock.

Sweeping the dark hallway as best he could, he saw nothing. There was no movement.

He tried flicking the light switch on, but nothing happened. The lights didn't respond.

He ignored most of his FBI training and cleared the entire downstairs in a matter of moments.

This was risky. An intruder could have hidden in one of the corners and this FBI agent didn't sweep thoroughly enough to be sure. His ineptness could have allowed the assailant to escape, or worse, attack him from behind.

Someone might have hidden in one of the two downstairs closets. He never checked.

There could have been someone hiding behind the couch. He never checked.

The only thing that he cared about was locating his wife.

Where was she? I thought.

He made his way to the staircase. He peered up it while looking through the sights of his pistol. He kept his finger away from the trigger. It rested safely on the outer perimeter of the guard.

That was one step in his training that he did adhere to. Mostly it was because he didn't want to shoot his wife by mistake.

On the second floor, he saw a flicker of light coming from the master bedroom.

He whispered as loud as he could, "Millie! Millie!"

No reply.

This time he said it in his normal speaking voice. He said, "Millie! Are you there?"

No answer.

The FBI agent waited another second and then shouted, "FBI! I am coming up the stairs. If there is anyone in this house, then make yourself known or get shot."

Now his training took control over him. He spoke in a commanding voice, identifying himself as a federal agent and making it clear that any surprises from an intruder would result in their getting shot.

There was one thing that he didn't do. He didn't call for backup.

Foolish, I thought.

Like moviegoers watching the suspense from the safety of their seats, I watched the scene before me.

The FBI agent made his way to the top of the stairs. The final two steps creaked beneath his weight.

He cursed under his breath. Then he stopped at the top of the landing and swept the two open doorways in the hall. The first was to an empty bedroom. It was decorated for a baby. It was meant for a future kid, whenever he and his wife were ready for one. At the moment, they had no children.

The agent jumped out on one knee and swept the bedroom with his gun. There was no movement.

The room was completely finished. There was a crib, a rocking chair in one corner, and a mural on every wall.

The mural theme was the aquatic sea life. It was meant to be non-gender specific since they hadn't had a child yet.

There were drawings of fish, sea horses, and turtles swimming across the walls.

One of Millie's friends from her law office had come over and spent the last three weeks painting it.

Why? The FBI agent did not know.

He didn't seem to know what the hurry was.

But the detail in the mural amazed him, really quality work.

As the FBI agent turned away from the room, he noticed that Millie had bought something new for the kid that doesn't exist.

Resting on a dresser near the crib was a pair of blue baby monitors. They were packed in clear, plastic packaging.

The FBI agent shrugged. Then a slight noise returned him to the horror of his situation.

The noise came from the master bedroom.

The FBI agent entered the room and saw nothing. No one was there.

Everything looked the way that he had left it that morning before he had left for work. All except for the bed. Millie must have made that before she left for her law firm.

The FBI agent turned his attention to the sliver of light that he had seen from the staircase. It came from beneath a closed door.

It flickered. He figured that it must have been candlelight.

The door led to the master bath.

He approached it. Then he heard the noise again. It sounded like dripping water. It was a quiet noise. It must have been a slowly dripping faucet.

"Millie?" he asked.

No response.

He raised his gun to the door.

"Millie, I have my gun drawn. I'm coming in. Please say something now," he said.

No reply.

The FBI agent reared back and kicked open the door to the master bath.

Inside the room, he saw that the light from under the door had indeed come from a lit candle. The wick had burned down to the lower half of the candle as if it had burned for hours.

Suddenly, the FBI agent witnessed two sights that terrified him.

The first wasn't as bad as the second.

His eyes flew to the bathroom mirror.

Sixteen letters and four words were written across the mirror in red lipstick.

The message read:

ID KILLER
TRY AGAIN

The second thing that he saw was his dead wife.

In the bathtub, her corpse lay under the surface of the murky bath water.

Her cold eyes stared up at the ceiling. Two bullet holes had torn through her torso.

One was in her chest, center mass. The second was in her gut.

A blank expression covered the FBI agent's face.

The FBI agent looked back at the mirror. Then he moved his lips and mouthed the writing, as if reading it carefully.

He mouthed, "ID Killer."

Then my screen in Shane's head went dark.

The night was beautiful, the perfect night. It was art, like a painting or sculpture. This night was sculpted to perfection by a master sculptor. He had hammered out a perfect night for killing.

Washington D.C. was quiet. In Georgetown University, a footpath in front of the campus led past the Georgetown Park and down to north Volta Place.

Jessica Long was excited about her date. She had fantasized about it for days. She barely spoke to any of her sisters in the sorority house. She just floated around, daydreaming about her secret date.

Jessica liked poetry. She majored in it. What she was going to do with a degree in English? That was a question that her mother would ask her.

Her mother was more of a traditional woman: strong family values, do your chores, marry a working man, and stay-at-home type. This kind of future didn't attract Jessica. She had no intentions of following in her mother's footsteps, although her mother challenged her to do so every semester.

Most of her family never questioned Jessica's decisions. They minded their own business as she wished that her mother would do.

Jessica had no idea what she was going to do with her degree. She'd probably go on to get a Ph.D. like so many others. She could teach college. These days the market wasn't very good for any major, at least none that interested her.

On the plus side for Jessica, she had won a scholarship in poetry. That was what brought her south to D.C., to Georgetown. Jessica was originally from a small town in Maine. She grew up in a farming community.

Georgetown was not really known for its English department.

Her advisor explained to her that the school was trying to beef up some of its lesser known fields. So that was why they had offered her a full scholarship to study English.

Since her mother had made it very clear that the family would not pay for her education, what choice did she have?

Jessica had been at Georgetown for only two semesters and already she was ready to meet a guy and have some fun. She was sick of being single.

She liked older guys. And this guy, her secret date, was an older guy and successful. He was not old old, she had told herself. He was in his thirties, just the right age for her. Jessica still had stars in her eyes and innocence in her heart.

She was the perfect prey.

The night finally arrived. She had bought a new outfit from bebe. She thought it was perfect to impress this older guy. It was slutty, but borderline. And that's what she wanted. She wanted to show him that she was more than nerdy

glasses, that she was fun. She wanted to show him that she was more than a small-town girl. And she really liked him or at least the idea of him.

To pay for the new outfit, she had dipped into her college money. She also used $200 on a new hairstyle. No one who knew her from back home would have recognized her. That's for sure.

She looked the part of rich man's wife. That was the part that she wanted to play.

When it came to her sorority sisters, she lied to them. She had said that she was going to hit the downtown clubs.

She had even used the phrase "party like a rock star."

Jessica walked out of the sorority house and through the campus. She made her way to a path near the park. She walked near the edge of the path along the border between gravel and grass. She followed it down to the street, where she waited for him to pick her up. She had agreed to meet him there instead of on campus. He told her that he was going through a divorce. He didn't want anyone on campus to see them together. He claimed that his wife worked on campus. She taught some courses in finance. Her name was Dr. Martina Simon.

Dr. Simon taught a class called Economic Crisis of the European Union, a class that Jessica would never be interested in taking. In addition to finance classes, she also taught a couple of political science courses.

Since Jessica had started seeing her new boyfriend, she had snuck into three of Dr. Martin's classes on political issues. That was why she was positive that she would never enroll in any of Dr. Simon's courses. To her it was complete nonsense.

Jessica kept her new relationship a secret from her friends, from her parents, and from Katrina. That was the hardest part, keeping such a big secret from her best friend and closest sorority sister.

Her new boyfriend told her that they could reveal themselves as they became more serious, but for now he wanted it to remain a secret.

The wind picked up, blowing briskly through the trees behind her. She trembled in her short skirt. Her long, slender legs gave way to the breeze and her knees bent slightly. However, the wind wasn't the only thing that caused her to tremble. A sliver of terror crept over her from out of the darkness.

The scene alarmed her. The campus P.D. had posted several bulletins and sent out numerous e-blasts warning the coeds of Georgetown to be wary of suspicious strangers walking around the campus. Tonight she ignored their warnings and walked near the empty park.

Her date was successful and well known around D.C. So she felt safe enough to trust him.

A killer known as the Woodsman watched with feral eyes as Jessica clumsily walked out of the park. He sat in a black car parked on the side of the road. Jessica didn't notice the car at first because it rested under a broken street light.

The man in the car had broken the light an hour earlier.

The Woodsman watched from inside the car. The vehicle was hidden perfectly in a shroud of darkness. As Jessica neared the car, she didn't even notice it. He had

picked the perfect place to ambush her. He could have eased the door open and slid out. He could have quietly snuck up behind her and snatched her. But he had an even better plan.

First he studied her. Her long legs led up to a red skirt. Her long, blond hair waved in the breeze. She wore a dark jacket. Her earrings sparkled just slightly.

He peered down in his lap and gripped his gloved hand around a sharp and odd-looking knife. It had a bent handle and a serrated blade. It was a special kind of knife. It had been custom made for his wood-carving habit.

In his other hand he held a half-completed wooden sculpture. He'd spent the last hour whittling it. The finished result would be a young coed with some of her limbs missing.

For now, the wooden sculpture would have to wait. Soon he would have a real coed to whittle into something.

Jessica froze mid-pace in the street. She felt afraid, like one of her farm animals alone in the pasture at night. Then she saw the black car's outline in the darkness.

She gazed into the tinted windows, only barely able to make out the figure inside. The passenger side window rolled down and the figure leaned over.

"Jessica?" the voice asked.

"Yes," she replied, inching closer to the car.

"It's me. Get in."

She recognized him as soon as a sliver of light fell across his face. It was her date. She smiled and walked closer to the car. She opened the door and slumped down into the seat.

The engine hummed to life and the headlights came on like a beast opening its fierce eyes. The car slowly drove off into the darkness, into the perfect night for carving, for killing.

The Woodsman held onto Jessica's right hand as they found a secluded spot in the shadows; they sat on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

She snuggled next to him. Every so often, a passerby glanced over in their direction. The two of them appeared to be a normal couple out for a late night rendezvous.

Jessica never suspected that he was anything but what he had claimed to be. She never suspected that there was something dark and menacing lurking in his brain.

He threw a blanket over their shoulders and they stared out across the National Mall.

Jessica listened intently as he explained the history of D.C.'s architecture to her.

"Much of the city's designs are Masonic. Of course, you probably knew that. I am sure that you read Dan Brown's The Lost Symbol since you're an English major," he said, excited to explain architecture to her. In his real life, he enjoyed architecture. It was his passion. Well it was his second passion anyway. Carving up young girls was his first.

"Masonic? Like the secret society? I haven't read that one. His book about the Mona Lisa and Jesus, I read that one," she said.

The Woodsman smirked and said, “Okay.”

He shrugged off his need to sound condescending and went on to explain to her the creation of the city of D.C.

“Did you know that the city planners designed our capital to both intimidate and to humble the world’s heads of state?

“They wanted foreign Presidents and Kings to feel at home when they visited, but they also wanted to scare them into submission to make it easier to manipulate them,” the Woodsman said, as if lecturing.

Maybe you should have been the professor in the family, she thought.

Jessica pretended to be fascinated by the history lesson.

Then she thought, *guess that you really are kind of a boring, older guy.* The thought made her smile.

The Woodsman must have taken this as a sign that she enjoyed his speech because he rambled on. By the end of his lecture, he realized that he had been wrong. She possessed zero interest in what he had said.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to go on and on,” he said.

She leaned into him. “I love this. Really. The way that you explain it is perfect. But I am an English major. So I am just not familiar with all of the architecture stuff,” she said.

She leaned into him and kissed his cheek. Then her head fell across his small, but chiseled chest.

He was smaller than average size, just a few inches shy of six feet, but his frame was proportionate. He exercised rigorously every day. At least he looked as if he must do so.

Most successful serial killers possessed an adequate workout regimen. The ones who were good at not getting caught stayed with a certain routine. Many found that a rigorous routine helped ensure that they would continue to remain undetected.

According to the FBI two types of serial murderers exist. Type A was methodical, organized, and extremely hard to catch. Type B was more of a rampage type of killer. They were messy, random, and just careless. However, type B was not always easy to catch because there was no predictability.

Type A was hard to catch. They used caution. They usually possessed high levels of intelligence. They were also methodical, territorial, and ritualistic.

But it was much easier to garner an accurate profile of type A because they rarely deviated from their SOP.

Type B was more likely to get caught for something reckless like leaving a witness behind. Or they were careless, getting pulled over for a traffic stop.

Ted Bundy was a Type A killer. He was caught once due to a broken taillight.

The Woodsman was a type A killer.

“Perhaps we should open the wine now,” he suggested.

He leaned over and picked up the bottle. He used a stainless steel wine key to pop out the cork.

He poured two glasses and gave one to Jessica. She grabbed the stem firmly, swished the wine around for a moment, and took a swig.

She tried her best to make it look as if she knew how to drink red wine.

The Woodsman smiled sinisterly. The monster inside his head watched through the dark tunnels of his eyes as Jessica drank the sedative that he'd injected through the cork and into the wine bottle earlier.

This was why he had picked an expensive bottle of wine. Some of the cheaper wines didn't use real cork anymore. Wine companies were moving more toward synthetic corks or twist caps. And he needed a real cork so that the needle would pierce through it.

He lifted his wine glass in front of his face. Then he said, "A toast."

He gestured to her to lift her glass. She raised hers with her left hand and it met his.

The she asked, "Sure. To what?"

She felt her legs going numb from sitting on them. So she shifted, raising herself slightly.

"To architecture," he proclaimed.

Jessica nodded and they clinked their glasses together. She took a big gulp.

The Woodsman stared at her, not drinking any of his wine. He watched her.

"Aren't you going to drink?" she asked.

The Woodsman stared back at her, his eyes turning lifeless and cold.

She shrugged and said, "Well, I'm drinking."

Then she took another big gulp.

She looked back at him. His cold gaze grew like an ice storm, piercing through her.

She began to feel uncomfortable. Then she felt something else. She felt the numbness in her legs return.

But I already moved them, she thought.

Then she thought, *Wait!*

The numbness was spreading. She felt it in her hands. The glass began to quiver as her hand trembled.

She nudged him slightly like she was trying to wake him from a trance.

"Why aren't you drinking?" she asked.

"I don't want to get drunk. I'm driving. Here, you have some more," he said. Then he poured more wine into her glass.

"I don't think that I should," she said.

"It's okay. You're safe with me," he said.

"I like you. Wait, are you trying to get me drunk?" she asked. She leaned in closer to him. The effects became more pronounced. She assumed it was from the alcohol.

"Do you like me?" she asked. She began to rub on his arms and chest. Her hand quivered the whole time.

He did not respond. Instead he leered at her.

Again she asked, "Why aren't you drinking?

Again, he said nothing. She began to panic.

Jessica realized what was happening. He had drugged her.

She stood up. She had practically jumped up. As soon as she had gotten on her feet, she felt the potency of the drug.

She said, "What? What have you done?"

"I drugged you," he answered.

“Why?” she said. She felt woozy. Her head began to spin.

He set his glass down and stood up. He got closer to her. She thought that he might reach out and help her stay steady, but he did nothing.

Instead he leaned in closer to her ear and whispered, “Do you know about that serial killer? The one that the news is calling the Woodsman?”

She tried to reach out and grab him for balance, but her arms didn’t respond to the signals from her brain.

She muttered, “Yes. Yes.”

Her eyelids fluttered as if she struggled to keep them open.

Then he said, “I am him.”

Alarm rang across Jessica’s face.

Run! Run! She thought. But her legs still didn’t move.

She turned away from him and looked out over the Mall.

Her vision blurred. She tried to move. Her knees buckled beneath her weight. And she crashed against the concrete. Her wine glass, which she had forgotten that she was still holding, shattered against the ground.

She couldn’t feel it, but her lip was bleeding. One of her teeth had chipped.

She coughed and gagged. And she fought to keep her eyes open, to stay awake. But the drug was too powerful and she passed out.

Everything was black.

Jessica’s head pounded. That was the only pain that she felt. As she attempted to open her eyes, an overwhelming feeling of numbness coursed through her body.

It wasn’t the same kind of numbness that she had felt when she was drugged by the wine. This was different. It was painless. It reminded her of when she’d had her root canal. The deadening feeling inside of her mouth and cheek was the same feeling that now reigned over her entire body.

Numerous smells charged against her face long before her eyes opened. She smelled mahogany, incense, and an odor of burning caramels, which was a very unusual scent. It reminded her of a bakery from back home that went out of business.

Her father used to love to walk past it every Sunday.

Then again, perhaps she didn’t smell anything. Perhaps, this was her brain telling her what she smelled.

The one overwhelming smell that really made her gag was the smell of meat grilling. The whole room reeked of it.

Am I in a kitchen? she thought.

Slowly, her eyes twitched open. The room was blurry and she blinked in order to adjust her eyes.

Meanwhile, sounds chimed through her ear canals. First she heard a constant beeping sound, followed by the sound of suction, like the tool used during her root canal in order to vacuum drool and blood from her mouth. It sounded mechanical.

Jessica leaned to her left about as far she could turn her head. As her eyes adjusted more, she saw an IV line hooked into her arm. Next to that was a small table littered with unrecognizable medical machines and devices.

The machines whirred and beeped. The only one that she recognized was the heart monitor. It beeped regularly.

The other machine, and she only guessed, looked like a breathing machine.

I must be in the hospital, she thought. How did I get here?

Then she looked at her hands. They seemed to be strapped into something.

It was hard to tell because her vision was still blurry. She squinted her eyes harder, trying to focus them better. She strained them to the point of exhaustion. Finally they focused enough for her to see her surroundings. She could see, but now she wished that she hadn't.

Horror burst through her brain as she saw it. Her left hand was completely skinless. A steel rod was fused to her wrist. Bones, veins, and muscle tissue protruded up to her shoulder.

Violently she struggled to move, but she was confined to some kind of contraption. It was not a hospital bed. The contraption that held her prisoner was more like a medieval torture device. It was covered in rust. As she fought to free herself, all she heard was the squeaking and turning of metal parts. The device that restrained her whistled and howled like metal twisting in the wind.

A constant and powerful gust of air from a vent above her blasted across her body. It carried warm steam.

Jessica attempted to scream, but no audible sounds emitted from her, only mumbled whimpers.

She struggled and turned her head down. She looked as far she could and winced in terror.

The Woodsman had skinned her entire body. Every muscle in her body was exposed. All she could see was the bare, red tissue that made up her muscular system.

The muscle tissue covered most of her skeleton, but she could make out her ribs. Underneath the splintery, white bones was her beating heart. It beat profusely like an engine with the hood up.

The drugs, combined with her state of shock, paralyzed her nerves. And she felt nothing but the sheer terror.

What Jessica hadn't known was that she had been drugged and pumped full of a powerful sedative cocktail The Woodsman had created it. He called it M99.

It was a two-part sedative.

The first part was the sedative that he administered into her drink and later he injected it straight into her arm.

The second part of M99 was the constant barrage of M99 in weaponized aerosol form. This vapor had blasted her from the air vent over her head.

Jessica had had to be exposed to the weaponized drug for a few hours for it to take full effect. Of course, if she died in the process, the Woodsman would still continue with his plans for her.

Her body looked like one of those skinless forms from the Bodies exhibits that toured all around the country.

After the terror sank in, she realized that she was posed in an awkward position, like one of the displayed corpses from the exhibit, except she was not a corpse, not yet.

She sat upright as if she were in a chair, except there was nothing underneath holding her up. Multiple steel rods protruded through her joints and limbs. The rods held in this upright position like a marionette.

Suddenly, she realized that she was being watched.

Steam rose from below her now. She peered upward, following the rising steam. Above her, gazing over the side of a steel catwalk, she saw him, a phantom.

The Woodsman looked down at her. The steam combined with her blurred vision, contorting his shape. The only things that appeared finite were his black, soulless eyes.

In the haze, she recognized that he wore something over his face. It was a black gas mask. The mask was only a mouthpiece. The goggles were not attached.

The mask was attached to a black, rubber hose that ran past his chin and over his shoulder. The other end of it attached to a tank on his back. It reminded Jessica of her little brother who had similar equipment for treating his sleep apnea.

The apnea caused him to stop breathing in his sleep and so he had to sleep with a special breathing mask.

“Good. You’re awake. The others have died during the skinning process. Right in the middle.

“You slept through it, most of it. I thought that you were going to miss it,” the Woodsman said.

Jessica tried to mumble back to him, but still no sounds came out of her.

“You can no longer make audible sounds. I severed your windpipe, then sewed your neck back together. Sorry,” he said.

She felt as though she were going to start crying at any moment, but no tears came out. Then she realized that she had not blinked in quite some time. She tried, but her eyelids did not shut.

They were gone, surgically removed.

“Jessica! Pay attention! This is the best part. This is where I pose you like they do with mannequins.

“After I discover a suitable position, I drop a chemical over your body. That chemical is in place just above your head there,” the Woodsman said.

Jessica looked up at a large pot that boiled above her. Bubbles exploded on the surface of it, making a popping sound like water dripping from a faucet. Sheer terror now coursed through her body.

“The pot above you contains a liquid that I created.

“I know what you’re thinking. Yes, I am more than an architect. I dabble in chemistry.

“But mostly, I like to think of myself as an artist.

“Are you paying attention?” he asked, tilting his head to study her face.

“The liquid is basically a liquefied wood-based substance. When I release it over your body, you will be frozen under a layer of wood, immortalized forever. Wood will now be your new skin,” he said.

A grin slowly stretched across his face and he looked straight ahead of him like he was smiling at an invisible person.

Jessica returned her eyes downward to her own body.

She began to recite the Lord's Prayer. It had been a long time since she had been to church, but she prayed as best she could.

As the words formed in her mind, the Woodsman released the pot. The liquid gushed over Jessica's body. In an instant it solidified her pose.

The Woodsman glared down and smiled.

As the wood dried, he relished in his creation. Jessica's body became a wooden sculpture. She was frozen in the moment of fear. He had captured her perfectly in a new layer of wooden skin.

"Now your old skin is gone. You have shed it," he said.

All the Woodsman had to do next was to wait for her to completely dry. Then he could start on the next victim. Then he could finish his creation, his sculpture.

In the thick, consuming darkness, he clawed at the sides of the hole. Dirt built up beneath his fingernails. He huffed and panted. Sweat covered his forehead and chest. He fought the urge to scream.

The hole consumed him. He felt as though he was falling deeper and deeper into it.

The hole's opening seem to grow farther away from him. Soon it would be completely out of reach as if it were miles away. Eventually, the opening into the hole became the end of a long tunnel.

Shane's breathing decreased. His ribs painfully straddled his lungs. Everything inside of his respiratory system tightened. He gasped.

Shane focused his vision on the end of the tunnel. He heard an evil, echoing laugh. A pair of red eyes suddenly appeared above him from the edge of the opening as if his tormentor had just decided to look down at him. The eyes glimmered.

They looked like a pair of large, blood-red Christmas lights. Shining through the darkness, the sinister eyes lit the walls of the hole.

Then a shovel full of dirt fell across his face. Something was burying Shane alive.

"You belong only to me!" my devilish voice exclaimed from the darkness in his mind.

I threw dirt over Shane's grave. The particles of dirt poured onto him, covering his torso.

In sleep, I controlled Shane's dreams. Sometimes it was necessary to remind him of his master. I reminded him of why he should fear me. I reminded him of why he obeyed me.

I gave him plenty of room to fill his own petty desires. To be whatever he wanted to be. And as long as he did it by day, I didn't care. But the nights were mine.

Shane exercised regularly. He read novels that bored me. Occasionally, he even dated a woman until I had had enough. Then he pulled the plug.

I needed him to do these things. I needed him to live his life. All of the normal things that he did were necessary to our balance, to our cover. They protected us from suspicion.

Shane was a visible guy.

After his guardian, Terrance Graves, was dead and buried, the partners of his family's law firm needed someone to run things. They asked Shane to step in as a temporary figurehead. He had to take over Terrance's duties.

This all turned out to be primarily superficial. What they really used him for was to act as a symbol until they could find a new leader. Immediately, Shane found that they suspended most of the office's powers until they found someone more qualified to step in.

Apparently, they didn't trust him.

He slept in Terrance's old bed in a New York City apartment.

In his last will and testament Terrance Graves, the former head of Shane's law firm and his benefactor, left us his estate. Terrance had no other family except for Shane. So Terrance willed everything to him.

The official story read that a serial killer known as the StoneCutter had murdered Terrance Graves.

The StoneCutter also attempted to murder the U.S. Secretary of State. He buried her alive on her own property up north.

The media covered it for weeks. They said that the StoneCutter had kidnapped the Secretary and her lawyer right from under the noses of the Secret Service.

One Secret Service agent was killed in the line of duty. Except for Terrance, no one else was harmed.

They also reported that it was unclear how the Secretary had survived that attack.

Terrance Graves wasn't so lucky.

According to the media, the StoneCutter had shot Mr. Graves multiple times and left his body in a shallow grave.

They speculated that the Secret Service had rescued Madame Secretary and thwarted a double homicide.

The authorities presumed that the StoneCutter was still at large.

Shane and I knew different. We had killed the StoneCutter.

Shane's eyes opened abruptly. He'd slept well but a feeling of exhaustion lingered. For the last month, I had plagued his dreams. I grew restless. We killed the StoneCutter a year ago and now it was time for a new challenge.

Shane's new position at the firm gave us nothing to do. All he ever did was read and work out. It was like being in prison in a way.

I felt bored.

Shane fought the boredom as well. We spent hours studying new cases that the firm was involved in. We hoped to find something interesting, but no case piqued our interest.

So, we worked out, sometimes in Terrance's office and sometimes at home. At least, Shane was in top physical form. He'd packed on fifteen extra pounds of muscle.

He read more and more. This kept both of us sharp. We read three or four books a week.

Shane even took up painting. He took down all of Terrance's rubbings and other artworks. He replaced many of them with his own. He was getting quite good at painting.

Painting helped me more than Shane. It had become a temporary outlet for my dark fantasies to be put into images.

The resulting paintings were strongly violent and twisted. Fortunately, Shane didn't get a lot of visitors. No reason to hide any of his paintings.

Which was good because they revealed far too much about me.

In his will, Terrance also bequeathed his apartment to Shane. It overlooked Central Park. And it was a nice-sized apartment. Expensive moldings and fixtures brought it together in a New England Victorian style.

Shane left Terrance's decor the way that it was. Our tastes were for the more postmodern, dark styles, but we could survive in this new home for now.

Shane rose from the bed and walked out onto the balcony. The railing covered his naked lower half from onlookers, not that people in New York ever looked around much. Or that they'd be surprised by a naked man standing on a balcony.

He peered out over the horizon. The early morning sunlight trickled around the skyscrapers. Our new apartment was cast in shadow.

Shane's neighbors were mostly billionaires. Investment bankers and business owners occupied most of the apartments that overlooked the park. The real estate here was super expensive. Even millionaires like Terrance had problems getting in. Terrance had acquired this apartment as payment in a case that he personally took on.

A wealthy hedge fund manager had swindled hundreds of investors into a scam. Terrance kept him out of jail, but the fund manager sacrificed his fortune, including this apartment and its incredible view.

Shane stretched out his arms and let the chilly December air brush over his extremities.

We were on the seventh floor. As Shane looked around, he noticed that most of his neighbors were outside on their balconies. They stared at the street below. A startled look swept over their faces.

Shane followed suit and gazed down toward the street. Police lights filled his eyes. Uniformed cops, SWAT, and forensic units moved across the park in all different directions.

Something big was going on.

The police blocked off the streets surrounding Central Park. I grabbed tightly to the insides of Shane's eyeholes like a passenger would grab the portholes of a ship. I peered out, trying to make out what happened, but we were too far up.

Shane decided to skip breakfast and get a closer look.

Before Shane could even get his pants on, the doorbell rang.

I twisted my head and peered into the back of Shane's skull, where I stored his memories. Staring back into my wolf-like eyes were the faces of the dead killers that I'd murdered and shredded to pieces over the years. The FBI never found them. Because the FBI hadn't known that any of them were dead.

I wanted to keep it that way. In order to be sure that it stayed a secret, Shane had to play along with a certain FBI agent and a hostile cop ex-girlfriend's scheme.

Detective Sun Good, Shane's sometimes girlfriend, had maintained silence for most of the time that he lived in New York. She called twice over the last year. And that was all.

She called when he first arrived. Then she called to remind him about his deal with the FBI.

A Special Agent Kirk Cutter wanted him to spy on the internal workings of Graves and Associates.

Agent Cutter suspected that the firm concealed a dark secret. Only he had no idea what that secret was.

Sun Good had told Cutter into the missing murder clients from our firm. Unbeknownst to either of them, Shane had killed these clients. Their bodies were burned to ash and scattered in different locations, never to be heard from again, or so he hoped.

Shane never did contact Agent Cutter after Terrance's funeral.

Shane had nothing to report to him anyway. We found nothing. At least we found nothing that he wanted to share with the FBI.

Studying the other partners in the firm seemed to be difficult since they rarely had board meetings anymore. Much of our business had been done by email and memos sent from the highest-ranking member of the board, Dylan Range.

Mr. Range assumed most of Terrance's day-to-day responsibilities after his death.

When Shane arrived in the Manhattan office, he was disappointed that our new temporary role in the firm was ceremonial. Shane had become the face of his father's firm and that was all. He participated in major meetings with new clients, but Range discouraged him from speaking.

Dylan Range never ordered Shane not to speak. Instead, he kept Shane out of the loop as to the contents of each meeting until the last minute. This tactic prevented Shane from preparing for any of the meetings. So he appeared to have no knowledge of anything in front of potential clients.

Range usurped Shane's power in these meetings.

I sensed that Range had a creature in him. All of the partners seemed evil, but I had no proof of any wrongdoings.

The doorbell rang again, interrupting Shane's memories.

He turned and walked to the front door in the buff. His skin looked pale in the sunlit apartment.

I need to hit the tanning bed, he thought.

Shane opened the door so that his privates remained hidden behind it. A beautiful woman in a suit stood in the doorway. She had long blond hair and blue eyes. One of her ears seemed to stick out a little more than the other.

Still, she was breathtaking.

Not really thinking clearly, Shane opened the door, revealing his lower region.

"Do I know you?" Shane asked.

"Are you Mr. Graves?" the woman asked.

"I'm afraid that he has passed on," Shane answered. "What is this about?"

The woman looked perplexed for a moment. Her eyes rolled up and down Shane's chiseled torso and body. As her eyes gazed in my vessel's lower regions, she let out a sigh. Shane followed her gaze and realized that he was more exposed than he had thought.

Not being shy, he hadn't cared. So he disregarded her leer.

As she stared back at Shane's face, a glimmer of recognition flashed in her eyes.

“I know you,” she said. “You’re that lawyer.”

Shane nodded.

“Yes. It is you,” the woman said. Her blue eyes studied him.

“Yes, it is me,” Shane answered.

“I’m a fan,” she said, smiling. “What are you doing here in Manhattan?”

“Who are you?” Shane asked.

“Sorry,” she said. The woman reached into her purse and pulled out a police badge.

Great. Another cop.

“You’re a policewoman?” Shane asked. He pulled back into the shadow. The darkness consumed his lower half.

“Don’t cover yourself on my account, Mr. Lasher,” she said. “I’m not a policewoman. I’m a homicide detective. I transferred from vice just a few days ago.”

“What can I do for you, detective?”

“My name is Sandy Parks.”

Shane nodded.

“We’re short staffed today. So I’m here helping out the uniforms. We’re going door to door in this building, asking questions about a homicide in the park,” she said.

Homicide? Now my interests piqued. My mouth salivated. A new murderer was in my midst.

“A murder in the park? Really?” Shane said. He felt my interest. My blood flowed through his. But now it gushed.

“Yes,” Sandy Parks said. “So were you here all night?”

“Yes, I was,” Shane replied.

“And is your girlfriend here?”

“I’m alone,” Shane said. He smiled at her. I grinned behind his eyes at the thought of a new playmate.

“Did you see or hear anything unusual?”

“Sorry. I went to bed early and slept most of the night. I’m afraid I have nothing to tell you. Have you had any luck with my neighbors?”

“I’m not allowed to give out any more information than I already have shared with you, Mr. Lasher,” she said, sounding official.

“No problem. I understand the hard work of a homicide detective. In fact, I know one personally back home in D.C.”

Sandy nodded. “That’s all the questions for now.”

She turned away from the door. Shane stepped back out into the light and said, “Sandy.”

She turned and said, “Yes?”

“Shane. Just call me Shane.”

Sandy Parks smiled.

A murder had taken place in Central Park and right under our nose. My senses had become weakened from my hibernation. The time to act fell upon us. Time for Shane to unleash his demon, his killer instinct, me.

Outside the apartment building, Shane stood on the sidewalk, warmly dressed, which was good because it was in the low forties. And that was nothing for December in New York.

A black sedan pulled up slowly. The driver got out and opened the rear door. This part made Shane feel like royalty.

Shane left his Mercedes parked in the building's garage. Except for occasionally when Shane walked out to it and turned over the engine, the car remained unused.

He hadn't needed it. The firm sent a black town car to pick him up every day.

Shane entered the vehicle and sat back in the comfortable leather seat. Every day the firm spoiled us.

The car drove past the police barricade. I turned Shane's head and stared at the crime scene. I tried desperately to get a gander at any of the details, but I saw nothing.

"What went on in there?" the driver asked.

"I'm not sure," Shane responded.

"A murder?"

Shane nodded.

"Looks bad," the driver said.

Shane agreed, but said nothing.

They spent the next twenty minutes in light traffic. The driver remained quiet. He knew that Shane wasn't much for chitchat.

The driver pulled up to the front of a tall building and let Shane out.

In the lobby of the building, security immediately recognized Shane. The guards on duty acknowledged him with a friendly hello and passed him through the checkpoint.

Ever since the StoneCutter killed Terrance Graves, the partners saw that it was necessary to heighten security protocols around the building. Now anyone from the general public could pass security only with a scheduled appointment. And all appointments had to pass through Range's office.

Range found a way to cash in on the heightened security. He claimed that the security measures were in place to protect our clients.

This little white lie helped the firm to secure some of the more wealthy and famous clients. These days the firm made its bread and butter from Wall Street firms.

Range absorbed Tina, Terrance's old assistant, for his own office. She still sat outside of Shane's office, but did little to assist him. Primarily she had been annexed by Dylan Range's office.

Shane maintained his work by coordinating with his assistant, Ally Embers by email, phone, and text message. Occasionally, she posted something on Shane's Facebook wall.

She was a good assistant. She was a Brazilian and young law student. Shane had recruited her a few years ago. He liked her. She never questioned any assignment that he gave her. She also knew when to keep her mouth shut.

In a strange way, I missed Ally as much as Shane had. Because I lived in Shane, I didn't allow him any friends. Ally Embers was one of the only people that Shane spoke with on a regular basis. She was one of his only friends.

On our way past the security station, we walked up a flight of wide stairs and into the main lobby. Thick marble pillars surrounded the room. They stood tall, reaching all the way to the top of a vaulted ceiling. They looked like trees made from marble.

In the center of the lobby, just before the elevators, was an enormous statue of justice. He stood twelve feet tall. He wore floor-length robes. The details of his face were masked beneath the shadow of a hood. He held a long broadsword. He leaned against the sword, which pointed toward the ground.

The statue was quite old. It had been moved decades ago from a courthouse in Athens, Greece. It was quite barbaric looking.

Shane walked toward the elevators and pressed the button. Two lawyers walked up behind him. They discussed a case that he was unaware of.

The doors opened and Shane stepped onto the elevator. He pressed the button to his floor.

He rode the elevator. The two other lawyers got off and he pressed the button again behind them. He tried to speed up the doors' closing time.

Finally the doors closed and the lift resumed its upward course.

The elevator dinged and Shane got off on his floor.

He passed Tina's desk. She looked up and said, "Good morning, Mr. Lasher. Mr. Range wants to see you. I'll call him and let him know that you're in."

"Thank you," Shane said.

Tina's belly had grown over the last few months. She was pregnant. Shane wondered if she was married. He'd never thought to ask before. All of their conversations had been brief.

I think this side of Shane, the side that makes him wonder about the personal lives of others, is just another example of his good side growing powerful. The price of doing business, I'm afraid.

I knew that Shane missed Ally. He missed his life in D.C. I missed our killing.

D.C. was much easier for us to maneuver in than New York City. We were better prepared there.

In D.C. we had an industrial kiln for melting away bones and evidence. Here, we had no way of disposing of a body.

New York City was full of cops and witnesses. D.C. had plenty of cops, but it was mostly federal agents. Most of them were concerned with federal crimes. Crimes that took place somewhere else. They barely looked at the city they operated in.

A con was that D.C. had politicians everywhere. Politicians were busy, busy bees. Of course, this was also a pro because busy bees never paid attention to murder. They only paid attention to money, scandals, and elections.

I thought about murder in Central Park again.

Shane thought of the beautiful Sandy Parks. She'd given him her card.

He just needed a reason to contact her. Then he could extract information from her.

First, he needed an angle.

"Mr. Lasher," Tina said, buzzing in over the intercom. Her Hungarian accent seemed thicker than it used to. Not sure how that was possible since she hadn't returned home in years.

“Yes,” Shane responded, holding down the button on the intercom.

“Dylan Range is coming to see you in your office,” she said.

“Okay.”

Shane plopped down in the chair behind the desk.

His cell phone rang. He checked the caller ID. It read:

ALLY EMBERS

He pressed the button. It ignored her and sent her straight to voicemail.

The door to the office swung open and a short bald man entered. He had a full beard, speckled with a few stray gray hairs.

It was Dylan Range. He had been with the firm long enough to remember Shane’s father. He was one of two of the original partners.

“Shane,” Range said. He walked into the center of the room, expecting that Shane would meet him there.

Shane remained seated and Range continued on and then stopped in front of his desk.

“Dylan, what can I help you with?”

“I know that you’ve been bored here with us since I took most of Terrance’s duties. But we needed someone to step in and appear to be in charge until we can find a new president for the firm,” Dylan said.

Every time he spoke, I saw his new porcelain teeth. I wanted to reach my claws out of Shane’s body and pull out those shiny new teeth. I could watch as blood sprayed from Dylan’s mouth and listen intently to the harmonic sounds of the bloodcurdling scream that he would make.

“To be honest, I can’t wait until I can return to D.C. and take cases again. I feel like I’m on standby. Not that I don’t appreciate the perks that come with this job.

“I like staying in Terrance’s apartment and this office is incredible, but I’m ready to go back to work,” Shane said.

“I figured that,” Dylan Range said. “I bet it has been hard being around all of the things that he left behind.”

I sensed that he looked into us for some sense of remorse, some sense of humanity. Shane stalled out for a moment. I kicked his brain and he reacted.

“It has been hard sleeping in Terrance’s old bed and working in his office, but it has also helped me,” Shane said.

“Helped you?”

“Yeah. If I wasn’t here, I probably would’ve never learned as much about him as I have. He liked to paint. Did you know that?”

“I didn’t know that.”

“See? Being here really has helped me more than anything,” Shane said.

Dylan sat down in the chair across from Shane. He nodded his head in agreement.

“We are taking on a new client. He isn’t in legal trouble, but he may be facing a large civil suit in the future related to one of his designs,” Dylan said.

“Designs?” Shane asked.

“He’s an architect, a very powerful architect,” Dylan answered. “He often works here in New York, but he lives near your office in D.C. That is why I want you to meet with him. We may be representing him in court either here or there.”

“I see. What is his name?”

“Townsend Dry,” Dylan answered. “He’s a partner in Dry and Pierce. Their architecture firm is a little famous. They have grown over the last few years.”

“So why am I meeting with him?” Shane asked.

“His firm is important to us. We feel that the surge of business that we have received out of sympathy for the passing of Terrance Graves is about to be over, and the board thinks that we need to try to hold onto as much of our new profits as we can. Our fees are higher than other well-established law firms out there. We need this client. Our civil suit department is suffering,” Dylan said. He took his glasses off and wiped the lenses with the tail of his shirt.

“Okay. I was only asking. I will meet with him,” Shane said. This new client would be good for us. Good for Shane. Good for me.

I grew silent and complacent. I felt quiet and unused. I would accept any work that came our way. In the depths of Shane’s head I twisted my tail and contorted my body. My tail moved slowly. My muscles grew frigid from lack of use.

On the outside, Shane worked hard to be more toned than ever. Day in and day out, he sculpted his abs, chiseled his chest, and strengthened his legs.

On the inside, his heart pumped at a healthy beat as it should. The chambers and blood vessels were free and clear. Blood flooded like a mighty river through his body. Shane was in the best shape of his life.

My bloodlust was the only thing that grew inside of me. My belly was empty. I was empty. I needed a new target, a new prey, a new adversary.

I wanted to call Sandy Parks and find out about the murder in the park. Maybe there was a predator there for me to hunt and kill. For now, I would have to settle for meeting Townsend Dry.

“Good to hear,” Range said. He rose to his feet. He started to leave the room.

“Dylan?” Shane said, rising from the desk. He slid his hands into his pockets and smiled at Dylan.

Range turned back to Shane and said, “Yes?”

“How much longer am I going to be here?” Shane asked.

“We are looking at a few candidates now to replace Terrance as the director of the firm. We will expunge the title of president. You still hold more shares in our firm than anyone else, so your voice will be heard when it comes time to choose someone,” Dylan Range said.

“As long as it’s not me. I know that this was my family’s firm, but I would rather let someone else run it. I miss my life back in D.C.,” Shane said.

I looked at my claws. The nails were dulled by months of neglect. They needed to be sharpened. I reached them out and sharpened them over bones in Shane’s skull. Sparks ignited and flew into his brain.

Shane felt the surge of life from me. He knew that I was not dead, only quiet.

“We appreciate your being here for the firm, Shane. Don’t worry; we’ll have someone for the job soon and you can go back to your old life, your old ways,” Dylan said.

He chuckled under his breath. He shared the same untrue impressions of Shane that the rest of the world possessed. He believed that Shane was a talented lawyer, but also a heartless playboy and womanizer. Everyone believed that Shane doted over the women of Capitol Hill until he was through with them.

Our mask worked well.

Shane sat on an expensive suede sofa in Terrance's penthouse. He propped his feet on the coffee table. A small fire from the fireplace behind him warmed the room. The television beamed images across the shadows, but the sound was turned down.

We stared at the souvenir in our hands. Shane's fingers rubbed over the polished steel of a nickel-plated Colt 1911. It was the gun used by the StoneCutter.

Shane studied the gun. We relished it as our greatest trophy. It served as the only reminder of the greatest, most deadly prey that we had ever hunted, our creator.

The StoneCutter had long since been buried but the FBI left the case open. Somewhere in the bureau was an agent still hounding to find the real StoneCutter. He stressed over the old clues and searched through the decade-old files. He never realized that the StoneCutter was already dead.

Through Shane's eyes, I peered up and noticed that the local news had begun covering the murder in Central Park.

Shane set the gun down, turned up the television with the remote, and sipped on some top-shelf Hennessy.

The anchor announced, "In Central Park in the early hours of the morning police discovered a young woman's body. The details of her condition are speculative, but reports are trickling in that she was skinned alive and mutilated."

Skinned alive? Mutilated? Smelled like a sadistic, deranged killer to me.

"Action News 5 is also cautious of connecting this murder to the grisly murder last month, where the victims, a lesbian couple from Long Island, were skinned alive and mutilated.

"Afterward the killer placed the victims in a statue-like pose. If the killer is the same man, we might be seeing the first serial killer to hit New York City in years.

"It has also been learned that the New York Post is running a story tomorrow linking the Central Park murder to the work of the Woodsman killer.

"We already know that the Woodsman uses wood in his murders.

"Action 5 News has an unnamed source at the Post claiming that the killer used wood in his placement of the bodies in Central Park as well. If this is true, it links him to two murder scenes.

"But as I mentioned, most of this is speculative at this point," the anchorman continued.

A feeling emerged inside me that I hadn't felt in months. Murderous interest piqued in my blood. A cold, familiar feeling surged over my scales like goose bumps over Shane's skin. I was ready to hunt again.

The day drew near that I would bathe in the blood of the dark demon that dwelled inside of the Woodsman.

For now, Shane had to play detective. He had to begin searching for clues; they were not just going to fall into our lap. We had to bait the hook. Then we would use the hook and jam it into the Woodsman's head.

Special Agent Kirk Cutter, the FBI's top serial killer hunter, stood on a Coast Guard patrol boat along with his special task force. His hawk-like eyes perused the horizon. Five other patrol boats scoured the waters closer to the port of Miami. They searched for an escaped suspect. The man that he hunted was a notorious henchman for the drug cartels.

Miguel Crown was a vicious killer. Originally he had worked for the cartels, killing anyone they asked. Over a decade's worth of murder warranted him the nickname, the Blood King. However, his lust for blood was even too great for the cartel. They had tried to terminate him two weeks ago.

Only they failed and he slaughtered the men that they had sent to kill him. Since ambushing him didn't work, the drug cartel notified the Feds of his whereabouts. They figured that they could assassinate him in prison.

Before long, Special Agent Kirk Cutter was hunting down the Blood King.

Cutter furrowed his eyebrows and studied a bump on the horizon. The setting sun provided little light for him to focus, but something inside of him helped him to see with more clarity than the other agents standing on the deck of the patrol boat.

"Captain, steer the boat portside," Cutter shouted back toward the bridge.

The captain nodded and the boat twisted its course toward the bump on the horizon.

Cutter and the other agents stared through their binoculars. They made out a yacht floating on open water.

Within minutes the patrol boat descended upon the yacht. As they neared it, Cutter noticed that the name on the side of the boat matched that of the stolen vessel that they'd been searching for.

"It's him," Agent Cutter announced to the other agents.

They'd found the Blood King.

"We should prepare to board," one of the other agents said.

Then the agent stepped closer to Cutter. Inches from Cutter's right ear, the ear without the earpiece, she whispered, "You know what to do."

Agent Cutter nodded. Then he looked again at the yacht. He noticed movement on the upper deck.

"Prepare to board. I will take the upper deck. One of you, take the middle and the other, the hull," Cutter said. He drew his service pistol, a Glock 22 handgun.

The agents locked and loaded. Each wore a bulletproof vest.

Cutter loosened the knot on his tie.

The patrol boat slowed its engines to a hum before cutting them off completely. Then it drifted to the rear of the floating yacht.

The stolen yacht simply floated, gently rocking up and down in the water. No signs of the Blood King jumped out at them.

A young sailor tied the patrol boat to the deck of the yacht.

Cutter led the agents onboard. No one spoke. Instead the agents watched for his hand signals as he commanded each of them to investigate the lower decks.

Cutter ascended the stairs to the upper deck and the other agents descended into the lower area.

Rarely did Shane stir under my control over his sleep. Tonight he had. Tonight he woke up on his own.

He looked around the bedroom. Through the darkness he saw nothing but lights coming in through the window.

Shane walked to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and buried his face underneath it. Like a man in the desert, he drank the water that gushed out.

Then he looked at himself in the mirror. He thought of Sandy Parks and smiled.

Another cop. Why not? he thought.

He had dated Sun Good on and off for years. Mostly that was off. He even loved her.

Shane rubbed his eyes and returned to the warmth of his bed.

I returned to my visions of Agent Cutter.

A cold wind blew off the Atlantic. Its icy fingers brushed through Cutter's gray hair. At the top of the stairs, he stood with his knees slightly bent. He surveyed the objects on the upper deck. His lean silhouette was seen by the predatory eyes of the Blood King of Miami.

"Miguel Crown! This is Special Agent Cutter. I am with the FBI. Come out!" he said.

No response.

"I know that you are up here. Surrender yourself and you won't get shot," Cutter shouted. He kept his gun out and ready to fire.

Miguel's demon clambered onto his brain. Something was wrong; it appeared weakened.

Miguel listened to the FBI agent's demands. He didn't respond. Instead, he remained standing at the other end of the deck. He stood over the edge of the boat, peering down into the dark water below.

Cutter began moving toward the bow of the ship. With the sunset diminishing the available light, it grew harder and harder for him to see.

He searched for two minutes before he noticed the shadow standing in the darkness near the edge of the bow.

Cutter looked around and saw no one else. He rushed for the shadow. As he neared the bow, he slowed and pointed his gun directly at the figure.

"Freeze!" he shouted.

"I'm not going anywhere," Miguel Crown said.

Cutter could not make out Miguel's features, but he recognized that his voice was not one of his agents.

He saw the outline of a weapon in Miguel's hand.

So he said, "Toss your gun over the side!"

"Please don't kill me," Miguel said. His thick Cuban accent almost made his words impossible to understand.

Cutter's ears adjusted. Miguel Crown's voice sounded hoarse. Then he sniffled.

He sobbed.

"Are you crying?" Cutter asked, confused.

Miguel's voice sounded tearful. He said, "I have longed for this moment, FBI man."

"What are you talking about?" Cutter asked. He kept his eyes on the gun in Miguel's hand. His eyes focused better and now he could see that Miguel faced away from him. He peered out over the water.

"The creature in my head has made me do terrible things, man. Terrible things," Miguel said. Slowly, he turned back to face Cutter.

"Creature?" Cutter asked.

Miguel stepped closer. The setting sunlight fell across his face. His eyes were black with tears streaming from them. His monstrous features stared back at Cutter.

The reddish hue from the sunset blinded Miguel as he stepped closer and closer to Agent Cutter.

"I have a creature living inside of me, a demon. I have fought these urges for years. It torments me. It drives me to kill. I don't want it to win. I don't want it to consume me. But I can't stop it.

"I came out here to stop it, to end it," Miguel Crown confessed.

I watched with pity. Pity for the creature inside of him. He'd let his vessel get the best of him.

"Special Agent of the FBI, I have killed and murdered dozens of people. And most of them are buried right here. Beneath this yacht is my dumpsite, a graveyard of the bodies that I've dumped here.

"I killed. I cut them up into little pieces and then I stuffed them in garbage bags with rocks and WHOOSH! Tossed them overboard.

"They sank here, man. Right here." Miguel said.

The sunlight vanished and Miguel's features evaporated into shadow.

"Drop your weapon!" Cutter demanded.

Miguel looked down at his gun.

The urge to kill tried to consume him. He fought it.

In his head he heard a voice. It said, "Shoot him!"

He overcame his monster and tossed the gun to the deck of the ship. He raised his hands to surrender.

Kirk Cutter grabbed a flashlight from his vest and clicked it on. The beam fell across Miguel's face. The creature was gone.

"No one will believe you about the creature, Special Agent. They will only think that I am crazy, man.

"Like the serial killers before me," Miguel said. His tears dried up on his face. He seemed sincerely remorseful for his crimes, just as Dr. Jekyll felt for Mr. Hyde's crimes.

Suddenly, from behind the beam of light that blinded him, Miguel heard a dark chuckle.

Then a voice said, "Blood King, you are not the only monster standing on this deck. I've killed someone close to me before. And then I just kept on killing.

"I've killed before that and I will continue long after you are dead. The reason why I am so good at hunting your kind is that I am one of your kind.

"I love to kill."

Kirk Cutter moved the beam of light from Miguel's confused expression to shine on his own face.

Miguel winced in horror as his eyes fell upon Kirk Cutter's creature-like face. He stared at a secret that Kirk Cutter kept from everyone; he too was a serial killer. Ever since he's first kill, ten years ago, he has hunted and killed men in his line of work. He has hid behind his badge.

His job afforded him the perfect cover to track down murderers and then kill them.

Miguel looked down at the gun that he'd tossed. He thought of making a move for it. Before he could budge, Kirk flashed the light back into his eyes, blinding him.

Cutter yelled with his finger holding the speak button down on the headset to his radio.

"Drop the gun! Drop the gun!" he shouted. He fired his gun twice into Miguel's chest. The impacts of the bullets sent him back off his feet. Then he stumbled over the side of the bow. He fell to the cold water below.

Kirk Cutter picked up Miguel's gun and fired it in the opposite direction as if Miguel had fired at him first. Then he tossed it overboard. The ocean erased his fingerprints, which didn't matter since most likely the gun would sink to the ocean floor.

Cutter peered over the side of the yacht and watched as the Blood King's body turned lifeless and cold. Miguel's corpse floated. His blood leaked from the bullet holes and dyed the water around him into a thick, black color.

Chapter 2

Statues That Move.

"*The more successful the villain, the more successful the picture.*"
—Alfred Hitchcock, Director

The morning light cast shadows throughout the apartment. I watched through the portals of Shane's eyes as they drearily opened. I saw a long shadow outstretch its darkness. It reached across the room and over the sheets and across Shane's body.

Shane sat up in bed. He rubbed his eyes, obstructing my view. He rose from bed and walked to the balcony. He looked down at the park; it was not the ordinary Central Park scene.

The crowd from yesterday was gone, but the media remained. Actually it appeared as if they had doubled in size since yesterday.

Yellow crime tape blocked an entire canvas of the lawn near the center of the park.

That must have been where our new friend had skinned his victim. We needed to hunt down more information, much more. It was time to dust off Shane's resources and find out more about the Woodsman.

Shane stretched back across the bed and picked his up iPhone from the nightstand. It was eight in the morning.

Back in D.C. he'd tried multiple cases. He was always busy working.

Here in New York, he did almost nothing but think and exercise. He had plenty of free time, so he slept in some days. Today was not going to be one of them. Today he hunted.

Shane picked up his iPhone and looked at the clock once again as if he had forgotten to check it just a second ago. Then he pulled up the phone screen and called Ally Embers.

"Hi Shane," Ally said. She sounded chipper.

"Good morning. Why do you sound so excited?"

"I'm glad to hear from you. I've been so bored here," she said.

"Bored? Aren't they keeping you busy?"

"Yes. I am assisting with Jack Crush's caseload, but working for him is not as exciting as working for you. I'm so glad that you called. Do you have something for me to do?"

"I do have something for you. It has to remain on the down low. Our secret. Understand me?"

"Of course. I always keep things hush-hush for you," she replied.

"Good."

"So what do you need?"

"I need you to make some calls and do some research on a murder that happened here. A body was found in Central Park. The cops aren't saying much, but the media here claims it was a serial killer called the Woodsman.

"Apparently, he skins his victims alive. I need to know more. Can you find more information?" Shane asked.

He rose from the bed and walked to the bathroom.

"Oh. I've heard of him. CNN has been talking about it for the last twenty-four hours.

"No problem, Shane. Sounds exciting. It's a lot better than the shit that Jack Crush has me doing. I can't wait to look into it," Ally said.

"Good. Prepare a report on what you find for me and email it to me. I need it today."

"Got it," she said. Then she paused a beat.

Then she said, "I really am glad to hear from you. Please come back."

"I'm working on it," Shane said. He hung up the phone.

We began our morning exercises.

Shane spent most of the day waiting to hear from Ally. He glanced at the home screen on his iPhone. It read 3:00 p.m.

Then he touched the mail icon. This brought up his personal email address. He had no new messages. She had still not emailed her report to him.

We had to leave the office early. Dylan Range asked that we attend a special opening of Townsend Dry's newest artistic creation, a sophisticated office building near the river.

Instead of letting the firm drive Shane in their car, he decided to take a taxi.

He left the office and headed down to the street.

He hailed a cab and told the driver the address. The driver started the meter and drove away from the curb.

It took about thirty-five minutes to arrive there. This was good time in New York City traffic.

The building was an enormous heap of twisted modernism. It possessed a hint of evil, like a demented tower of metal. I liked it.

Shane exited the car and paid the driver $47. He handed the man three $20 bills. He waited for his change and tipped.

Shane stepped away from the cab and turned before the car drove off.

We walked into the building. The security guard pointed us in the direction of the first-level gallery room. We walked up a flight of steel stairs and past a large fountain. In the center of the fountain was some sort of obscene, metal sculpture. Shane made out a naked woman in a strange position, but it was more than that. The naked woman was symbolic of a twisted reality. Her body had contorted like a broken ballerina.

Shane picked up on a symbolic meaning in her disfigurement. She represented a twisted life, her life. What was her turmoil? Only the artist knew.

Most people would not have noticed the true form in the statue. To the regular person, the statue was a bit of a Rorschach test. Like the ink blot, beholders saw only what they wanted to see. Their minds saw what they projected onto the image.

Shane turned from the statue and continued.

He reached the gallery room. People flooded it.

Good turnout for a man that I've never heard of, he thought.

Art pieces stood on elaborate platforms that filled the room. Numerous paintings hung on the walls. Most were painted by famous local artists.

Waitresses and waiters in skimpy outfits paraded around the room like it was a nightclub. They carried flutes of champagne. The whole atmosphere was very chic. Shane fit right in.

"Would you care for a glass of champagne?" a brunette waitress asked.

"Sure," he said, reaching out and taking a glass.

Shane walked into a small crowd of well-dressed guests. The room was fairly large. Small clusters of people were spread out between the sculptures and paintings. To one side of the room, a small table was covered with shrimp cocktails. On the other side, a table held assorted cheeses and decorative bottles of imported wine.

"Shane Lasher," a female voice asked from over his shoulder.

Shane spun around, away from the shrimp cocktail table, and laid his eyes upon the source of the voice as a woman approached him.

She was absolutely breathtaking. Blond hair, blue eyes, tan skin, and one ear was slightly higher than the other. It was Sandy Parks.

She wore a gold evening gown that left little to the imagination. It radiated on her.

Shane thought that whoever the designer was, he had definitely had her body in mind when he designed that dress.

It also looked too expensive for someone on a cop's salary to afford. She must have had another source of income.

"Detective Parks. It is good to see you again," Shane said.

"Thank you," she responded. She stole the champagne glass from his hand and took a sip. "But it's just Sandy."

"Okay. You can call me Shane," he said.

"So, Shane, what brings a celebrity D.C. lawyer to the Big Apple?"

"I'm sure that you read about my guardian's murder? My family's law firm was without a leader. So I've stepped in temporarily," Shane replied.

"So you are running a multimillion-dollar law firm?" she asked. A strip of her hair fell onto her forehead. I sensed that Shane wanted to push it back up.

"Basically I'm just sitting in his office and living in his apartment. One of the senior partners is actually running the ship," Shane admitted.

Sandy smiled.

"Isn't that your apartment now?" she asked.

"Right. It is."

"Listen, I am sorry about what happened to your godfather. I don't mean to make light of it," she said.

Terrance Graves was dead and buried. That was all that mattered to us. But Shane had to look the part of a heartbroken son. So he nodded.

"Don't mention it. It's true that he's gone, but it was a year ago. Besides, Terrance wouldn't have wanted me to be sad all the time. He'd want me to move on. So I have," Shane said.

"I lost both of my parents years ago in a car accident, so I understand what it feels like to lose someone," Sandy Parks said.

"How is your investigation going? The murder in the park? The Woodsman?" Shane asked, changing the subject.

"The Woodsman. That is all anybody seems to talk about.

"He is a serial killer that I've been working on for about three months, along with two other detectives," Sandy said.

"So what's his deal?"

"I can't discuss any leads with you, but I can tell you what you have already seen on the news. He abducts his victims, drugs them, skins them, and arranges their bodies in some perverted way.

"Some cops think the positions are significant."

"Significant? What do you mean?" Shane asked.

"Like a totem pole," Sandy responded. "It was like the killer was positioning each victim to represent something. You know like Earth or darkness or whatever.

"That's actually how I got hooked up with Townsend."

Shane drank the last bit of champagne in his glass and looked past Sandy, studying the crowd behind her.

"Townsend?" he asked.

“Yes. He and a dozen other artists have collaborated on this case. They are trying to help us make sense of the meanings in the totem poles,” she said.

“And?”

“And what?” she asked.

“That’s it?” he asked. “You aren’t going to tell me more about what the bodies mean?”

“No. I’m not,” she said.

“Pretty please,” he said.

“No. I’ll tell you that he’s getting more and more brazen with the locales and poses that he’s choosing to use,” she said.

“Anything else?”

“What is it with you and serial killers? Is there anything that I should be aware of about you?” she asked.

He said nothing.

Then she said, “You know, you actual do fit the profile for a serial killer: single, thirties, successful, and if Terrance Graves was your guardian, then what happened to your parents?” she asked.

Then she began circling him as she might a suspect in the interrogation room.

He still said nothing.

Then she said, “Most of all, there is something dark in the back of your eyes.”

She is good, I thought.

Shane chuckled at the accusation. I smirked behind the cold stare in his eyes. Detective Parks had no idea how right she was.

“I have a soft spot for serial killers. I’ve made a career of them. I’ve made a lot of money because of the StoneCutter,” he replied. Then he turned closer to her, took a sip of champagne, and said, “They are my bread and butter.”

“That’s right. They are. You have lined your pockets well. The StoneCutter. That was a bad guy. And he made you famous,” she said. Sandy tilted her head. Her deep blue eyes lured Shane in.

“The fame is the best part,” Shane said.

She smiled at him and said, “Right.”

“So anything else interesting about the Woodsman that you can share without compromising your investigation?”

“There is one thing that the media doesn’t know that I can tell you,” she said.

“Oh?”

I leaned forward in Shane’s skull, pressing my ears against the bone so that I could hear a little better.

“Do you know where the Woodsman’s name comes from? Why we call him that?” she asked.

Shane shook his head.

“After the killer skins his victims, he pours liquefied wood over their bodies. The liquid coats them and quickly dries into a solid wood base. It’s like he petrifies them. First he has to shape them in the way that he wants before he transports them to the locations where they are to be displayed,” she said.

The Woodsman covered them in wood? He was doing more than just killing. He was creating sculptures from them. I had to find him. I had to have his carving knife catalogued with my other trophies.

“Wow, that is unique,” Shane said.

“Unique?” she said. “It’s sick! And this son of a bitch deserves to die!” she said. Suddenly, she seemed offended like we had struck a nerve.

“So you believe in the death penalty?”

She said nothing. Sandy Parks just nodded. Her eyes peered down into her champagne flute.

“You sounded like you admired him,” she said.

“In my job, it is required of me to keep an open mind. That’s all. Innocent until proven guilty and all,” Shane said.

“I’m not trying to bust your balls. I’m just messing with you,” she said. She looked at Shane and smiled.

“You are half right. I am a bit of a serial killer groupie, but that’s also required of the job. Like the lawyer who chases ambulances, I chase serial killers,” Shane said.

“I guess that you’d make a fine serial killer yourself,” she said.

Shane’s brow furrowed.

“Huh,” he muttered.

“Don’t worry. I don’t think that you’re a serial killer. I’m just telling you that if you were, you would truly be a challenging one to catch,” she said.

“So then you’re paying me a compliment?”

She didn’t answer. Instead she said, “I wonder where my guy is?”

Then she shot a smile at Shane.

“Sorry to disappoint you. But there is a guy. You’re cute though. But I know better than to get involved with you,” she said.

Then she looked around the room at the crowd as if she were searching for someone. Her eyes swept the room like a trained law enforcement official looking for bad guys.

She stopped. She made eye contact with someone.

A sharply dressed, handsome man walked up to her. He was shorter than Shane, about 5’9”. He was about the same age. His frame was smaller, but muscular, even beefy.

“Hi, darling,” he said.

I felt a slight air of disappointment filter through Shane’s chest. It traveled up his esophagus, entered his throat, and sifted in through the vents at the floor of my chamber.

The man grabbed Sandy and kissed her in a salacious way. He marked her as his own right in front of Shane.

Shocked by the sign of affection, Sandy pulled back. She went for a handhold instead of a kiss.

Then she said, “I’ve been looking for you for like twenty minutes.”

“I’m sorry darling. I was caught up discussing the movement of modern architecture in the twenty-first century.”

“Wow! Boring. I’m glad that you spared me,” she said.

He smiled, but said nothing.

Then she said, “I want you to meet someone.”

She turned to face me. “This is Shane Lasher. And this is Townsend Dry.”

Shane reached out to shake Townsend’s hand.

"I'm actually here to meet you, so this is lucky for me," Shane said.

Their hands interlocked. I stared into Townsend's eyes. I lunged forward and pressed hard against the backside of Shane's eyes.

A creature lurked inside Townsend. I saw him. He stared back at me. He was very, very dark.

Interesting, I thought.

"Shane Lasher. You're that famous attorney. Something to do with the StoneCutter?" Townsend asked. He expected Shane to respond. But Shane said nothing.

So he cleared his throat and said, "I suppose that Mr. Range sent you here to show Graves & Associates' support of my work?"

"Lasher & Associates," Shane corrected him.

"They dropped Graves' name from the masthead. And you are right. I came here tonight to show you that our firm holds you in the highest regard. We're aware that you have concerns about a pending suit against this new building design, so I'm here to offer our support.

"We will do everything that we can to make sure that your building stays up. And that your firm is not liable for any fines," Shane said.

"There is no suit. Not yet. The city hasn't filed it, only threatened. But thank you for showing up and personally sharing your support. That's a bold move for your firm," Townsend asked.

Then Townsend said, "You know, I thought that you were a criminal attorney. Why are you handling my case?"

"I'm not your official lawyer. I am a criminal lawyer. But since I'm the acting face of the firm, I came here to show our commitment to you," Shane said.

"It's nice to meet you. Perhaps I'll come by and speak with you soon. We can make some preemptive measures to protect my company from this potential civil suit," Townsend said.

Instead of correcting him, by pointing out again that Shane was not his attorney, Shane said nothing.

Townsend reached down to his suit jacket and adjusted the buttons, closing the jacket. Then he reached his hand out to Sandy.

"Detective, let's go and harass some of the other guests and see if we can get them to invest in my projects," Townsend said.

He smiled at her.

"Sounds good. It was a pleasure seeing you again. Call me if you remember anything else about the other night," Sandy said to Shane.

Before they walked away, she shot him a smile that most men would kill for.

We watched as Townsend Dry escorted her into the crowd of well-dressed party guests.

They looked like a new couple: holding hands, kissing, gazing into each other's eyes.

Townsend dated a cop. Peculiar. Then again, Shane had dated a cop. In fact, Shane had fallen in love with a cop. At least he had been as close to love as his monster would allow him to get.

Five days had passed since we'd last seen Townsend Dry. Shane exhaustedly researched Townsend's entire life. He was our age. He was clean. He had no arrest history. He graduated from Cornell with an M.A. in Architecture and a B.A. in Business Management. He'd successfully built a small empire in high-demand architectural design that spread across New York City like wildfire. His designs were hailed by critics as "art that represented the Internet age."

He owned two properties: an apartment in Manhattan and a penthouse apartment in D.C. that was clear across town from Shane's.

He had no criminal record. He had no history of violent behavior. Nothing.

Shane swiveled his desk chair. He leaned back, taking a break from reading stacks of magazine articles and watching YouTube videos about the famous architect.

A knock on the office door surprised both of us.

"Come in," Shane called out from behind the desk.

Tina opened the door slightly and stuck her head in.

"Mr. Lasher. Sorry to bother you, but Ally is on line one. I tried to buzz you on the speaker phone, but there was no answer," she said.

Shane looked at the phone. A couple of architecture magazines sprawled across the top of it. We had accidentally knocked it off the receiver.

"Sorry. I got it. Thanks," Shane said. He sat upright and returned the phone to the cradle.

Then he picked it up again.

He answered it.

"Ally, what did you find out?"

"Hey. Nothing on the Woodsman. Not yet.

"But after you texted me this morning on this new client, Townsend Dry, I found out that he's a talented, sought-after architect. His firm is responsible for more than fifteen hundred designs around Manhattan, Long Island, and New Jersey over the last ten years. Right now they have a dozen projects working, five of which are here in D.C."

Townsend is a busy guy, Shane thought.

"What else?"

"You mean the strange part?"

"Yes, what about it?"

"The one thing about him that is not sparkling is the criticism of his early work," she said.

"Explain," he said.

"Some critics go as far as to say that his mind is demented. And by looking at some of his sculptures, I can see why they think that.

"During Townsend's sophomore year in college, he created several sculptures and showed them to the public.

"The pieces were mocked and the reviews all came out bad. Some of them have images that you can see posted on a website called tastelessart.com. I'll send you the exact link when we get off the phone.

"It appears that Townsend's true passion was to be an artist. But after the failed art exhibition, he changed his major to architecture. Kinda reminds me of Hitler."

"What was so obscene about his art?" Shane asked.

Ally said, “Take a look at the links. You’ll see for yourself.”

“Thank you.”

“Wait,” Ally said.

“Yes?” Shane asked.

“Come home soon. I miss you,” she said.

“Me too. Believe me,” Shane said and then hung the phone up.

In a strange way, we both missed Ally. She had become invaluable to us, much more than she realized. Shane kept her in the dark about his true self, but she was just as good at assisting us in killing murderers as she was in exonerating them of their crimes.

And Shane meant what he told her. He missed home.

So did I.

I liked the New York setup, but it was not home. We wanted to return home to Washington D.C., the place that we hunted, the place that we belonged.

Shane turned to his MacBook and pulled up his email. Ally had sent him two links. One displayed the criticism of Townsend’s art.

The article was from Cornell’s school paper.

“Dry’s sculptures were horrific, terrifying, and just plain obscene,” the article read.

Shane clicked on the other link to view the images of them.

The link opened to pictures of the sculptures. The first series that Shane saw was a group of pornographic tin men. Each was posed in a perverse sexual position. The men were missing limbs.

A second image showed metal wires and strips fused together to form another tin man. He held the severed heads of two tin women.

There was truly a sick mind at work in Townsend’s head.

However, a few tasteless metal sculptures did not make him a murderer. They only proved that he was demented.

Shane searched through more of the links beyond the posted images. After several minutes of surfing through the website, Shane discovered another link that was attached to Cornell University.

He clicked it.

It led to the university’s official webpage for the department of architecture. The background on the page was of the Milstein Hall, a building of famous architectural design. It was a place where students had over 20,000 square feet of open space in order to study and design different projects.

Shane browsed through the different pictures of students and rooms in the school. After several pages, he noticed a picture of a group of students talking to one of their professors. In the background of the picture, he saw one of Townsend Dry’s sculptures.

Shane double clicked and enlarged the image to get a better look at the sculpture. It was unmistakably one of Townsend’s pieces. The art piece had outstretched metal arms. The hands were severed at the wrists.

It was dark and twisted.

After further investigating the morbid piece, Shane discovered that an entire wing of the building was named after Townsend.

After a few more pages, we discovered no more images of it.

I smiled behind Shane's eyes. We had to take a trip to the campus and see the pieces for ourselves.

Shane leaned back from the computer screen and picked up the phone. He buzzed Tina.

"Yes," she answered.

"Call my car around front. I have to take a drive somewhere," he said.

"Yes, sir."

Down on the street, Shane's Mercedes Benz hummed. His driver held the driver's door open for him.

"Take the rest of the day off. I'll drive myself home tonight," Shane told him.

"Okay," the driver responded. He closed the door behind Shane.

Shane buckled the seatbelt and drove off.

Traffic turned out to be light. Still, Cornell was a long drive. It took us about four hours. After getting a visitor's pass and parking in the visitor's lot Shane set out on foot.

He stopped to look at a map posted in a large glass case. He located the right building and headed toward it.

It was well into the afternoon, so most of the students were off the campus grounds, studying in the library, hanging out in the quad, or just lingering around the local cafes.

Most of the buildings were plain brick. Across the street, Shane saw generic downtown buildings and some storefronts.

The stores were targeted toward the student body. They sold books, school sports gear, and other souvenirs.

Shane walked into Milstein Architectural Building and headed in the direction of the Townsend Dry wing.

He walked up a large staircase and around winding, elaborate corridors. He even walked over one strange-looking catwalk. Finally, he made it to the top floor. After he rounded a corner, he knew that he was in the right place.

Townsend Dry's wing consisted of one long corridor littered with his sculptures.

Large sections of the walls were cut out so that the sculptures could be displayed inside them like cabinets without doors.

Each sculpture was encased in a thin glass cover. The glass was screwed into the wall, protecting the sculptures from tampering.

The sculptures definitely belonged to Townsend. He had no doubt of that, but something about the sculptures was different. They were different from the images on the Internet.

As he neared the first two, I immediately noticed the difference, and my black heart sank in my chest. A fiendish grin stretched across my face.

Then Shane realized it too. The difference between these sculptures and the images of the ones on the Internet was substantial. The sculptures online were ferrous with their twisted metal parts. The sculptures surrounding us in Townsend Dry's collection were carved from wood.

As he walked down the hall, taking in the sculptures that depicted so much violence, he realized that this hall was much more than a representation of the darkness that lurked inside Townsend.

At one end of the hallway, a sculpture made of metal initiated the entire series. He followed that metal piece all the way to the end of the line, witnessing the evolution from a man into a serial killer.

Somewhere along the corridor the pieces lost their metal components and were suddenly made up of totally wooden carvings. They grew in skill as well.

Townsend Dry had to be the Woodsman.

Like the illustration of the evolutionary ape that crawled and eventually became an upright-standing, civilized man, Townsend's evolution from a talentless, disturbed freshman morphed into a diabolical, talented serial killer.

Over the last decade, Townsend Dry had transformed into a budding and deadly serial killer. The police only knew of a couple of murders by the Woodsman, but I saw his inner devil. I would've bet that his skills had been honed long ago. He must have killed more than just the three victims so far.

Once he'd entered Cornell University as a naive young man, he'd studied architecture and molded himself into a successful business owner, but he'd acquired an education beyond that of his trade. He also developed the tools necessary for murder and mayhem.

Townsend's hall reminded me of the Bodies exhibit that had come to D.C. several years ago. In the exhibit, a hundred real corpses were pieced together to perform everyday tasks.

The twist was that most of the bodies were missing their skin. Skinless corpses of athletes were posed playing football and soccer. Skinless cheerleaders danced with pompoms. Even lawyers stood in a fake courtroom without their skin.

Shane pulled out his iPhone and began snapping several pictures of each sculpture. This was our evidence. It was not concrete, but it was good enough to know that Townsend was the Woodsman.

According to Detective Sandy Parks, the Woodsman's kills were similar to the sculptures before Shane.

Even though the pieces seemed to fit, I needed a closer look at Townsend Dry in order to be sure that he was the Woodsman. After all, we had been wrong before and I killed the wrong man. I didn't want to risk killing another innocent man. Shane couldn't live with another mistake like that.

My mouth slowly opened and my snakelike tongue emerged, licking my scaly lips.

I imagined tasting the Woodsman's blood and I salivated.

Back in the apartment, Shane sat on the floor under the windowsill. His back was straight against the wall. He reviewed the known Woodsman's murders on his laptop.

So far the media were only linking the murder in Central Park to one other murder from last month, involving two women, a couple from Long Island.

No way had the Woodsman only started to kill three months ago. He had honed his abilities over many years. What I saw in that hall was the evidence of a mad man, a killer who had evolved over many years.

Abducting a woman, skinning her alive, and rigorously placing her body in the middle of Central Park without being detected required tremendous skill and practice.

He'd killed before.

With a little research and patience, Shane would discover more killings. Then he could link the Woodsman to Townsend.

Suddenly, his cell phone rang.

He peered down at the screen. Sun Good was calling.

He pressed the green answer button and said, "Hello?"

"Shane, why are you so quiet? I haven't heard from you in months," Sun Good said.

"Sorry. I've been busy here. You know I'm running a multimillion-dollar law firm," Shane lied.

"Whatever. I bet you're doing nothing but idling in your office all day doing pushups."

Shane snickered.

"What do you want? I really am busy," he said. He stared at images on his laptop of Townsend's sculptures. He'd downloaded them earlier from his iPhone.

"Fine. I don't miss you either," Sun said.

Shane smiled. It was his reaction, not mine. He really did miss her.

"Actually, I'm calling for business reasons. The FBI wants to see you," she said.

"Why?"

FBI? he thought.

I hadn't longed to hear that.

I shuffled positions in Shane's head, twisting and slithering around. I needed to stretch out. I slid my long tail down his spine and into his chest cavity. I stretched out my tentacles and neck into his skull.

"Agent Cutter is asking specifically to meet with you," Sun said.

"When? I'm very busy," Shane said.

"He's already in New York City. He'll try to see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow is no good. I've got meetings all day," Shane lied again.

"I'm not your secretary. Work it out," she said.

Shane said nothing in response.

Dead silence hung between them for a moment.

Then Sun said, "Listen, I want to talk with you later, but right now I have to go.

"Call me after you speak with Cutter. Tell me what he says. Okay?" Sun said.

"Yeah. Okay," Shane answered. He paused a beat, waiting to see if she had anything else to say, then hung up.

Now we had to deal with Cutter and the FBI.

Agent Cutter had killed Miguel Crown in cold blood, according to my vision, so he fit the right profile for Shane's victims. He was a killer.

However, he was FBI. That made him very dangerous. I wasn't sure if we could take on him, the Woodsman, and the FBI all at the same time. But it looked like Special Agent Cutter was not going to give us much of a choice.

Shane had to juggle his nightlife and the law firm at the same time. At least he wasn't on an important case right now. And we had the element of surprise. Neither Cutter nor the Woodsman knew that we were coming for him.

I smiled.

Later that day Shane went to court. He wanted the FBI to think that he was working hard in order to appear like he had been busy running the firm. So he asked Tina about any trials that were going on today and he ended up sitting in on one.

The trial was of little importance to the firm. It was a simple case of armed robbery and assault with a deadly weapon.

Teri Givens had held a bank teller at gunpoint for all of $400. Nothing stellar, but she'd shot the teller in frustration when she'd found out there was so little money in the cash till.

Teri, a twenty-year-old single mom on welfare, faced life in prison and her two children faced a childhood as wards of the state.

The only reason why this case was remotely on the docket of Lasher & Associates was because Teri's estranged father owned a chain of grocery stores across Manhattan and New Jersey. He was rich. He had the money and the firm needed the business.

Apparently having a rich daddy didn't mean that his children wouldn't resort to criminal activities. And since he had cut her off when she turned eighteen, it wasn't a surprise to him that she had kids that he hadn't known about. Neither did it surprise him that she had turned to a life of crime.

Shane sat in this tedious trial for most of the day. He was so bored with the proceedings that he kept checking his iPhone to see if Agent Cutter had called. Better to be interrogated by the FBI then to sit in this courtroom any longer.

He longed to leave, even if it was to talk to a deranged FBI serial killer hunter.

The courtroom was crowded. Most of the crowd was related to the victim somehow: aunts, cousins, and even some distant cousins. Seemed like a tight bunch.

Shane's iPhone buzzed in his jacket pocket. He reached in and pulled the phone out. He had a text message. It read:

This is Special Agent Kirk Cutter.
I need to see you now.
Go to Central Park.
Find a uniform cop. Tell him who you are.
I'll be waiting.

Shane leaned toward the paralegal next to him and told her that he was leaving.

He quietly exited the courtroom.

Shane took a taxi back to the apartment. He got out on the corner of W 96th St and Central Park West and 72nd St. then he walked to the police barricade that surrounded the entrance to Central Park.

"Officer," he said, waving at a uniformed cop.

"What is it?" the officer said. He spoke with a heavy Brooklyn accent.

"FBI Agent Cutter asked me to meet him here," Shane said.

"Okay. Wait here," the officer ordered. He turned and stepped ten yards away. He turned to look at Shane from that distance and then got on his radio.

Shane couldn't hear what the officer said; there was a moment of radio static before someone responded.

“Sir, are you Mr. Lasher?” the officer called out.

“That’s me,” Shane said.

The officer spouted something back into his radio and then waved to Shane to pass through the barricade.

Shane followed the instructions and walked over to the officer. The cop pointed him to the entrance to the park and said, “Take a right and follow the path.”

Being near cops was becoming so normal for us that I barely noticed anymore. Even Shane wasn’t nervous around them. During the StoneCutter case we’d had several interactions with the Secret Service and the MPD. I remembered the fear that they would discover us, but so far no one had. Our camouflage worked flawlessly. Not even other killers saw me hiding in Shane’s head.

In the park Shane followed the path that the officer had said. He walked along and after a couple of minutes we saw Cutter standing with two other agents.

He saw Shane and signaled for the other two to leave.

“Lasher the slasher,” Cutter said.

Shane shook his head and said, “Don’t call me that.”

“How often do people call you that?” Cutter asked as he approached Shane. His suit fit him like a second skin.

“Not as often as you would think,” Shane replied.

I slithered around and coiled up. I wanted to remain undetected while I tried to study Cutter. I wanted to see his demon without him seeing me. He was not like Townsend Dry. Cutter had hunted numerous serial killers in the past. If anyone would be able to spot me hiding inside of Shane, it was he.

“Follow me, Shane. We need to talk,” Cutter said.

Kirk Cutter led Shane deeper into the park. They left the other agents and police behind them. Cutter zigzagged in and out of bushes and walkways.

Finally, we arrived in a clearing.

Cutter looked directly at Shane’s face as they stepped into the clearing. He didn’t blink, but merely watched the expressionless face of my vessel as we saw what he was trying to show us.

In the clearing, just up ahead, Shane stared at a tree stump that was covered in a foreign, stranger-looking wood. The wood had been brought it from somewhere else.

As Shane looked up, he saw three tall poles erected around the stump. Thin, metal wires dangled from each pole. The wind blew across the park and whipped the wires around like the tentacles of some amphibious, demented creature—like me.

“The Woodsman used these wires to prop up his victim, twenty-one-year-old Jessica Long,” Cutter said.

Then Cutter said, “I have been hunting serial killers for a decade. Longer even. And I have never seen anything like this. How did he get all of this in here and then set it up? And no one claims to have seen him or them. The only eye witness accounts that we have so far is of a white, generic pesticide truck and a brown tent. All of this took place at around 4 in the morning. One homeless guy said he saw the driver, but the man wore a mask.”

“Mask?” Shane asked.

“Yeah like a gas mask for the insecticide spray. That’s what we figure,” Cutter said. Then he stopped talking like he realized that Shane was not one of his fellow investigators for the first time.

He stepped in front of the stump, blocking it from view.

I watched as his dark eyes. They were not black, but there was definitely something dark behind them.

I skirted down farther into Shane to avoid detection. I suspected that Cutter’s demon might have been like me, a killer of killers. In that case it might be better to avoid him. Even great hunters return some of their catches back into the wild.

I was not yet convinced that Cutter deserved to be put down.

“I am now a part of the Woodsman investigation. He has transcended the jurisdiction of local law enforcement. This victim is from D.C. So it’s all hands on deck.

“For the moment, this case is still being investigated here by NYPD.

“I am here on an advisory position. But I believe that my team will be taking over in the next day or so.

“I’ve chased a lot of killers over the years, Shane. And I know them. This guy is one for the books. As of now we only know of three homicides that he is responsible for, but I suspect that it will turn out that he has killed more,” Cutter said.

He pulled out his Smartphone and began scrolling through it as he spoke.

Shane began to respond, but Cutter put his hand up fast, signaling Shane to remain silent and just listen.

“Jessica Long was a college student at Georgetown. She lived in D.C. like you. But her body was displayed here in New York, where you now live.

“Her roommate says that she was dating some prominent older man. They surmised that he was thirty years old. He had money. They think that he was a doctor, investor, or…lawyer,” Cutter said. His dark demon showed its teeth behind his eyes. I saw it. I wasn’t cowering, but hiding like a snake studying the approaching prey. The deadliest vipers won’t attack another predator unless provoked. I waited for provocation.

“Look at what this monster did to her,” Cutter said. He pushed his phone into Shane’s face. The swiftness of his action almost forced me to the surface out of reflex, but I resisted.

Shane looked in dismay at the image on the screen.

Another image followed; Cutter had the photos set up as a slideshow.

Jessica’s skin was completely replaced with wood. The Woodsman had amputated her legs from just below her pelvis. The stumps of her legs were wielded into elaborate metal planks onto the top of the tree stump. The tree stump became a part of her stumps.

Her arms were outstretched, held out by metal extensions that were attached to the poles.

It amazed me. The Woodsman had created art. Townsend Dry used to create works of art. The connections were significant, but borderline circumstantial.

Another picture flashed on the phone. I recognized Jessica’s position. The way that the Woodsman had posed her was exactly like one of Townsend’s sculptures at Cornell.

Townsend Dry had to be the Woodsman.

"One could even say that you fit the profile of the Woodsman. But don't worry; I know where you were the night of the first murders, so you're not on my radar," Cutter said.

"Agent Cutter, why are we meeting here like this? Are you trying to intimidate me with these photos? I have met serial killers face to face. And I am not intimidated by you," Shane responded.

Cutter leapt to a defensive position right in front of Shane. His eyes interlocked with ours.

"Watch it, slasher! I could open an investigation on you and your missing clients. How would you like that?

"Remember that we had an arrangement. You're supposed to deliver information to me about the partners in your firm. The FBI thinks something has been going on. I suspect that if we dig enough we'll find mountains of dirt on them.

"Now you have not checked in once with me since you have been in New York. I had the MPD back off from investigating you in exchange for your cooperation in securing information about the partners in your firm.

"I am here to collect. So what do you have for me?" Cutter asked. He backed away and scratched the back of his head. Cutter's blond hair was cropped short.

"Agent Cutter," Shane responded, his expression turned to one of severe agitation as I waded just beneath his outer surface. "I'm not your errand boy; I'm not your informant.

"I am, however, a lawyer and right now I am the acting director of an international law firm that has connections in the highest corridors of power."

Shane's eyes turned black as Cutter looked away for a short moment.

Then I said, "You don't threaten me! You don't scare me!"

I kept my back to Cutter, but I felt his eyes flare and stare coldly into me.

I turned back into Shane, who said, "Next time you want to speak to me, schedule an appointment. If we are done here, I have a multimillion-dollar law firm to run. Why don't you go back to playing cops and serial killers?"

Shane glanced back only long enough for his eyes to meet Cutter's cold gaze, and then he walked away from the agent, leaving him to stare at Shane's back.

Agent Cutter needed a much closer examination. For now I had the Woodsman to look into, to hunt, to enjoy.

I needed to go back over and memorize the photos that Shane had taken of Townsend's sculptures. I had a feeling that we would be seeing another macabre still-life murder, and soon unless I stopped him.

I realized that I was filling the role of protector more and more. The thought of saving the regular people from the clutches of other serial killers grew on me more and more.

Chapter 3

Carved Up.

"I opened her breast and with a knife cut through the fleshy parts of the body. Then I arranged the body as a butcher does beef, and hacked it with the axe into pieces. I may say that while opening the body, I was so greedy that I trembled and could have cut out a piece and eaten it."

—Andreas Bichel, Bavarian Ripper

The inside of Shane's skull needed some reorganizing. I shuffled around memories that he didn't need quick access to anymore, archiving them. Most of them were memories of happier times, as a child or away at summer camps or even law school. I never threw them away completely, only tucked them away deep into the filing cabinets of Shane's subconscious.

I needed him in top form. We faced several threats: the Woodsman, Cutter, and possibly the FBI.

I couldn't afford Shane faltering in any way. His anxieties, his guilt, and his sudden sense of morals had remained dormant for the last several months. I needed things to stay that way.

So far we had learned a lot about Townsend Dry, but little about the Woodsman. I was sure that Townsend was the Woodsman, but many of the details were still unclear to me. Why did the Woodsman perform his sick ritual? How did he choose his victims? Why date them? Why not just abduct them?

Amateur hunters shoot any animal that crosses their sights. Being excited to simply nab a kill, they disregard the joy of the kill and pull the trigger. Professional hunters kill for sport, usually avoiding the young, the sick, and the pregnant. They kill for trophies. Survivalists hunt for food. They kill only what they need and spare the rest.

Big game hunters only kill the most dangerous wildlife. They hunt the biggest predators, the deadliest opponents. They hunt the same way one plays chess. Every move counts. Every move is calculated.

The thrill of the hunt was a part of my ritual.

It was dangerous to underestimate a demon like the Woodsman. If I'd learned anything from the StoneCutter, it was to always assume that my prey was setting a trap of his own.

I wanted to learn more about the Woodsman before we sprung our trap. I couldn't stalk a killer like him. He would see me coming from a mile away. No. The best way to study him was to watch his next victim. I suspected that the vivacious Detective Parks was next on his list. Why else would he be dating her?

Today, Shane would follow the detective around, stalking her. He would use her to get to Townsend, to lure him out.

Her day went like this: She woke up early, jogged up and down the streets near her apartment, listened to her iPod, stopped for a coffee, and walked back to her apartment.

After about another hour, she came down the stairs and walked to a little newsstand down the street. It was time for us to make a move.

Shane carried his briefcase and walked up next to her. He cleared his throat to get her attention.

She turned around and looked at him.

"Mr. Lasher," she said.

"Hi," Shane said.

"What are you doing in my neighborhood?" she asked.

"Do you live nearby?"

"Yeah, I live right over there," she said, pointing at her street.

"Huh. I'm here meeting with a new client who hasn't shown up. So I was just going to buy a newspaper and find a place to sit and read until he calls," Shane said.

"How long are you gonna wait?" she asked.

"I don't know. Not long," he replied. "Where are you going?"

"I'm on my way into the station. We need some leads on the Woodsman."

"So are you heading up the investigation?"

"I'm not. In fact, the FBI has stepped in already. So far they haven't pulled it from us, but they will," she said.

Then she paused and said, "I shouldn't have told you that. I'm not supposed to talk about the investigation. And you already know this."

"I do. I've known my fair share of cops," Shane said.

"Your client has stood you up. So you might as well walk me down to the subway," she said.

Shane nodded and asked, "How's it going with Townsend?"

"It's good. I really like him. He's more upscale than most of the guys I get involved with. He's like from another world. You know what I mean," she said. The excitement in her voice was painfully obvious. It hurt Shane's feelings a little. He liked her.

From his point of view, what was not to like? She was beautiful. She was young to be a homicide detective, so she had to be smart. She seemed smart.

And Sun Good would be jealous. Shane liked that part.

"I don't understand," Shane said, sarcastically. But she didn't pick up on it. Maybe she wasn't that smart.

"He's like you. He's upper class. He's from a good family, went to a good school. You know all of that high society shit. He's not from my side of town. He's not full of bullshit like all of the guys I meet day in and day out," she said.

"Yeah. I was being sarcastic," he replied.

"I know. I was acting stupid. Don't you spoiled types like that in a woman?"

Guess she was smart.

"Ha ha. No. I like smart women."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess that you do," she said. Then she shot him a smile that would outshine a diamond.

She had a bit of a seductress thing going on.

Shane smiled back.

"There's the subway stop. I've got to head in. It was nice running into you," she said. She started to hug Shane, but stopped halfway and came at him with a hearty handshake instead.

She started to walk off. Shane called after her, "Hey!"

She spun around.

"Yeah," she said.

“What are you doing tonight? Do you want to grab a drink or something?” he asked.

She smiled and paused for a moment. She looked up into the sky as if the right thing to say would fly overhead, attached to a plane on one of those sky messages.

“I’m seeing Townsend tonight,” she finally responded.

“Where? We can double. I’ll bring my girlfriend,” Shane said.

I shook my scaly head. We had no girlfriend and she knew it.

“You have a girlfriend? And you were just hitting on me?” she asked.

“You caught me. But I wasn’t hitting on you. I’m flirting with you to get information on the Woodsman. Professional curiosity.”

“Interested? Why?” she responded.

Then she said, “There is no suspect for you to defend yet.”

“It’s because I’m fascinated by you. Besides, you know my reputation. I like serial killers,” he said. Then he realized how creepy that sounded.

So he said, “I meant that you’re right. This Woodsman, whenever you catch him, will need a good defender.”

“Shameless. Are you sure that you’re not just saying that so you can get closer to me? I studied up on you after our first meeting. You have a reputation of being a womanizer.”

“No, my womanizing days are done. Although you do kind of bring out my primal urges.”

“You’re bad,” she said.

You have no idea, I thought. I hoped that Shane’s impromptu ploy had worked. Otherwise we would be stalking her and Townsend on their date tonight.

It could play out like a literal third wheel.

Sandy thought for a second, then smiled at Shane again.

“You still have my card, right?” she asked.

“Yes,” he answered.

“My cell is on there. Text me this afternoon. We’ll meet tonight for dinner, the four of us. And you’d better have a *girlfriend*. I really like Townsend. I don’t want him to think that I invited you because I secretly want you.”

“Got it, but I don’t think that it’s much of a secret that you want me. I think that’s fairly obvious,” he said.

She smirked, turned, and entered the subway.

Some jokes never worked, but Shane insisted on not thinking first and speaking later. I had seen that trait in a lot of normal men, so I guessed that it went well with our camouflage.

Shane watched as the vivacious detective vanished into the darkness below the street.

In a high-ceilinged, darkened loft, the Woodsman was busy. He crafted and I watched from Shane’s head.

This vision began as a bird’s-eye view like an out-of-body experience. Then my view zoomed in and stopped at a side angle.

The Woodsman sat on a stool, inches from a metal worktable. He wielded metal pieces together, creating some new type of contraption.

I hissed, thinking about how perverse he was.

The Woodsman's face remained obscured from me. This happened whenever my target was a powerful specimen. He would make a fine trophy. I desired to have his blood on my hands.

Not seeing his face made no difference. I was sure that it was Townsend.

The Woodsman suddenly stopped what he was doing. He looked over his shoulder as if he sensed that I watched him. He paused for a moment and then studied the large room behind him. I turned and looked as well.

The room was his lair. I could see odd shapes stacked all over the space. There were long metal rods fused together in strange ways. I saw cables and wires hanging from the ceiling. In one corner of the loft was an enormous stack of coiled chains.

Broken pieces of wood had been piled up in one of the corners.

Mannequin limbs hung on the walls like stuffed animal heads in a hunter's trophy room.

And then there was the liquid wood. It churned and boiled in a large pot over a grate in the floor. Beneath the grate was a roaring gas fire.

The Woodsman had an impressive setup. The whole scene was like an industrial-style dungeon. It was like something from a Freddy Krueger movie.

The loft was enormous. It must have taken up an entire floor of whatever building it was in.

I didn't see any weapons, but I imagined that the Woodsman had them stashed somewhere. Probably in a room against the far corner. The darkness was so thick around the edges of the lair that I couldn't make out anything beyond the burning pot of liquid wood.

The Woodsman's eyes glared around and then he returned to his preparation.

Tonight would be the night. He had worked on the Detective for long enough. She was his next target. Tonight he would have his way with her, or so he thought.

Tonight I would intervene and have my way with him. Tonight he would be a part of one of his own demented sculptures.

Again, I would be playing the part of a hero. Not my intention, but that was what I had become, some sort of antihero.

Shane's eyes were closed. He rested peacefully on the sofa in his office. I let him rest. Like a pet viper, I coiled up inside of his brain and shut my eyes. It was time for both of us to regain our energy.

Tonight we hunted. Tonight we killed. Tonight we carved.

Shane waited in a posh restaurant just off Broadway. Jillian sat across from us. She was a very expensive hooker. She was from Ukraine.

"So where are your friends?" she asked in an accent that sounded like a bad actress on a soap opera.

So maybe she wasn't from Ukraine. Maybe she faked it. Maybe she said that to heighten her value for customers looking for a foreign girl.

Whatever.

Shane didn't care. He just wondered where the hell Sandy and Townsend were.

He changed the plans for them at the last minute, I thought. I slithered around, dragging the ridges of my tail against the inside of Shane's neck. He felt the sting from this move and cracked his neck backward in an abrupt manner.

Jillian tilted her head in a most peculiar way, as if she studied his movement with the utmost interest.

She must have thought, *what the hell are you doing?*

She sensed his frustration.

But she hadn't questioned it. She had been in her business long enough to know when to say nothing.

Shane looked at his watch and finally answered her, "Yes, they are late."

"Can we go ahead and order then?" she asked.

Shane looked at his watch again. They were almost an hour late.

He nodded at Jillian. She opened her menu and began surfing the listings with her eyes.

Shane decided to give them fifteen more minutes; then he was going after them.

I hope that it isn't too late, he thought.

I knew that it was. We had set a trap for Townsend and somehow he'd sniffed it out.

The Gables was a luxury modern living community for some of New York's most prominent citizens. The main building reached upward into the Manhattan skyline.

Townsend lived in the penthouse apartment, similar to Shane's penthouse back in D.C.

Shane took over an hour to reach the Gables after we'd left the hooker back at the restaurant with nothing but a few hundred dollar bills and a fake name. So she had no real idea who Shane was.

Unless she recognized him, a mistake that we had both overlooked. But that didn't mattered. We were going to save Sandy's life. If the fake Ukrainian hooker recognized Shane from magazines, then what difference did that make?

Lots of people who are into criminal enterprises claim to know Shane. Just a part of the culture.

He defended a famous serial killer, so of course everyone who has a rap sheet wanted to know him.

Shane had to make a pit stop at our new home so he could pick up our kill-case.

The wind picked up around us. Shane stood outside the building. We knew that Townsend owned two properties: his penthouse apartment and his office, which was miles away.

I imagined that he would use his home as his lair, not the crowded office. Of course, he did own the small building that his office was in. That made it easier for him to construct hidden rooms. Being an architect certainly had its advantages over being a lawyer.

Shane's thoughts were with Sandy. Mine were with the dissected pieces of the Woodsman's corpse after we were through with him.

We have to save her. I just hope that we are not too late, he thought.

Shane looked up at the full moon. It was time for his beastly transformation into the devil, into me.

Like a demonic light switch that hung from a fiery corridor deep inside of him, I clicked on.

I looked around the street. No one was around. I smiled and lifted Shane's blood-red scarf. I wrapped it around the bottom of our face, hiding his identity.

The scarf waved in the breeze. It was long. It acted as a part of us, like it was a part of Shane's features.

Shane wanted me to save his new girlfriend, so I had no time left. The Woodsman was going to kill her tonight. It was a strange sensation knowing that her life was in my hands. I could save her, and I'll admit that on some level, I wanted to save her.

I walked into the main entrance of the building. One resident passed by me on his way out. He did a double take after he exited the building. I supposed that in his peripheral vision, he had been alarmed either that my face was covered or by how inhuman I appeared. Either way, he was wise to shake it off and continue into the night.

Past the lobby, just in front of the elevators, a tall security guard lingered near a reception desk.

He had not yet seen me, so I jumped to the nearest wall, placing my back against it. Slowly, I peered around the corner.

The guard had his face buried in an iPad. Sensing that something was wrong, he quickly glanced up, but he saw nothing.

I reached my hand around the corner. I had to reach out as far as Shane's arm would go. I searched for a light switch to the lamps nearby.

I found it. Then I flipped it off.

The room turned much darker than I had anticipated. The switch shut off all of the lamps, even the ones along the opposite wall.

"Hey! Who's there?" the guard asked. He lunged from his chair. He had a large flashlight in his hand.

The only other light in the room came from a chandelier. It had been set to a low setting, probably to create a hotel-like feel.

Even with the chandelier still illuminating the lobby, the room had turned quite dark.

So the guard turned on his flashlight.

His eyes traced the beam across the room.

"Who's there?" he demanded again.

No answer. Silence.

The guard slowly walked to the light switch. First he looked down the hallway, but nothing was there.

I already stood behind him.

The guard flipped on the light switch. As the lamps lit up and brightened the dark room, I injected a tranquilizer into his neck. He swung the flashlight back toward me as a weapon, but I caught it just before it could swipe across my face.

The guard jerked at it, trying to retrieve it from my grasp, but it was too late. The tranquilizer caused his knees to buckle. He went limp and then passed out.

I reached down and procured the elevator keys from his belt.

I dragged him back behind the reception desk and propped him up in the chair. Whenever he awoke, he would assume that he had simply dozed off. He would remember me as a bad dream.

I walked down the hall. I stopped at the elevator and pressed the up button.

One elevator dinged and opened immediately. It had already been on the first floor.

I stepped in, inserted the skeleton key, and pressed the button.

I rode the elevator up to Townsend's penthouse apartment.

It was enormous. It took up the entire top level. The elevator opened up right into it.

Inside, we saw the most deranged pieces of art. Violent, sadomasochistic sculptures and paintings decorated the apartment. Long, thin pillars reached from the floor up toward the ceiling like manmade stalagmites, stabbing into the roof of the Woodsman's cave.

I crept slowly through the Woodsman's home. I heard the crackling of fake fireplace. Classical orchestra music played over hidden speakers. A bottle of Cristal was open and sat on top of the coffee table near the fireplace. One glass rested in front of it. The flute was still full of bubbling champagne. As I crossed the room, I saw that a second glass had spilled onto the rug beneath the coffee table.

A shade of light red lipstick was smeared across the top of it. It was Sandy's lipstick.

I was too late. Under Shane's skin, and below my lair, I felt Shane's panic. It rumbled and festered to the point of explosion. He'd genuinely wanted to save the detective.

I tightened my grip on the reigns and regained control over him. His panic and desires to save this woman were subdued, for now.

Then, I continued to look around the apartment.

I studied the living room. Above the fireplace was a painting of Cronus, father of Zeus. He devoured his children. The painting was so magnificent that I considered stealing it for our home back in D.C.

The apartment was devoid of sounds, besides the crackling fireplace and Beethoven's Ninth playing softly over the speakers.

No sign of Sandy Parks or the Woodsman appeared anywhere.

Deeper into the bowels of the Woodsman's home, I discovered more evidence of just how twisted he was. The artwork and sculptures only grew more depraved as I descended farther into the winding hallways and empty bedrooms.

After a thorough search, I found no signs of life beyond the empty champagne glass. It seemed that was my only clue.

Then a thought raced through Shane's mind.

He thought, *this is not his lair. The equipment he uses for making his sculptures of dead people isn't here.*

He was right. To do the work that the Woodsman did, he must have had a workspace somewhere else. Where was his lair? That was the question that I needed answered.

The only place that I could think of was his firm's office building downtown. It was the only other property that Townsend owned, according to his records.

That was our best shot.

Although I didn't know it, in a room nearby, where Shane and I stood a woman had only begun to wake up from a drug-induced sleep.

The same strong fumes that Jessica Long had smelled were now all around her.

The boiling smell stung the inside of her nostrils like bees flying into the catacombs of their hive, their stingers scraping the honey-covered walls.

"Wha… Where am I?" she asked the blurry figure that hovered over her.

All she could make out about him was the dark gloves that clung tightly to his hands.

He stood near her, motioning his hands back and forth. He held something, but she could not tell what it was.

Whatever he was doing made a familiar sound. Her head pounded as she tried to control her faculties. She knew she needed them to figure out what that sound was.

Everything was confusing. Her sense of gravity seemed completely off. Trying again to regain her sense of what was happening, she shook her head until her vision came into better focus.

Suddenly, a foreboding sense of terror overcame her like the fiery embrace of the devil's arms. She realized that she was bound and hanging completely upside down.

That smell intruded her nose again as she peered straight up, or rather down for her. Below her she saw bubbling, churning liquid. It reeked of rotten wood and sulfur.

The boiling liquid shot out a heat that swept up and across her face as if she were standing too close to a large bonfire on a windy beach, a place that she would much rather be.

She tried to scream, but she was gagged. She shook her head violently, attempting to loosen her gag, hoping that she could get off a single scream that would be heard.

She stretched her mouth as wide as she could and rapidly bit down. She chomped repeatedly on her gag.

She hoped that doing this in rapid succession would free her mouth. Finally her intense effort worked. A hole formed.

She didn't think about how close her captor was. She didn't let the singeing fear burn through her hopes of escape. So she sucked in deep, collapsing her lungs as far in as humanly possible, and then she let out the loudest scream that she could.

Several stories below, I rode the elevator, completely unaware of the woman screaming above me.

The black holes that were my eyes jetted upward as I thought I heard something. The sound had been faint, but I was sure that it was there.

I waited for a second sound, but there was nothing.

The elevator doors opened and I continued toward my destination.

I passed the guard on the way out. He was still slumped over his desk, sedated.

The woman spit blood from where her captor had punched her. She was given only one chance to spit it out before he replaced her gag, making it ten times tighter than before.

Still he said nothing, not a word. Even when she'd startled him with her attempt at rescue, he'd remained calm.

He returned to the same movements that he had started earlier. He used his gloved hands to handle some blurry objects, which she now realized were shiny and reflected the dim lights that hung from the ceiling.

The familiar sound returned. Only now she realized what the sound was. This realization brought a second, much more terrifying realization: She was going to die.

Her captor was the Woodsman. The sound that had terrorized her was the sound made when a knife was sharpened against a rock. The object in his left hand was a sharpening stone. The object in his right hand was a large knife. It was the knife that he used to skin his victims before he covered their filleted bodies with the liquid wood.

The woman peered at the boiling liquid below her. It was the heated wood concentrate that she had seen before on the Woodsman's hideous human sculptures.

She closed her eyes and held her breath. She was about to experience what Jessica had experienced. She was about to die. And I was nowhere to save her.

Chapter 4

Deadly Client.

"*It is far more difficult to murder a phantom than a reality.*"
—Virginia Wolfe, Author

I couldn't sleep. Shane slept, but I stayed awake. I tossed and turned in his skull, trying not to disturb him with the violent whipping of my tail. At first he did not sleep. At first he worried about Detective Sandy Parks, but I switched off his light. I had descended the staircase in his brain and manually pulled the fuses out of his power box. I manipulated him to fade away, convincing him that she was all right. However, I knew that she was dead. The Woodsman had killed her.

We'd failed to save her. I didn't want Shane's guilt weighing us down like concrete shoes as we sank to the ocean floor. So I blocked the vision from him. I blocked it from me. I deleted it from my mental recorder. I didn't want to know the truth. If I knew, then he would figure it out.

Shane needed his rest. His body needed to rest. Today, we researched. We had to find Townsend.

Shane left the apartment in the early morning hours. He was barely awake. He skipped the morning workout.

He wanted to get to the office as quickly as possible. He wanted to get started right away. Lasher & Associates had considerable resources. He wanted to use them to locate any other potential properties that the Woodsman owned. There had to be something. He must have had some kind of paper trail that would lead Shane to him. Tax records, aliases— there had to be something.

If he dug deep enough he would find it.

Shane knew something about keeping properties untraceable, but keeping properties completely anonymous and untraceable in the modern age and in a major city like New York was nearly impossible.

No matter how well-hidden Townsend's holdings might have been, they were not invisible. Not here. Not in the middle of New York City.

There was no record of Townsend owning a car, so it was doubtful that he left the city. No way had he abducted someone and then gotten on the subway dragging her sedated body around.

It just wasn't likely.

Shane yawned and exited the cab in front of the firm's headquarters. He paid the driver and grabbed his briefcase. He entered the building and headed toward the staircase in the grand lobby.

Sweeping past the security desk, he almost hadn't noticed that the post was deserted, which was highly unusual.

Security's protocol had called for him to show his badge to the security guards at the desk upon entering.

Lasher & Associates had on the premises very valuable papers, files, and contracts of some major clients. So security was highly important.

Confused by the absence of security staff, Shane stopped and walked to the desk. He investigated the scene. He peered over the countertop and noticed something even odder. The guard's chair slowly swiveled as if he had just been seated in it and had quickly bolted away from it so fast that it spun behind him.

Wherever the guard was, he'd left in a hurry and only moments ago.

Emergency bathroom break, he thought.

Then he shook his head, fighting off the image.

It was very early in the morning. No one was up yet. The guard probably didn't imagine that anyone would walk in while he was away from his post.

Still there was supposed to have been two guards.

So where are they? he thought.

He shrugged and turned to the stairs.

As Shane climbed the staircase up to the first-floor elevators, he expected to be greeted by the enormous gothic statue of the hooded justice, leaning on his long broadsword as the blade fired down into the floor, as if it pointed toward hell. This was the same statue that had greeted him every day for the best part of a year.

Instead what waited for him at the top of the staircase forced Shane to drop his briefcase. Blood churned and boiled inside his veins. Shock filled his body as if he had bitten straight into a power line with his teeth. Fury seared through his organs and skin.

Shane felt faint. I had never felt that before. I had to come to the surface.

Shane had a crippling claustrophobia. It was a condition that had followed him from birth. It was his kryptonite.

Fear of enclosed spaces had been the only thing that had ever paralyzed him before.

The sight in front of him had the same effect.

He froze in place. He stood at the top of the stairs. Nothing would have snapped him out of his paralysis, nothing.

In front of us was the most grotesque, inhuman diorama of carnage that Shane had ever seen.

Standing three people tall in place of the once-erected statue that guarded the lobby, was a totem pole made of human pieces. Three naked, dead women were hideously mutilated and stitched and sewn together in horrific ways.

Two of the pieces had been completely detached from the rest and sewn into the bottom of the human totem pole. They held the carnage up like a sick Christmas tree stand.

I had never imagined anything like it. I was actually mortified. I had misjudged the evil of the Woodsman. He had to die.

Shane winced at the sight of the totem monstrosity that towered in front of us.

Then Shane noticed the statue of justice had been toppled over. It lay behind the human totem pole. The skirt covering its legs jetted out from behind the art exhibit. It looked like a woman in a dress had toppled over and now she couldn't stand up.

As Shane's eyes returned to the gruesome stack of dead women, he noticed the fine details of the totem pole. He saw the various metal rods that extended outward, holding up the different pieces of anatomy. He traced the long cables that pulled up the arms of each woman.

Then he noticed the thing that horrified him the most.

The woman at the very top of the totem pole looked like Sandy Parks. Blue eyes had rolled back in her head. Her mouth was sewn shut.

Her head had been shaved. And her ears were missing, but the face was hers.

Her breasts were exposed and covered in the liquid wood, the signature trace of the Woodsman. Her nipples protruded out of the liquid wood as if she were one of those models covered in a paint-on bikini.

Shane felt guilty for looking at them. Then he felt horrified that he'd let her die.

I am so sorry, he thought.

Suddenly, a woman screamed from behind Shane. He whipped around to see a Hispanic cleaning lady faint and crash to the floor. Her cleaning basket spilled. Dusters, spray bottles, and other products fell out and rolled onto the floor around her limp body.

Great. She saw us, Shane thought. Now he had to stay and give a statement to the cops.

He pulled out his cell phone and dialed 911.

Shane waited in his office alone. While he waited, a vision came to me.

It was from the night before.

I saw the Woodsman. He sat at a desk. He'd stared blankly at the screen of a laptop. His expression changed to dismay at what played on the video that was displayed across his screen.

He'd watched a security feed. It was from his apartment.

He watched as an intruder entered his home. The intruder was tall and lean. He wore a black suit, black pea coat, and a blood-red scarf that wrapped around the bottom of his face, hiding his identity.

The Woodsman watched me.

He played the feed over and over. Every time that it ended, he clicked on the play icon and restarted it.

He watched as Shane rummaged through his belongings. Then he watched as Shane carefully replaced every single item back to where he had found it. He left nothing of place. The Woodsman replayed the video. He paused the feed and leaned in closer. Then he glared at the intruder's eyes. He studied them.

Finally, a look of recognition contorted across his face. He had seen those eyes once before, only briefly, but he recognized them.

"Shane Lasher," he said.

"Death and murder follow you everywhere you go. Why do you suppose that is?" Kirk Cutter asked.

He stood as straight as a statue. He sneered and cocked his head to one side.

"I work here, Agent Cutter. Lots of people do," Shane answered.

I knew why the bodies were here. The Woodsman had left us a message. He knew that Shane had broken into his apartment. He had watched us with his hidden security cameras.

He probably had used these cameras to record his interactions with his victims so that he could watch them over and over, reliving the seduction and murder.

He'd killed Shane's new friend and placed her body here for Shane to find. It was more than a grotesque art exhibit. It was his warning to us. He was saying:

You know who I am!

Now I know who you are!

Agent Cutter's darkness gleamed in his eyes like a glimmer off the surface of a black planet. The demon inside him stared at Shane unflinchingly. Its claws almost protruded from the FBI agent's eye sockets as it gazed through his pupils. I was not sure if it could see me or not. I suspected not because he had not tried to kill us, not yet.

"Let's change the subject for a moment. Remember why you're here! How is the spying going, Mr. Lasher?" Cutter asked.

"I told you before; I'm not spying for you," Shane said.

"Where were you last night?" Agent Cutter asked.

"With a woman. She'll back up my story. Need her information?"

Agent Cutter grimaced and shook his head, waving off the suggestion.

"I believe you," he said.

"Do you have any leads?" Shane asked.

"Leads? What are you, a cop now?" Cutter asked.

Shane said nothing.

Cutter said, "This is the work of the Woodsman. What would I know of suspects?"

"Someone must suspect something? What about Detective Sandy Parks? Did she have notes on him?"

"Why don't you let me investigate? You just keep your eyes open around the firm," Cutter replied. He motioned for Shane to leave, as if he were dismissing one of his own agents.

"Do you need a statement?" Shane asked.

"And say what?" Agent Cutter asked.

Shane shrugged.

"I don't want you anywhere near my investigation." Cutter said. "Any investigation that the FBI might have involving your firm will be hindered by your involvement. Not to mention that if the press finds out that you discovered the body, it will be a shit-storm of national coverage.

"So, no. I don't want you to make a damn statement. Now go back to work."

Shane, surprised by Cutter's outburst, turned to walk to the elevators. Before he made it two steps away, the agent's voice boomed behind Shane.

"And Shane," he said, "Keep your damn eyes open! I'm not playing around. You find me something about this firm or I WILL open an official investigation into your missing clients. The end of your career will be the least of your worries."

Shane turned and continued toward the elevator.

Shane returned to his office, passing Tina's desk, now vacant, which was the same for most of the floor. The FBI must have blocked most of the staff from entering the building until they were finished taking their pictures, collecting evidence, and removing the grotesque totem pole of bodies.

How do you remove a human totem pole? Shane imagined that they would have to remove each body part using a pull-and-peel method.

Shane entered his office. He was greeted by a dark presence.

"Mr. Lasher?" the man standing in his office said.

Shane froze and stared. I leapt to a defensive position just beneath his surface, ready to lash out. Before I ripped through his skin and began slashing the intruder, Shane said his name, stopping me just before I showed myself.

"Mr. Dry?" Shane asked.

"Right. We met the other night, at the gala," Townsend responded. He leaned against one of the pillars in Shane's office.

Shane didn't relax. The main thought that plagued both of us was how long Townsend had been trespassing in our office. Had he discovered anything?

"I remember," Shane answered. He looked beyond Townsend to the doorway. Resting near the entrance to Shane's office was his kill-case. Shane was unarmed. So he started to nudge back toward the entrance, near his kill-case.

Townsend moved slowly toward Shane like a beast in the wild recognizing another of its kind and studying it just before it decides whether or not to attack.

One of his hands was out in front of him, near his chest. He clenched it into a fist. The other hand was hidden in his coat pocket.

His coat was unbuttoned, revealing his perfectly creased sky blue tie. As far as Shane could tell, there was no evidence on Townsend's clothes that he had so much as touched one of those bodies.

Even his face looked well rested.

"That's right; we met. I was with Sandy Parks," he said coldly.

Shane didn't speak.

"Sorry we missed our double date last night," Townsend said.

Shane nodded.

Then he asked, "Is there something that I can help you with?"

The two men stared each other down coldly, darkly.

Townsend slowly closed the distance between them, while Shane remained still like an oak tree with its mighty roots planted firmly in the ground.

Townsend said, “Shame about those women downstairs.”

Shane said, “Then you will understand if this is not a good time for a meeting. Perhaps we can have it some other time,” Shane said.

What are you doing? Shane thought.

My hind tendrils whipped and thrust me farther into Shane’s frontal lobe. I remained as hidden as I could behind his blue eyes. Cautiously, I peeked out and studied Townsend. His hand was still in his coat pocket.

Shane’s fists clenched tightly as Townsend moved in closer. I prepared to attack.

Within the span of a single breath I had planned several violent scenarios in which Townsend would most certainly be dead. The easiest to perform involved repeatedly banging his head on the thick, wooden desk.

“I think that this is the perfect time,” Townsend said.

Finally, I emerged to Shane’s surface. I was not letting Townsend get any closer without being in full control.

Townsend stopped, paused, and said, “What is wrong with your eyes? You look different. Your face.”

Townsend closed his eyes for a brief moment. He tried to shake off the horrible sight of me.

He reopened them. I saw that he had to be the Woodsman. The look on his face had switched from horror to pure evil. He stared me down.

After a moment of dark recognition, we approached each other. The Woodsman did not shudder in my presence, not like past killers had.

“The devil is in the details you know, Mr. Lasher. I like details. That’s why I’m an architect. I am good with details. My work is perfection all the way down to the last detail,” Townsend said. His cold gaze unflinchingly locked onto mine. He stopped six feet away. He was just out of my reach.

“Another profession that is good at details is the practice of law. Cases are won and lost because of details,” I responded.

Townsend said, “Serial killers have an acute attention to detail. Take the Woodsman. The totem pole downstairs is very detailed.

“I stared at it on the way in. And I was amazed at how much work went into it. It was exquisite. Did you see the wooden skin?”

I said “I don’t know. I thought it was amateurish and mediocre.”

I watched as the evil grin of the Woodsman crept across his face.

Suddenly, the door to Shane’s office swung open. Standing in the doorway with a look of utter disbelief was Tina. Without her usual professional manner, she entered, interrupting our showdown.

“Sorry, sir, I didn’t realize that Mr. Dry was here.”

“How are you? I was just visiting. Wanted to tell your boss that I hope he stays on as the permanent head of Lasher & Associates.”

“Thank you. That’s very nice of you.” Shane said. He had sprung past me and regained control over his body. Tina cocked her head a moment afterward, as if she had caught a glimpse of me, but then she shook it off.

Townsend turned to leave. The Woodsman had also disappeared back into his skin. He walked past Tina and through the open door. Just outside the opening, he stopped, turned, and looked back at Shane.

He said, "You know, I wasn't sure that it was you until now."

Then he pulled his hand out of his coat pocket, holding something in his palm.

It was a small, red memory stick. It read 2GB on the outer case. It had two gigabytes of memory.

The tip of the stick was a silver USB connector.

Townsend reared his arm down and swung it upward. He tossed the memory stick underhanded across the room. It landed on a black leather sofa, just missing the glass coffee table.

He shrugged and exited the office. On his way out, he whistled some jingle that I had never heard before. I guess that it was meant to torment us. The sound faded down the hall and toward the elevators. Then he was gone.

"What a strange man," Tina said. Her accent tickled Shane's ears.

"Tina, I need some privacy," he said.

Sensing something demonic in her boss's voice, she turned and left. Tina shut the door behind her.

Shane bent down and picked up the memory stick. Then he walked to his laptop and inserted the stick into the USB port.

He sat back and watched as a video feed appeared on the monitor. The video showed a dark intruder creeping around Townsend's apartment. The intruder searched stealthily for the apartment's tenant. The intruder was Shane in his kill-suit.

I messed up, Shane thought.

Now Townsend knew our secret. Shane no longer had the advantage. The Woodsman would be waiting for him. He had to strike fast. He had to strike today.

Like a torrent of fire, the darkness of the night engulfed Shane as he traveled to the Woodsman's apartment. I sat in the cockpit. My tendrils caressed his pulsating brain like the tender fingers of a lover. With each supple touch his body moved in the direction that I wanted it to. He performed at optimal capacity.

Tonight he would find Townsend and tear him limb from limb.

Townsend knew that Shane had been in his home. He knew that Shane had searched for him.

What he didn't know was what Shane had planned for him. He didn't know that Shane wanted to murder him, that I wanted to strangle the demon living inside him.

Shane arrived just around the corner to the Woodsman's apartment building.

Shane had no idea what Townsend intended, but he would be waiting for us. I supposed he wanted to either blackmail Shane or ambush him. Either way, Shane couldn't take a chance on waiting to find out. He had to act. Townsend had to die.

I shifted gears and completely took over Shane. Anyone who might have passed by and gazed into Shane's black, soulless eyes would have been staring at me, the shark that swam in his head.

Slowly, I walked to the side of the street where Townsend's building stood. At the building's side street, I stopped. That was when I noticed the strobe lights that

bounced off the building across the street. The lights were faint from here. They flashed blue and red across the second floor of the building.

Oh, no! I thought.

I remained in the shadows and peered around the corner at the scene that unfolded in front of Townsend's building.

Police cars littered the street. I stepped out of the shadows and stared in disbelief.

Among the police officers, I recognized two familiar faces. The first was Townsend Dry. He was slumped over a police squad car. It looked like he was being read his Miranda rights. They were arresting him.

The second face that I recognized, and the one that shook me out of the cockpit of Shane's mind, was FBI Agent Kirk Cutter.

Without even realizing it, I had stepped directly outside the parameter of the crowd. I stood just beyond them.

In that moment, Kirk Cutter turned and looked at me in a horrifying dead stare. I retreated into Shane, leaving behind his human form. As I did this, Kirk Cutter's eyes turned slowly into a shade of black crimson, like blood mixed with crude oil.

Must have been the reflection from the police light bars, I thought.

For the first time in my life, I retreated. The feeling that overwhelmed me wasn't fear. I never felt fear. It was defeat. I had hunted the Woodsman, planned to kill him until he evaded me, and now Kirk Cutter had him.

Cutter was becoming a much bigger problem than I had originally thought.

Cutter cracked a mischievous, demonic smile, the kind of smile that Hamlet's uncle would have cracked the moment that he was crowned king after murdering his brother.

Shane slipped back into the shadows and hid around the corner. We returned to the side street.

What are we going to do about that security feed? Shane thought.

His nerves constricted, shaking the walls of my lair. His bones rattled like the beams of a large mansion during an earthquake.

He had to forget about killing Townsend for now. The goal that he had to focus on now was retrieving the security feed that showed Shane inside of Townsend's house. He had to get that back before the FBI viewed it.

The Woodsman's destruction would have to come later. His freedom, his secret, was at stake.

Chapter 5

Bits & Pieces.

"I took the right leg of that woman's body, from the knee to the hip, took the fat off and ate it while I stared at the other girl. When I bit into it she just urinated right there."

—Arthur Shawcross, Genesee River Killer

Shane had taken courses on mental conditions. One such condition was known as sociopathic. He had hoped that it would help him to understand himself. He'd tried to understand me.

I used this course to learn about others of my kind so that I could better hunt them. He also took classes in criminology. One of the things that he had learned was that there are two basic types of serial killers, according to the FBI anyway.

The first type of serial killer was like Ted Bundy: refined, elegant, methodical, and highly intelligent. The second was more like the Green River Killer. They were controlled by rage. They killed at random. The demons in them couldn't help themselves.

Serial killers of the first type were easier to predict because they held onto the same patterns. They followed the same routines. They could be profiled. Those of the second type were easier to spot because generally, when they went into a rage, they kept killing until they ran out of fuel.

The second type of killer usually portrayed telltale signs in his daily life. These signs were easy to spot. So normally, the maniac serial killers were caught because their behaviors gave them away.

For me, the first type was easier to catch because I could study the killer and plan the perfect trap.

Native American hunters, hunting deep in the wilderness, would construct a deadfall. This was basically a deep pit; jagged spikes layered the ground at the bottom of the pit. The roof of the pit was covered with loose brush which camouflaged the hole. The prey came along, stepped through the fake floor, and fell onto the spikes, impaling themselves. Gravity was the force that killed the animal.

Deadfalls were especially effective in trapping bears. All you needed was the right bait hanging over the trap. The bear reached out to snag the bait and toppled over into the deadfall.

With the Woodsman, I'd used Detective Sandy Parks as bait, and now she was dead. I lost that one. He'd gotten away from me. That wasn't going to happen again.

Agent Cutter was another story. He was a different kind of serial killer. He was a vigilante and a cop.

The other thing about Agent Cutter that Shane picked up on was that he was a combination of Type A and B.

He was methodical and highly intelligent and he stuck to a cop's routine. But he was also capable of fits of rage.

At the end of Ted Bundy's killing spree, he'd changed into the second type of killer. He'd gone on a rampage and murdered five girls in their sleep.

Kirk Cutter was the best of both worlds.

Shane would deal with Cutter when the time came. For now his top priority was to get that video feed.

Cutter used his office as a place where a monster plotted and schemed. I sat behind his desk, studying the blueprints of the local jail. On the corner of 4th and Metro, there was a precinct with holding cells in the basement. That was where Cutter had taken Dry.

Just then, as Shane's eyes were hidden somewhere behind my black ones, Dylan Range entered the room unannounced. Tina stuck her head in at the same time that he passed underneath the large doorway.

"Mr. Range is here to see you," she said. She remained in her swivel chair.

Shane nodded.

My eyes receded into the blackness of Shane's skull. I was absorbed back into his brain like a subterranean predator seeping back into the desert sand. Small grains of his dark mind consumed me.

"Mr. Range," Shane said. He rose from our chair.

"Good morning, Shane," Range said.

He approached the desk and reached out his hand, offering a good morning handshake.

Shane took his hand and firmly shook it and smiled. Shane's expensive, all-white teeth impressed Range.

"It has been quite an ordeal here today," Range commented, shaking his head.

"Yes, it has," Shane agreed. "I'm surprised that so many of the employees have shown up."

"Many of them are staying out. Believe me. We are hurting from that thing that was left in the lobby. Many of them are scared to return.

"But that's not why I'm here. I'm sure that you know that Townsend Dry was arrested last night," Range said. He removed his wire-rimmed glasses. That was the first time that I ever noticed that his face was slightly crooked. His jaw seemed to be off-center, making the rest of his features asymmetrical. His eyes, nose, and even his mouth seemed off-center. The only things on his face that were normal were his ears.

"I heard. What of it?" Shane said.

"He just called," Range said.

I straightened my back, allowing my muscles to contort and contract. I didn't have a spine. No vertebrae. I was more snakelike than other creatures.

Shane and I listened contently.

Range had paused, as if he waited for a response. When he didn't get one, at least not one that he recognized as human, he continued, "He says that they are charging him with murder. They believe that they can link him to the Woodsman killings."

That's too fast! I thought.

"He has requested you," he said, tilting his head in the other direction. This movement rendered his face, making it seem straight.

Shane couldn't help but smile.

"Does that mean that you want to meet with him? 'Cause Shane, if you need more time before you get involved then we can wait."

Range sounded nervous.

"I will meet with him. It will be a pleasure to take on a real case again. I'm eager to get back to work."

"You know that we were never punishing you. The truth is it was best to keep you out of the spotlight. But now we need you again," Range said.

Then he said, “Townsend might be guilty. He was here yesterday after the corpses were found. It doesn’t look good for him. We need you, Shane. Will you work on his case?”

“Yes,” Shane said.

Then he said, “I will.”

Shane donned his kill-suit, every stitch minus the red scarf that covered his face, hiding my grisly features from the world. He entered the precinct house where Townsend was being held until tomorrow’s arraignment.

The sun had passed over the buildings and begun its descent into the western sky. Shadows were cast and merged into each other, creating a false nighttime feel alongside some of the taller buildings.

The FBI had set up a checkpoint just inside the doors to the station—something else for Shane to deal with.

Shane remained perfectly composed as the two guards checked him for weapons. The first ran a metal detector over his body. The second rifled through the papers in Shane’s kill-case. Luckily for us, his garrote remained nicely concealed beneath the leather surface of the case.

Of course, killing the Woodsman tonight might not happen. Tonight he wanted the video feed. After that matter was handled, then I could watch the Woodsman’s monster asphyxiate to death under our garrote wire.

After the guards cleared Shane, I came to the surface.

I glanced around the precinct on my way to Townsend’s cell. I saw no sign of Agent Kirk Cutter. That was one good thing that was going my way.

I walked through a series of doors and hallways. Then I followed an armed officer down a staircase and into the basement. I arrived at a steel door. The guard pressed a button on an intercom. He flashed his face up at a rusted, old surveillance camera and smiled. The door buzzed and opened.

“This way,” the officer said, glaring back at me. He pointed through a door that was even more rusted than the surveillance camera.

“Lot of security here,” Shane said.

Ancient security, but still a lot, I thought.

“Yeah, only in the basement cells. We get a lot of transport criminals and this is where we detain them.

“We’re the closest precinct to the downtown courthouse complex. The U.S. Marshals’ office comes through here a lot. They insist that we maintain more security than other locations.

“Of course this strains our budget.”

“Interesting,” I said; the words slithered off my tongue and out of Shane’s mouth. The sound made me think of the serpent in the Garden of Eden when it spoke to Eve.

Pick the apple. No one will know. What harm can it do?

I walked through the door and into a room with a thick glass partition. It separated one side of the room from the other.

Through the well-polished glass, I saw Townsend Dry. He sat and stared up at Shane with an impatient look on his face. He appeared to have been waiting a long time for us to arrive.

I evaporated into Shane.

He nodded to his client. There would be no strangling him through the glass barrier, no need to reveal myself now.

After Shane acquired the video feed, then he could figure out how to get at Townsend beyond the security measures.

“Shane.” Townsend greeted us with a smile.

“You look tired, Townsend. Have you not been sleeping?” Shane asked, patronizing him.

“Cut the shit. Let’s talk about what I have,” Townsend said. He leaned forward, aiming his words through the circular metal center embedded in the window.

It was a shiny metal ring that had several holes pierced through it. It looked like the top of a gold-colored peppershaker.

Shane shrugged and sat down directly across from Townsend.

“You know why you’re here?” Townsend asked.

A blank expression fell across Shane’s face. Townsend wanted Shane to represent him, but beyond that, who knew?

Finally after clearing his throat, Shane shook his head.

“There is a devil living inside you. I see it. You are like me.”

“Devil? I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” Shane retorted.

I coiled up in a striking position and angled my head so that I could get a straight look at Townsend’s eyes through Shane’s blue ones.

Townsend calmly smiled back at Shane. The orange jumpsuit that clung to his body illustrated his muscular features. He was considerably smaller than Shane in size, but he was built like a brick.

“You know she liked you?” he asked.

“Who?”

“You know who?”

I looked back at Townsend, puzzled.

“Sandy. She liked you. Did you know that?” he said.

Shane said nothing. He paused. Then he said, “So you are the Woodsman?”

“CUT THE SHIT, I SAID!” Townsend screamed into the glass. The monster came straight out of him and stared at Shane with cold eyes.

Shane flinched, startled. I quickly reinforced him. I uncoiled and wrapped my tail around his spine. The scales on my body expanded and then contracted with my tail. I tightened my grip on him and strengthened his backbone. He would not flinch a second time.

“Everything okay in here?” a guard stuck his head in and asked Shane.

“Yes. Just another day at the office,” Shane answered, smiling back at the guard.

The guard hesitated for a second and studied Townsend. The Woodsman had retreated back into his hole and the mild-mannered architect had replaced him.

I watched as the guard retreated out the door.

“The girl begged for her life. She begged for it. She sniveled and cried and begged. She was pathetic,” Townsend repeated.

“What do you want?” Shane asked.

“I want to see it.”

“See what?”

“Your creature.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Townsend stayed quiet. The two men stared at each other through the glass. Not a word came between them for a long time.

Sensing that I was not going to appear so easily, Townsend switched gears.

He said, “Why were you sneaking around my apartment the other night?”

“You don’t know that was me.”

“Don’t play with me. We both know what we have living inside of us. The voice, the twisting feeling, the noise.”

Shane half shook his head in a soft attempt to reject Townsend’s insinuation.

“What about Sun Good?”

“What about her?” Shane asked.

“Does she know about you?”

Shane said nothing, but I could sense something churning and boiling inside of him. Sandy Parks was dead. Nothing that I could do about that. But Sun Good was alive and healthy.

But now Townsend knew about her. No good.

“How do you know about her?” Shane blurted out, his gloved fists clenched tightly on the handle of the kill-case.

Townsend watched and narrowed his eyes.

“That’s the one. That’s the one that keeps you human. Sun is your totem. Your anchor. Isn’t she?”

Totem? Anchor? I thought. What was he talking about? Sun wasn’t Shane’s totem or anchor. He was suggesting that Shane loved her. Maybe he had loved her.

“I wonder what she’ll sound like when I skin her and solidify her body in wood.”

Shane’s grip around the kill-case’s handle tightened even more. The muscles in his right forearm twitched. His heart began to race.

Suddenly, I realized that Townsend might be right. Shane was acting on his own and against my control. This was not like the feelings of guilt that ate away at him from time to time.

Sometimes guilt had manifested into his stomach and he’d acted irrationally and without my control. No. This was something different.

Townsend’s eyes turned to black. His creature had surfaced.

“Sun Good will be my prized kill. I will boil her blood with my liquid wood and position her in some kind of monumental act.

“Perhaps a sexual one.

“Perhaps I will experience her before I kill her.”

Shane jumped to his feet and slammed the kill-case up against the glass. The sudden act of violence against the glass barrier startled the Woodsman. Even with his demon out, he leapt from his chair, knocking it over.

Without my own consent, I was on Shane’s surface. Like a reaction, I quickly seeped from Shane’s pores. My black eyes emerged and stared at the Woodsman.

“IS THIS WHAT YOU WANTED? TO SEE ME? HERE I AM! WHERE IS THE VIDEO?”

“Keep your voice down. Someone could hear,” Townsend said.

“Where?” Shane repeated.

“That’s all that you want? The original copy?”

The Woodsman smirked and got up off the floor. He stared into my demon eyes and his smirk widened into a smile.

I never turned away from his gaze, but I was prepared to withdraw as soon as the guard entered the room. He must have heard the chair fall over.

“Where?” I repeated.

Townsend returned to his chair and said, “Don’t worry. I’ll tell you, but first I want you do something for me.”

“What?”

“I want out of this prison. Get me out and I will give you the original. Until then it will remain our little secret.”

Slowly, I calmed Shane down. I could feel his breathing returning to normal and his heart slowed to a regular beat.

“You want me to get you out? How? Jailbreak?” Shane whispered.

“I don’t care how. If you think that you can have the court set bail in the morning, fine. I’ll pay it. If not, and I’m thinking not, then you’ll have to be creative.

“You’re the savior of killers. Figure it out!”

The Woodsman had killed Shane’s friend, blackmailed him, threatened Sun Good, and now he wanted Shane to break him out of jail.

“What evidence do they have on you?”

“That FBI agent has something on me. They haven’t yet told me what exactly.”

I returned to my hiding place and allowed Shane to take over again.

“Okay. Before we get into conspiring to break you out of a maximum-security jail, let’s talk about your case. Maybe we can get you out legally,” Shane said.

Townsend also returned to the surface. He smiled. This time his smile was different than that of the creature that I had just met. His teeth were different. I hadn’t noticed before, but his teeth were straight. Before they were jagged. His creature transformed him into a being with sharp, jagged teeth, not just black eyes like mine.

I’d never thought to check to see if my jagged teeth emerged through Shane’s mouth like my black, cold eyes did when we switched places.

With this thought lingering in my mind, I coiled back up in my nest in the back of Shane’s skull. I remained on standby in case he needed me, but I sensed that Townsend and Shane would discuss strategies to get the prosecution to allow a bail to be set tomorrow. It wasn’t a conversation that required my dark presence.

Shane was a brilliant defender. I’m sure that if anyone could figure out a way to get Townsend out, he would.

For now, I simply watched and hatched plans of my own. I thought about two things: Where was he keeping that video? And what was it going to be like holding the Woodsman’s severed head in my hands?

Shane still wore his kill-suit, black jacket and blood-red tie draped over a flawless white shirt. He stood next to Townsend. They were in front of a crowded courtroom.

The news that there was a suspect being charged with the Woodsman murders had hit the cable networks, newspapers, and online blogs in a matter of moments after Townsend's arrest.

One hour ago, Shane had met with the judge and the prosecution in secret.

"Mr. Lasher, Arnold tells me that you and he have reached an unusual agreement?" the judge asked.

"Yes, your honor," Shane replied, a smile cracked across his face.

"Shane and I have agreed that the court can set bail," the prosecutor said.

"Mr. Evans, why exactly would you agree to have a suspected mass murderer have bail set?" the judge asked.

"My client has agreed to change his plea to guilty, but only in one week if bail is set. He feels that he has some important affairs to get in order before he can go to jail.

"For one thing, he has worked hard to create his architecture firm and he wants me to arrange for it and his partner to be protected afterward. He personally wants to oversee this. He will not show up to his offices in person. He feels that he has cost his partner and employees enough grief.

"Instead he has agreed to wear an ankle bracelet. He won't leave his apartment. I will meet with him there during the week," Shane responded.

Then Shane said, "He just wants one more week of freedom."

"Why on earth would he want to confess to these charges in exchange for bail unless he's planning on trying to flee?" the judge asked.

"He is not going to run. He simply wants the time to make his peace with family and friends before they have to learn the truth," the prosecutor answered for Shane.

The judge stood from behind his desk and stared past Shane and out the window. Then he turned back to the two men and said, "I'll take this under advisement, but if I agree to set a bail, I think it's best we keep this conversation to ourselves.

"Also, Erik," he said, looking directly at the prosecutor.

"You should claim that you are against bail. What will the public think of a judge and a local DA agreeing to set a serial killer free even for a week? This has to remain secret," the judge said.

Erik Evans, the local DA, nodded in agreement.

Back to the scene that unfolded in front of me. I watched with admiration as Shane manipulated the judge and DA as if they were his puppets. With Townsend free, I would be able to retrieve that video and kill him before he went to prison.

Townsend stood next to Shane as the judge began to speak.

"Mr. Dry, you have been charged with multiple counts of first degree murder involving heinous crimes. How do you plea?"

"Not guilty, your honor," Townsend answered.

"Your honor, the City of New York requests that you deny bail," Erik Evans said.

The judge looked at the prosecutor and then back to Townsend and Shane.

"Mr. Dry is a well-respected member of our city," the judge said and paused.

Then the judge said, "Who is being accused of horrible crimes. The nature of these crimes is not lost upon this court.

“However, I do believe that he is innocent until proven guilty, as is the way of our system. And I do not believe that he is a flight risk. So it is the opinion of this court that bail be set at one million dollars on the condition that he is to be confined to his home,” the judge said.

The moment the words rolled off his lips, there was an intense rumble over the courtroom.

“Silence!” the judge said. He banged the gavel.

The court fell silent and a smile spread across Townsend’s face.

An even bigger smile stretched across my face, only my smile involved a mouthful of jagged, razor-like teeth, one of which was broken off at the center, making a surface that had multiple points on it, like the teeth of a jigsaw piece.

Of course the reasons why Townsend and I were grinning so intensely differed greatly.

He smiled because Shane had gotten him the chance to make bail. He could spend the night in his own apartment and not a jail cell. He also felt a sense of hopefulness because he thought that Shane might actually be able to get him acquitted from the murder charges.

It was a false sense of hope, but he still felt it.

The reason why I grinned so hard was because Shane never informed Townsend about the deal that he had made with the prosecution.

Townsend had no idea that the court expected him to change his plea after “much soul searching.”

Not to fret. If our plans went right, he would never make it to the trial. In less than a week he would be nothing more than a disassembled human stacked in garbage bags.

The law would think that he’d fled the country. FBI Agent Cutter would have to chase the phantom trail that we’d arranged ahead of time. The public would have to be satisfied that Dry was out there somewhere.

The judge would ridicule Shane, but he could do little more than that. And Shane’s reputation would be intact.

The evidence that Townsend had blackmailed Shane would be destroyed. And the Woodsman’s remains would have been burned to ash, like the logs on a dying fire.

No one would ever hear from him again.

Sitting in the back of the courtroom. Watching. Scowling. Growing furious. I sensed him.

I shut my eyes and saw through his. I saw outside of his and saw his figure. Even in the crowded courtroom—filled with FBI agents, vengeful, off-duty police, and interested parties—the figure’s details were askew. He stood in the back of the courtroom like a blurred monster in a dream. His fists clenched tightly. He watched as the judge agreed to set bail for the Woodsman.

He watched as Shane pissed all over his arrest.

Kirk Cutter’s monster was on the verge of leaping out of his vessel and attacking the Woodsman right in the middle of open court.

The entire process sickened him. The monster inside him twisted and railed at Townsend and his lawyer. He had hunted the Woodsman and now he hated the idea that we were messing up his efforts.

Cutter couldn't watch anymore. He exited the courtroom before the judge dismissed everyone.

He stood in the hallway and waited.

"Agent Cutter," a subordinate agent said, approaching him from around the corner.

"Not now!" Cutter said. Then he pushed past the agent. He walked to the second set of doors that entered the courtroom. He waited.

Shane saw him waiting. We nudged Townsend behind us and deeper into the crowd of people. He had a police escort. This was for his protection. The judge felt that while Townsend was in the courtroom he needed to be guarded from any would-be attackers.

As they neared Agent Cutter, Shane leaned toward the officer with his client and said, "Go ahead and take Townsend to get the anklet put on."

The officer nodded.

"This way, Mr. Dry," he said.

He took Townsend by the arm with a firm grip and led him away.

Shane turned to Townsend and said, "I'll be right behind you."

Townsend looked into Shane's eyes with a cold, yet confused stare.

"You had better be," he said.

Shane continued forward out in front of Townsend. Cutter stood there waiting. He reached out and grabbed Shane by the arm. He pulled him in close. Their suit jackets touched.

Townsend passed them and glared back.

"You're supposed to help us find out what happened to your firm's missing clients. I don't call this helping. It looks like you're trying to exonerate another serial killer," Cutter said in a hushed, dark voice.

"Mr. Cutter, I am doing my job. My concern is not to investigate the firm that my father created," Shane said.

Cutter's grip tightened, causing immediate pain to Shane's arm. Suddenly, I was shaken out of standby mode. Right in the middle of the crowded courthouse hallway, I revealed myself.

Seeing me stunned Special Agent Cutter. I was something that Cutter had not expected. The expression on his face changed from predator to prey. This expression was only there for a moment, but it was there. I saw it.

I jerked quickly and pulled out of his grasp.

Anger shone across his face. And Cutter reached out and grabbed at Shane's arm. But I intervened, dodging his grab. My position shifted with Cutter's. It was like a homicidal tango. Except our quick reflexes shocked Kirk so badly that he almost mis-stepped and stumbled backward.

I caught him with a two-step move. First, I locked my knees, securing my stance.

Then he countered. He reached out, and with a quick pull of his arm, he had regained his footing.

“That was a close combat move. Where did you learn it?” Kirk asked. His mouth gaped open after the question like a cave’s entrance. I wanted to reach into his open mouth and pull out the creature that lived inside of him.

“Just instinct,” I said in a cold voice.

Kirk Cutter had never laid eyes on me before.

Instantly his monster recognized me like we were old friends—cut from the same blood-soaked cloth.

Slowly, with another new expression on his face, an expression of terror, Cutter backed away from Shane. He backed away from us. No, he retreated from us.

“There’s something else going on here, Lasher. Something is not right about you. I will find out what it is,” Cutter said.

“You do whatever you have to,” Shane said.

Shane turned away and we left him standing there in the hallway. His eyes burned into the back of Shane’s head. I felt them.

While Shane’s back was turned, Cutter reached for his weapon, but he didn’t brandish it. Instead, his fingertips brushed across the hilt of his gun. He thought about drawing it. He should have, because once I was done with the Woodsman, he would be next.

The rain poured heavily over the city. And it was winter. So the city was cold.

Gusts of wind swept the rain into a diagonal arc. Visibility was low. The atmosphere set the perfect stage for the next act in Shane’s play. The very next night was the night that I had waited for. I felt it.

The hunger was there, seeping into Shane’s bones.

The streets were desolate. The part of town that Townsend lived in was asleep, as much as New York did sleep, which was to say not very much.

But the rain helped. It was an extra variable that kept onlookers away.

The blackness of the night and the harsh rain that bore down on us camouflaged my walk down Townsend’s street.

I realized that there was a chance that he would be wise to my attack. Yet, I remained hopeful that I would take him by surprise.

Before I entered his building, I stood underneath the cover of rain. I sifted through the pockets inside of Shane’s jacket. I checked for two items. I thought that he had brought them, but even monsters can be absentminded.

The items that I checked for were still in their rightful place. The first was a needle filled with a powerful tranquilizer, a frequent tool of mine. It was silent and concealable and it put the victim out in seconds.

The other item that I’d brought was a Taser. This would come in handy if I ran into any unexpected heroes.

I had to kill the Woodsman in his apartment. Once I killed him, I would have to cut him up into pieces quickly—head, torso, and appendages, but all of this would have to be done fast due to the NYPD’s technically advanced anklet. Townsend sported this device on his left foot. Once his heart stopped beating, there was only a small window of time before the police would show up.

When his heart stopped, the anklet was programmed to send out a signal. This was usually an indicator of tampering.

I pulled open the heavy doors to the entrance to Townsend's apartment. Inside the foyer, I was greeted by the doorman.

"Hello, sir," the tall, lanky doorman said. He waved, but barely looked at me.

As I approached the elevators, I noticed a vacant chair posted near them. Then I caught a glimpse of a policeman stepping into the public restrooms.

Shit, I thought.

The feds had posted a guard in the lobby of Townsend's building. I would have to find some way of getting around him on our exit. This was already looking more difficult than I had imagined.

I rode the elevator to the penthouse level. I got off into a darkened hallway. It appeared that the bulb over Townsend's door was out.

My instincts buzzed like an alarm. I reached into Shane's pocket and pulled out the Taser. I activated the weapon. The strobes at the end crackled to life. Little bolts of electricity sparked from the tip.

I approached the door to the penthouse. I pulled Shane's red scarf up over his nose. It obstructed his face.

As I neared the door to Townsend's apartment, I noticed that the front door was slightly ajar. This was not good. I sensed an ambush.

I reached out with my left hand and nudged the door open with one quick shove. It creaked open on its hinges. The bottom of the door hovered an inch above the brick tiles in Townsend's foyer.

As the door glided over them, I stared down a dark, empty hallway. It was not at all as it had been the last time that I'd broken in.

This time there was nothing but darkness. This time there was confusion building up inside of Shane. And then there was the smell.

Suddenly, my nostrils filled with the unrelenting smell of a dead body. Someone had died in this apartment tonight.

He has only been out of jail for one night and he's already killed someone! I thought. I'd arrived too late to stop him.

Cautiously, I crept through the penthouse, using the sparks from the Taser to flash light onto the floor like the flash of a camera. The flashes helped guide my feet as I trekked through the landscape. I didn't want to step onto any kind of a booby trap.

I entered the living room. The stench grew stronger. The scene in front of me shocked me to the bone. I had to take a second to absorb it. I had to take a moment to return my jaw to a closed position. I was so stunned by what I saw that I allowed the red scarf to completely fall off my face. It exposed my identity to the Woodsman's security cameras. But I didn't care, not now.

I entered the living room expecting to see the latest work of the Woodsman. But what I saw was not the dismemberment of a female victim. That I'd expected.

No. Instead spread out in front of me in a horrid, random fashion was a dismembered body. But not one of the Woodsman's victims.

I surveyed the mess. I saw a set of legs sprawled out over the coffee table. They were still attached at the groin, like an overgrown wishbone.

There was broken glass. It came from the center of the coffee table. The glass that used to be there had completely shattered. Glass shards covered the floor

underneath. Each sliver was covered with a droplet of blood. They looked like little blood slides.

There was a bloody arm, missing most of the hand. The severed arm was thrown over the sofa. The hand was clear across the room near the light switch.

The walls and furniture were covered in blood.

There was a torso. It was severed in two pieces. The heart and lungs had spilled out over an expensive rug, which made for an interesting fashion statement.

The other arm was tossed against a fake fireplace. Someone had impaled it on the pointy end of a poker.

All of that, all of the dismembered, bloody limbs did not shocked me. None of that bothered me. None of that had made my jaw drop.

The one thing that had made me gasp, the one thing that had stunned me, the one thing that had given me the longest pause of my existence, was the head.

Resting on top of the mantle over the fake fireplace was the severed head. The eyes were wide open. They stared at me with lifeless darkness.

They were eyes that I had seen before. The head belonged to someone that I knew. It was Townsend Dry's severed head.

Before I got to Townsend's apartment, before I could reach him, someone else had beaten me to him. Someone else had torn him completely asunder like a chewed-up rag doll.

I leaned over the bits and pieces that were left of the Woodsman. I studied them. I began to investigate the scene that must have taken place only an hour before.

I determined this time because the blood had barely begun the curdling process. It was mostly still damp and the smell wasn't quite rotten enough to be old.

I gazed at each of Townsend's limbs. The one thing that stumped me was that I couldn't figure out what the murder weapon had been.

What had the killer used to rip him apart?

As I investigated more closely, the only conclusion that I could come up with was that whatever the instrument had been, it was a barbaric way to die. It was almost as if the killer had simply used brute strength and managed to rip each limb off one by one.

That thought was too much for me to accept. The killer must have used a crowbar or some other nasty weapon. Perhaps one of the Woodsman's own primitive weapons had been used against him.

I considered the fact that there may have been multiple killers, but there was only one set of footprints left in the blood.

The killer had been considerably sloppy in that regard. He'd left a swarm of shoeprints: size 12. He was big.

The shoeprints trampled all the way across the rug and over the brick tiles. They vanished down the dark hallway toward the front door.

I was surprised that I hadn't noticed them on the way in. I guessed that the darkness was just thick enough to conceal them from me or perhaps I had been too interested in avoiding detection to have noticed them. Maybe my skills weren't quite as sharp as they used to be. No room for doubt now.

The entire murder scene was like a forensic team's wet dream. All of the different body fluids, tissue samples, and bone fragments would provide a good time for the NYPD's best forensic unit.

I looked over at the hidden security cameras in the living room. Now that I knew they were here, I found them easily. Townsend hadn't been that clever in hiding them. Instead, I had been careless in not detecting them before.

The Woodsman was a voyeur by nature. He displayed all of his killings for the whole world to see, like his artwork. He wanted an audience. He strutted.

He had filleted Sandy Parks and left her in a grotesque totem pole made of dead corpses. So of course he would have video cameras in his apartment so he could watch everything over again. He probably had cameras in his secret lair too, wherever that was.

I was not a voyeur. Shane was the only one who watched my dastardly deeds. He sat back in our body while I murdered.

Studying the cameras, I followed the wires to their origin. The wires ran from behind some fixtures up and into the ceiling. His apartment must have been beneath his lair. Townsend had a room above his apartment. It was probably on the roof.

I went back to the front door and peered out into the hallway. Nothing there. I closed the door silently, leaving it unlocked, and I went back to the elevator. There was no floor button to go any higher. I looked around and found a fire escape.

The stairwell was empty and there was no fire alarm attached to the door. I walked up the next flight of stairs. There was a thick, metal door. It had a padlock on it. The lock shined like it was brand new.

I picked it up, pulling it slightly away from the knob. I studied it in Shane's gloved hand, steadily calculating the quality. I wasn't picking this lock—no way.

As a serial killer, I had mastered many skills over the years, including lock picking. I was more than adequate when it came to performing stealth actions or breaking and entering without being detected, but to say that I could pick every lock would just be unrealistic.

I couldn't pick the new padlock. Maybe I could if I played with the tumblers for hours. There were only two quick ways to get through a padlock. The second fastest way was to just cut the lock with some heavy-duty bolt cutters. The first and fastest way to get through the lock was simply to use the key.

I turned back down the stairs and headed back toward Townsend's apartment.

I peeked into the corridor. It was empty.

In Townsend's apartment, I searched through the pockets of his pants. Of course the pants were separated into blood-covered pieces and scattered across the room like dirty laundry.

In Townsend's right front pocket, I found his keys. There was a padlock key on the ring next to car keys.

Back at the door, I opened it using the key.

The door creaked open. Slivers of dim light from the stairwell shined across the floor like the dim lighting on a plane flying 30,000 feet in the air. The room wasn't much different from a plane. It started out narrow, as far as I could see into it. There was a dull, humming sound coming from some machinery.

The room was cold.

Steam fired from some unseen pipes far in the darkness.

Shane's body shivered slightly because of the cold. I restrained him from this and his body stiffened back up.

I smelled far too many different smells to describe. Basically it was like a funeral parlor meeting an industrial chemical plant.

I touched my fingertips to the wall and searched for a switch for the lights. I found a switch and flipped it on. A booming sound came from inside the room, like a waking dragon.

An old generator cranked to life. The lights flickered on. They hung from long wires, jetting down from the ceiling like vines from a thick forest canopy.

One of the light bulbs sparked every few seconds. It flickered on and off as the tiny electrical current fought to stay alive. It was going to bust soon.

I stepped into the narrow space and walked the corridor. Eventually the hall opened up to a high-ceilinged room. There was a spiral staircase that led up to a catwalk overhead.

The ceiling was covered in pipes and rusted metal parts that I couldn't identify. Some of the pipes ran out through to the roof. I wasn't sure what any of them were for.

The bottom floor held the most interesting-looking devices. There was a chair made of corroded steel. It was black, green, and wet, as if it had been doused in acid over and over.

Above the chair were tubes and funnels that evacuated from a large cauldron.

I looked back at the chair. I noticed that the armrests and leg rests had restraints on them.

Interesting, I thought.

It appeared that the Woodsman had restrained his victims in this chair and covered them with the wooden liquid from the cauldron above.

I looked around the room. I saw various other devices and tools neatly organized. Then I noticed the laptop.

That was what I was looking for. If the surveillance video was anywhere, it'd be on that laptop. And that was where the footage of my visits would be found.

I turned on the computer and waited for it to boot up. When it did, I went to work. Proficiently, I accessed Townsend's video files and I found nothing. I searched every conceivable place. There was no sign of any files. They had all been erased. I checked the computer for the last known log in. It had been only an hour ago.

The person who had killed the Woodsman had been messy in his execution. He'd left too much evidence behind. He'd left the corpse behind. He'd left his bloody shoeprints behind.

The best way to avoid detection was to completely erase the existence of the crime. But this killer hadn't cared because he had erased the security videos. Maybe he wasn't sloppy after all. Maybe he'd worn gloves. And maybe he hadn't left behind any evidence linking him to the brutal dismemberment from downstairs except for the shoeprints, but that wasn't going to do me any good.

It'd help the FBI maybe, but not me.

I sat back puzzled.

I thought for a long moment and turned the laptop around. I removed the bottom cover and ripped out the hard drives and the memory cards. There was no reason to leave any of it behind just in case it somehow had traces of evidence left on it.

I returned the bottom cover back to the laptop and flipped it back over.

I slipped the hardware into my pocket and began to leave the Woodsman's lair behind.

Before I left, I paused. I took one more glance over the room. I felt Shane stirring. He thought for a moment of Sandy Parks and the suffering that she'd endured. Then I suppressed him down to the dark bowels of our body.

Returning to the hallway and departing through the door, I reached back and flipped off the light switch. The generator rattled and returned to sleep. The dragon had rumbled and shuttered back to its hibernation and its sinister dreams of fire.

I relocked the padlock and headed down the stairwell and back to Townsend's apartment.

At the door a sudden thought swept over me like a tidal wave.

I thought, *What if the killer saw the video of me? What if he was walking around out there with that memory stick? What if he knew that I was out there too?*

Now I had a serious problem. It was very likely that somewhere out there was a killer who knew who I was. And I knew nothing of him.

Then like an unsettled tiger, something leapt out at me. A cold thought stabbed through me. I realized the killer had removed a high tech anklet off Townsend without setting it off—no easy feat. This killer was someone knowledgeable. And knowledge was more than power; it was dangerous.

I stared over the remains of the Woodsman. I realized that I couldn't leave him behind. Someone would find him. And then there would be an investigation. Questions would be asked. The cops wouldn't care so much because Townsend had murdered one of their own, but the Feds would.

The last thing that I wanted was them snooping around, looking for a vigilante killer. In their hunt, they might find me.

So I took off Shane's jacket and folded it neatly by the front door. I went into the kitchen, carefully avoiding the pools of blood and the shoeprints. Then I took out some cleaning materials, along with all of Townsend's garbage bags.

I pulled out two garbage bags. I cut holes into two of them and pulled them over my shirt and clothes so as to avoid getting more blood on Shane's clothing.

Then I took all of the paper towels and dishtowels that I could find. I began by picking up the clumps of body parts and tossing them all into garbage bags. Next I picked up the smaller parts and the clothes. Finally the last thing left to do was clean up all of the blood, shoeprints, and stains. I used Windex and some other cleaners.

I scrubbed. I swept. And I mopped.

After I was done, I tossed the body parts down the trash shoot. I could recover them from the alley afterward. I could place them into the trunk of Shane's car and dispose of them properly in my furnace back in D.C.

Before I left the apartment, I slipped off the garbage bags and put my coat back on. Then I turned back, peered into the blackness of the apartment, and whispered, "Good night, Woodsman!"

I used Townsend's keys and locked the door from the outside. Then I left the building.

One item that every serial killer had to have around in case of emergency was a cooler. Master serial killers usually had several. Jeffrey Dahmer had two shelves full of them in the back of his pantry.

Shane grabbed as many as he needed from his apartment. He filled them with ice from the freezer. Then he placed all the garbage bags into the coolers in order to keep them from smelling up the trunk of his car.

After he had loaded the car with the remains of the Woodsman, he started the engine. It hummed to life like a faithful, mechanical beast.

The next stop was D.C. He was going home. It was time to fire up the furnace in my lair and dispose of the Woodsman forever.

Chapter 6

Monstrous Discovery.

"*I am a monster. I love to hunt.*"
—David Berkowitz, Son of Sam

The freeway was dark. Slivers of illumination fell across the blacktop like stars reflecting off the top of a lake.

The moon was out. It lit up the horizon like a blue fireball catapulting across the sky.

As Shane drove his black Mercedes Benz back to our lair in D.C., to our furnace, I thought of someone else. I envisioned someone else.

A dark man stood tall as he studied the outside of the Woodsman's building. A breeze swept up beneath his knees and brushed the bottom of his coat to one side.

A Glock 22 was perched in a shoulder holster underneath his left arm. His jacket concealed the weapon.

The man walked up to the building after realizing that the outside of it had no security. He crept up to the front door with ease and peered in. A doorman sat behind a high counter.

The dark man entered the building as if he belonged. He walked directly up to the guard. He said something. I leaned in closer to Shane's brain, but I still couldn't make out any of the man's words. Moments later he was at the elevators. He rode the elevator up to the penthouse floor.

Before he exited, he stretched out his gloved hand and caught the door before it closed.

He waited. Then he peeked out into the hall. There was no one around. He entered the hallway and walked to Townsend's apartment.

He stared at the door for a moment. He leaned in close and listened. All he heard was a faint rustling sound somewhere inside the apartment. Townsend was home.

The dark man looked up at the ceiling over Townsend's door. He peered closely at a tiny wire that was painted the same off-white color as the walls. It ran from outside the frame of the door and up to the ceiling. I couldn't believe that I hadn't noticed the wire before.

Damn! I thought.

How was he this good? Who was this guy?

Darkness surrounded the intruder like a filter. The intruder walked to the stairwell. He opened the door and entered. He walked up two flights of stairs until he was directly over the Woodsman's apartment. He stopped at the door to the Woodsman's lair. The funny thing was there was no padlock on it. It was just an old door lock.

The dark man slipped out a lock-pick and picked the lock. Within moments he was in the apartment. He was fast and skilled.

With my eyes shut, I felt my tail slither around in Shane's head, scraping the side of his brain. He winced in pain and accidentally pulled the steering wheel. The Mercedes jetted quickly to the next lane.

A car horn blared. My eyes shot open. I narrowed them. Then I closed them again and returned to my vision.

Shane drove on.

The guy swiped something from the backs of Townsend's security cameras. They were small, metal objects. Probably back-up hard drives.

He tossed them to the ground and smashed them with several hard stomps from his boot heel.

I strained to see his face, but there was nothing. I could only see his cold, dead eyes. They were black, blacker than my own.

After the man was done sifting through the Woodsman's lair, he stopped and stared at the weapons hanging from a rack above a bloodstained table.

The guy reached up and used his gloved hand to pull down a large, sharp machete. He twisted it in his hand and stared at the blade. It was perfect.

He returned to the stairwell. Instead of locking the door, he pulled a shiny new padlock from his coat and locked it around the knob.

He brought his own lock? This guy was not new to this. He planned this.

Again I shifted in Shane's head. I hated to admit it, but I was slightly nervous. The skill set of this new character was extraordinary.

The guy returned to Townsend's door and simply knocked on it. A moment went by. Then another. The door opened. Townsend stood behind it.

Townsend held a stun gun. He had expected a visitor. Perhaps, he had expected me.

The stun gun was a standard police issue with the yellow square around the tip. It waited to be fired. Once fired the metal barbs would shoot out toward the target at a high velocity. Following the barbs was a set of long metal cables not much thicker than fishing line.

Once the barbs penetrated the target, a powerful electric current ran from the length of the gun, down the long, metal cables, and into the victim. The charge from the current caused immediate pain and paralysis.

Before Townsend could fire the stun gun at the intruding stranger, he stopped and stared in shock at his visitor.

"You?" Townsend asked. Then with a reflex that had been delayed by only seconds, Townsend fired the stun gun. The electrified barbs shot through the air, cutting through the room with a sharp sound.

The electric sound surged.

The barbs dug deeply into the intruder's center mass. Microseconds later the electricity sparked and dazzled out from the point of impact, but the intruder did not budge. He merely stood motionless and unwavering.

Townsend's heart pumped fast and hard. He felt a fear overcome him unlike any that he had ever felt before. His terror grew as he watched the intruder grab onto the electrified barbs and pull them from his chest. That was when Townsend could see that the intruder wore a thick bulletproof vest.

The barbs had penetrated only the very top layer of the vest. And they barely managed that. It was because the Kevlar was constructed with a steel plate in the center of the two sides of thick fibers. The steel plate was meant to deflect knife attacks, but it worked nicely on stun guns too.

The stranger whipped the electric barbs to the floor and pulled a Glock 22 on Townsend.

"Drop the Taser," the guy commanded.

"Who are you?" Townsend asked.

"Woodsman, you are going to die," the stranger said, raising the machete high above his head. With one downward swipe, the blade chopped the fingers clean off the Woodsman's left hand.

Each bloody digit tumbled to the ground. The Woodsman clutched his fingerless hand and stumbled backward. He began to scream, but then the stranger punched him square in the throat with the hilt of the machete.

The Woodsman gasped for air.

"Look at me! You are going to die!" The guy said. His voice was filled with darkness.

Tears filled Townsend's eyes. The Woodsman had abandoned him. He was merely the human shell now. Then he whispered, "Are you working with him?"

As the words desperately floated from his mouth, the stranger stopped, motionless. He asked, "With whom?"

"You know. The one who wants to kill me. The lawyer."

"Shane Lasher?" the stranger asked. "He has tried to kill you?"

Townsend Dry reached into his pocket on the left side. It was awkward for him to do so since he had to use his right hand, which still had fingers.

He pulled out a memory stick and handed it to the stranger. Droplets of blood smeared across it from his hand. The stranger looked at it and then back at Townsend.

The intruder raised the weapon high again. He swung it down. The blade cut clear across Townsend's throat. Blood began gushing out. Townsend Dry choked and gagged.

The stranger paid no attention. Instead he walked to the sofa and inserted the memory stick into the laptop that rested on the coffee table in standby mode.

The computer came to life and the video drive started up. A small screen appeared and an image popped out onto the screen. It was a security feed from one of the cameras that the stranger had already destroyed.

His interest piqued when he saw a man wearing a disguise break into Townsend's apartment. The man was of a muscular build. He had brown, short hair. A flowing red scarf covered the bottom portion of his face. His eyes were the only thing that gave him away. Big, black eyes. The dark creature that lived inside the stranger recognized them. It was the lawyer. It was Shane Lasher.

Now the stranger had the memory stick and he knew who I was. I had to retrieve the drive.

I tossed the last bits of the Woodsman into the monstrous furnace in my lair. Shane had carried up his dismembered body parts in suitcases. It appeared that he was carrying up his luggage after returning from a trip, which was a plausible scenario.

He had wrapped each part in trash bags. He doubled the bags so no blood would seep out and stain the inside of the trunk of the Mercedes. Then he placed each bag inside the empty coolers and iced them down to keep them from smelling. Finally he used Townsend's empty luggage to transport the body parts up to Shane's penthouse.

At this time of night there was no doorman. The building security consisted of a keypad lock with everyone's individual four-digit combination.

Over the roof of my secret lair was a small industrial smokestack. To the city of D.C., the smoke that crept out was typical pollution. They had no clue that it was all that remained of a violent serial killer, a man who'd liquefied his victims in wood. His methods of macabre murder solidified his victims forever in statue-like positions. They remained frozen in the final expressions of their lives.

Now the Woodsman was cremated, his ashes forever scattered and returned to the earth. I wondered if serial killers ever really died or if our murderous souls simply returned to the earth to be recycled and reconstructed into new serial killers.

After a moment of watching the last remaining chips of bone evaporate through the small window in the furnace, Shane peered at the last shred of evidence that he had to deal with. He stared at the anklet. It was a high-tech device, smaller than the common criminal court-issued anklet.

In his life, Shane had trained himself in numerous skills. These skills trained him for a lifetime of hunting killers and evading the law.

He could speak English and get by in Spanish, French, and well enough in Russian. He was proficient in guns, knives, and other weaponry. He became skilled in unarmed combat. And he had mastered instant and unarmed kills. He could snap a man's neck with the right leverage and positioning.

All of this merged with Shane's considerable knowledge of the sciences and arts from our years in school, not to mention Shane's natural ability to converse with others; all of this made him a deadly predator. With all of these attributes,

however, the one thing that we had never foreseen to study or prepare for was a federal-issued, high-tech tracking anklet.

Two things dawned on him at this realization. First he again realized that whoever had disconnected the Woodsman's anklet must have been skilled. The second thing that he realized was that he had no idea how to dispose of this piece of equipment.

The only thing that he was certain of was that he had to get rid of it tonight before it jumped back to life. As long as it was with him, he was in danger of it reactivating. The last thing that he wanted was for the cops to suspect that Townsend was missing and had fled to his lawyer's home hundreds of miles away.

Shane couldn't throw the anklet into the fire. It might fire it up. That could send out one final signal. So he threw it into the freezing cold water of the Potomac River.

The darkness wrapped around Shane as he finally lay down from an exhausting day. He had spent the last few hours cleaning up a dastardly crime scene, driving, and finally disposing of someone else's kill. He'd arrived back at his penthouse just in time to catch the first slivers of sunlight peaking over the rooftops of the buildings to the east. The sun was barely starting its climb over the Atlantic Ocean.

I remained quiet in Shane's head. My tail was coiled up, my mouth was closed, my tendrils wrapped snuggly around Shane's brain, and my eyes were shut tight.

As I lay in a standby position, I envisioned the stranger again.

Somewhere in a dark room, the lights were off and the shades were drawn. Located near the freeway, he slept soundly. He rested in a plain motel room, nothing special, just four walls and a bed.

The stranger's dreams were too far from my view to make them out, but I imagined that he pictured the Woodsman's final breath over and over. The climax of his dream was, however, when he discovered a new monster, one that had successfully remained hidden for decades. This new creature would be much more challenging for the stranger to kill.

The stranger had already tasted the thrill of killing a killer. I didn't know how many killers he had dispatched. It couldn't have been that many if he didn't even bother disposing of the body. Leaving a hacked-up corpse like that raised unnecessary suspicion. So either the stranger didn't care about getting caught or he was simply reckless.

Suddenly, the stranger's phone rang.

"Hello," the stranger answered, his voice groggy.

"The Woodsman vanished last night. We just had a blip from his tracker. He's in D.C.," the voice on the line said.

The stranger's eyes shot open like a garage door.

"What?" he shouted into the phone.

"Sorry, sir. But Mr. Dry has vanished. Last night sometime. His tracker blipped a couple of times about a half hour ago in D.C.

"The local cops are searching near the river right now," the voice said, sounding somewhere between professional and frantic.

The stranger didn't even respond. He hung up the phone.

Then he got out of bed and headed for the bathroom. He turned on the light. He spun around, grabbed some clothes, and put them on. It was the same suit that he'd worn the day before.

The man grabbed his Glock 22 that was inside a paddle holster. He ejected the clip and checked the gun. Then he holstered the weapon. He slipped the paddle holster into the back of his pants behind his waistband.

The paddle holster was a favorite among undercover law enforcement officers because it possessed a flexibility of use, good concealment, and a relative ease for quick draw.

Its only real drawback was that it shuffled around during fast movement, such as running or driving. It also was hard to quick draw it from a seated position.

That was when I saw what I had already suspected. The thing that was obvious. This stranger was law enforcement. He held a badge in his hand for a brief moment and then placed it into the inside of his jacket pocket.

I couldn't make out the details of the badge. But I knew what it was. It was FBI. And the killer that I wanted next was none other than the one who had stood before me many times already: Special FBI Agent Kirk Cutter.

Cutter ran out his front door, not even bothering to lock it behind him.

He took the stairs down to the lobby and ran from the hotel.

He hopped into an unmarked FBI car and blared the sirens. Blue and red lights seemed to fire from the front grill of the car like laser beams. The streets were relatively dead for New York City, but the hour was still very early. The daylight had only begun emerging from the east like a great beast waking from a slumber.

The FBI car sped through the streets for about twenty-five minutes and then Agent Cutter was on the scene of Townsend Dry's apartment.

He jumped from the car, leaving it parked on the street. The blue and red lights pulsated from behind the car's grill. The lights bounced high on the buildings surrounding the crime scene.

Agent Cutter grinned as he entered the building. A uniformed cop was speaking to the doorman, taking his statement. Of course, Cutter already knew that the doorman had seen nothing.

Cutter's creature hid behind the FBI agent's steel eyes. No one suspected him. He entered the elevator, passing a policeman standing in front of them on his way in.

The elevator doors opened to Townsend's floor. Inside, an artificial light that his team had set up lit the hallway. A portable lantern illuminated a strong blue hue through a halogen bulb.

Before Cutter entered the apartment, he brandished his Glock. He checked it again. He made sure that it was ready for use. Then he holstered it again.

He was confused about why they had called him to tell him that Townsend's tracker was in D.C. He knew that Townsend was not with it. He knew that Townsend had been ripped to dozens of pieces and scattered all over his apartment.

Cutter walked into the apartment expecting to be greeted by other FBI agents asking questions about the massacre that lay ahead. He wasn't sure how much they knew, but he liked to be prepared for the worst.

What if they'd somehow figured out that he had butchered the Woodsman? What if they'd tricked him into showing up at Townsend's apartment? What if they'd set a trap for him?

He imagined it already. He was walking into a room full of agents waiting to confront him about all the forensic evidence that he'd left behind. He shouldn't have left the Woodsman in such a messy way. He should have known better. He was in such a rage that he hadn't thought clearly.

The other kills had been much neater. He'd killed other serial killers in a way that seemed like it was in the line of duty. They were legal kills. But not this time. This time his rage had gotten the best of him. It had grown stronger than ever. It was becoming harder and harder to hide it. Now he liked it. Now he embraced it.

Agent Kirk Cutter had embraced his demon.

Cutter entered the apartment with his hand resting near his gun. The holster was unbuckled.

As he entered the living room, two things happened. The first was that he saw a dozen forensic agents studying the floors, furniture, and walls. They wore protective gear and used black lights and spray bottles to search for blood spatter and other signs of evidence.

The second thing was that Agent Cutter nearly jumped out of his own skin when he saw the crime scene. His eyes scanned the apartment in desperation. The body was gone. It was nowhere.

Where were the body parts? There were no legs, no arms, no torso, and no head. There was no blood in sight. The entire apartment was spotless.

"Sir," one of Agent Cutter's team members said as he approached the stunned monster, "it appears that Townsend has not only escaped, but he has also killed again."

Agent Cutter swallowed hard. He tried to regain his composure.

"Over here." The agent pointed at the blood splatter on the wall. "This is the only blood that we have found so far, so we are hopeful that the victim may still be alive."

The dark creature inside Cutter grinned underneath Cutter's skin. It knew that no one would find a living victim. The Woodsman was definitely dead.

Someone had found the body and cleaned up after him. Someone that Agent Cutter would soon find.

"Townsend is on the run. And he has a hostage. That's why his tracker went off in D.C. The last time it showed up on GPS was near the Potomac River," the other agent said.

"Alert the metro police. Call the Bureau. Tell them to drag the river. Tell them that we're searching for that tracker and the leg that was attached to it," Cutter said.

"You think that the Woodsman is dead?"

"I don't think anything. He probably threw it in the river after taking a hostage, but let's be thorough. So have the river dragged," Cutter said. He finally relaxed his gun hand.

"Yes, sir."

Cutter did what he had done best for ten years; he controlled his team. He hunted.

It was rare for me to feel exhausted. After the long night that Shane and I had endured, I was tired. He slept. I didn't really sleep, but I did shut my eyes and dream.

The light from the sun shone into his apartment like a wave of fire. It didn't awaken him. Shane was dead to the world and so was I.

I wanted to let him sleep in. He'd earned it.

Unfortunately, he didn't get to. His iPhone started ringing. It repeated over and over. Shane was dead asleep. His resting body jerked up like he had just risen from a grave. He would have pulled off his toe tag had he actually been wearing one.

"What?" he said.

"Shane?" the bewildered voice asked. It was female.

"Yes?" Shane answered.

"Townsend Dry is missing. And you are supposed to be in court with him right now, in New York!"

The female voice was now very recognizable to Shane. It was his Brazilian, femme fatale assistant, Ally Embers.

"Missing?" Shane asked. He still reeled from such a deep sleep. The news almost did surprise him until he remembered that he already knew that Townsend was missing.

No. He's dead, Shane thought.

"Yes. The FBI is looking for him now. And Agent Cutter has called looking for you," she said.

"I'm in D.C. But don't tell anyone that," Shane said.

"They've tracked him here. If they find out that both of you are here, it will look bad."

"He's here? How do they know that?

"His anklet led them to the river," she said.

Shane's sleepiness was abruptly interrupted by Ally's report. It vanished like an escaping convict. Shane was now fully alert.

"They're dragging the river now. They think that he removed the anklet and threw it in."

"I had a long night last night. I'm hung over," Shane lied.

He paused a beat.

Then he said, "Look, I will make it back to New York before anyone notices. Stay on top of this case for me and let me know if anything develops."

Then he hung up before she could reply.

Shane checked his phone. He had dozens of missed calls: Tina, Ally, Range, and even Sun Good. There were far too many voicemails to listen to. Most of them were from Sun Good, so Shane decided to call her back first.

He dialed her number and a grimacing wave washed over me like someone had cracked open Shane's skull and flooded it with regrets. I didn't look forward to a scolding from Sun Good.

He listened as the number dialed. He heard clicking and ringing sounds. Then the line stopped ringing and a familiar, sultry, but slightly pissed-off voice answered.

Sun Good said, “Shane! Where the hell are you?”

Her voice actually sent shivers down his spine.

“I’m in D.C.,” Shane replied, composing himself even though she couldn’t see him. He couldn’t lie to her. He couldn’t say that he was in New York still. She may have already heard from Cutter that Shane wasn’t in his apartment there. Or she might have heard from his office that he hadn’t shown up today.

The last thing that he wanted was to be caught in a lie by her. She was a good cop. Under the circumstances, if she suspected him she’d be forced to arrest him. And she’d do it to.

If Cutter knew that Shane was incarcerated and unarmed and in restraints, he could be very dangerous. He and his monster could be very dangerous for both of us, extremely dangerous. So telling her the truth now was better than trying to recover from a lie later.

“What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be in New York!” Sun said.

“Calm down,” Shane said.

“I am really on edge right now. So please answer the question!” she replied.

“I heard that Townsend went missing. I heard that he might be here and I drove all night,” Shane said.

“You HEARD that he was missing? Where did you hear that?”

“I have sources in the bureau.”

“Who?” she asked.

“I’m not telling you any more than that,” Shane said.

“Okay. So tell me this. You just said that you drove all night. The bureau didn’t even know that he was missing all night. They didn’t know until his anklet came to life this morning, so how did you know before they did?”

Damn it! I thought.

“I misspoke. I’m still exhausted from the long drive here. I meant that I found out about it early this morning.”

“Early, huh? Like when?”

“I don’t know. It’s a five-hour drive. It’s about 9:30 a.m. You do the math! Are we done with this interrogation?”

“That sounds suspicious,” Sun replied. Her voice was clawing into me with her allegations.

There was a long pause. It wasn’t suspiciously long. It wasn’t a definite giveaway that Shane didn’t have a straight answer. But it was noticeable. Then suddenly he replied and even surprised me with his cunning.

He said, “I left because I thought that he might try to escape.”

“You suspected that he would try to escape? Why didn’t you call me? Why didn’t you call Agent Cutter?”

Another pause occurred.

“I’m going to tell you the same thing that I already told that FBI agent. I don’t work for you!

“Townsend Dry is my client. I work for him. I’m not going to call the cops on him when he hasn’t committed any crimes. If he ran I would’ve convinced him to return, but I wasn’t sure that he would. I only suspected. I came here as a precaution.

“Honestly, Townsend is not the first client that I’ve had to talk out of running. He’s simply the only one that you guys have caught doing it,” Shane answered.

Having an ex-girlfriend as a homicide cop was tough for any serial killer. Sun was particularly hard because she was tough, as tough as they come. One thing that I had to admire about her was that she was made of steel.

At the end of the pause, just when Shane was sure that Sun Good was going to speak, he heard her sigh over the phone.

Then she said, “Are you at home now?”

“Why?” he asked.

“I’m headed to a department meeting. I’ll be out in an hour, maybe two. Then I’m coming to your apartment to pick you up. Be waiting out front at eleven-thirty. Okay?”

“I really have a lot to do today,” Shane answered.

“Please, be outside in two hours. If I get there earlier, I’ll text you. Get a nap in before then. You do sound tired,” she said. Then she was gone. The phone went dead.

Shane sighed and let out our mutual relief. Because if Sun Good did put the pieces of what had really happened together, even Shane wasn’t going to stop me from silencing her forever.

She would meet the monster living behind the eyes of the man she had loved.

Shane had two hours until Sun Good would show up at his front door. She’d made it sound important. So he would stay.

Shane decided to follow Sun’s advice and get a nap. He lay down on the sofa, still fully clothed except for his shoes. They were tossed on the opposite side of the living room.

Shane closed his eyes and drifted off in seconds. A quick nap wouldn’t hurt anything. So he drifted off to sleep.

A dark figure—it had to be Cutter—hovered over a computer screen. He watched intently at a video that projected across the screen. The shadows around him kept his face covered. The darkness that had showed me these events sometimes also pixelated them in such a way that some images were distorted and some were clear.

Cutter watched the screen light up.

I focused on the video. It was surveillance of an apartment that I recognized. It was a night that I remembered.

The images on the screen were of me. I watched as he did. I saw Shane’s body, but it was transformed. His face was covered in a blood-red scarf. I watched as my gloved hands turned the doorknob to the Woodsman’s front door. I watched as I snuck in and searched for the crazed killer that was supposed to be my kill.

Cutter watched the very same thing. In the last moments that I’d been in Townsend’s apartment, I’d looked directly at the camera. Although, I didn’t see it, it saw me. It recorded me staring up at it.

The dark figure paused the laptop and froze my covered face. Even though most of my face was wrapped in the scarf and most of my features were hidden, Cutter recognized my eyes. He recognized the black orbs that stared out of Shane’s face.

He recognized the evil behind them. He recognized the shark-like eyes, soulless and black like the heart of a black hole.

A grin crept across the figure's face, a distorted face. Even though I couldn't make out his features. I knew that evil grin was there.

Kirk Cutter knew that he looked at Shane. Without a doubt he knew that lurking through the Woodsman's home, right in front of him, was Shane's body and the monster that drove him.

Suddenly, time spun ahead, like a DVD skip. Now Cutter sat behind a desktop, not a laptop. He was in an office. He must have moved to the offices in New York City.

The shadows danced across his face.

The villain's hands raced across the keyboard. He filled out an FBI form, some kind of intranet program, something that I was either not familiar with or couldn't make out because of the distorted pixelation.

I did recognize two words that he typed into the computer:

Shane Lasher

He searched for Shane's records. The blackness in his eyes beamed into the images of records and texts that projected onto the screen. He smirked as if he had the power to learn things about me that no one else with Internet access could do.

He searched through college records, public case files, and property and tax records. It wasn't until he hit a brick wall that the smirk on his face turned into frustration.

His inquiry into Shane's records was denied.

Shane's records before the age of eighteen were sealed by the courts. The name on the request was one that the FBI agent didn't recognize at first. Then he remembered it.

It was Terrance Graves.

Then the FBI agent picked up a landline phone. He dialed an internal number and waited as the phone buzzed another department.

A voice answered, "Yes?"

"Get me Doug Lawson," the caller said.

A moment passed and then there were a couple of ringing sounds, followed by a click as someone picked up the transferred line.

"This is Agent Lawson," a voice on the other line said.

"Lawson, I need some sealed files unlocked," the caller said.

Agent Lawson recognized the commanding voice. He looked down at the caller ID on his phone. It read:

Agent Cutter's Office

There was a pause. Static hissed through the phone as the caller waited for a response.

Lawson cleared his throat.

Then he said, "This is Lawson."

“Agent Lawson,” the dark voice said. “I need you to unseal some court records for me. And I need it done unofficially.”

“I can’t do that,” Lawson said. I could hear the shiver in his voice, the terror. He was afraid of this caller.

“Lawson, don’t make me ask again.”

A moment of silence passed between them like a gust of wind brushing over a silent desert.

Then Lawson said, “I’ll get it done.”

He hung up the phone.

Chapter 7

Death Warrant.

“*One murder makes a villain. Millions a hero.*”
—Beilby Porteus, Bishop of London

I slithered inside Shane’s cranium and brushed my scales against his brain. My tail coiled around the brainstem. His cerebral neurons ignited under the pressure and he snapped back into the stream of thought that I preferred: death.

With a violent surge, Shane shot up on the couch. He was slightly dazed. His reaction was as if he had dreamed of falling and suddenly had jerked out of his sleep because he’d smashed to the ground.

It was time to venture outside into the street and wait for Sun Good.

Shane rose and stretched his body straight up into the air. His fingertips reached toward the ceiling. His vertebrae elongated and returned to their natural position.

He needed a shower, so he started to make his way to the bathroom. Before Shane could even get halfway there, his iPhone beeped. He sighed and yawned. Next he slugged his tired body to the phone. He lifted it to his eyes and glanced at it.

The message read:

Come Outside!

Sun Good is here, Shane thought. Low energy levels barely fueled Shane’s body as he sluggishly picked up his shoes and put them back on.

Shane grabbed his Bulova watch. Next he grabbed his keys from the table near the door and headed outside.

He stopped in the hallway to lock the door and slide his coat on over his wrinkled shirt and tie. Shane looked and felt exhausted. We’d spent the whole night cleaning up body parts, hiding Townsend’s corpse, and driving. Now we had to go downstairs and meet with Detective Sun Good.

Shane rushed down the corridor and rode the elevator to the lobby. He got off and brushed past other tenants as they headed into the city.

As he stepped into the unwelcoming light of day, he saw a Crown Vic parked at the curb. The windows were tinted and the doors still closed.

Exhaust puffed from the tailpipe. The car must have been waiting at the curb for at least several minutes.

Shane heard the engine humming beneath the metal hood and the reinforced rammer on the front of the car.

He stared at the car for a moment. He waited for Sun Good to pop her head out and order him to get in. Instead the passenger door swung open.

Nothing happened. No one came out. There were no instructions from the driver.

The interior of the car appeared to Shane like the entrance to hell. The sunlight that glared through the darkened windows illuminated the inside of the front cabin in an eerie red color. The seats were dark brown. They appeared redder in the light.

Shane walked closer and lowered himself into the car. It felt like he descended into hell, all nine levels by the time he hit the seat.

Shane plopped into the seat. The door slammed as the car sped off.

That was when Shane realized that Sun Good was not driving the car.

At the exact moment that the car left the curb, he saw her pull onto the street in front of Shane's apartment building. She was in an unmarked white Ford Mustang.

Shane looked slowly over at the driver. His heart revved up and hammered in his chest.

He gazed over in shock into the face of a grinning FBI agent.

"Thanks for getting in," Kirk Cutter said.

Before Shane could speak, Cutter continued, "Let's go for a ride."

The car sped off.

Moments after we drove away in Cutter's car, Detective Sun Good pulled up to Shane's apartment. She jumped out of her car in a hurry. She walked into the lobby and had the doorman buzz Shane's apartment.

Sun Good waited and waited. There was no answer.

The car ride was tense. I liked to be in control of a situation. I liked to have the upper hand. In this case, Kirk Cutter had fooled us. Shane sat quietly as Cutter drove the car to a destination that remained unknown.

They drove for ten long minutes in complete silence. The car stopped at a traffic light. Shane watched from the front window as a group of pedestrians, including a class of high school kids, crossed the intersection in front of the black, unmarked FBI car. His heart began racing in Shane's chest cavity.

Shane watched the students as each one of them passed, but he kept his peripherals locked onto Agent Cutter.

Shane saw that Agent Cutter had his eyes forward.

As the light changed, Cutter gunned the accelerator and the car sped off, almost taking one of the pedestrians with them as he shuffled to make it across the intersection.

After driving through the city for forty minutes and weaving through moderate traffic, Agent Cutter pulled the FBI car into a parking garage. He drove up one level and pulled the car tight against the low-rising guardrail. Cutter killed the engine and said nothing. He just stared out the front window.

Shane turned his eyes and looked out over a massive scene of FBI agents, local cops, and Coast Guard divers in full gear. Half a dozen boats patrolled up and down the Potomac River.

The FBI searched the shoreline while the MPD maintained a wide parameter, keeping onlookers at bay.

Without turning his head to speak, Cutter opened his door and got out of the car.

Shane watched him. He didn't know what to expect, but he followed suit and got out of the car as well.

Cutter walked around the trunk and approached Shane.

He stopped just behind the passenger rear door and opened it. Then he took off his suit coat. I began to surface. I stared at Cutter's shoulder holster.

In the holster was a Glock 22. I stared at it. It was a beautiful weapon.

I sensed no immediate danger and receded into Shane. I stood at the edge of him just in case.

Cutter tossed his suit coat into the back seat of the car. He bent down into the car and pulled out two new items. The first was an FBI windbreaker. It was blue with FBI letters scrolled on the back in a bright yellow color.

The second item was a laminated FBI pass. He tossed it to Shane.

Shane flipped the pass over in his hands and studied it. It read "Visitor."

"Put that on," Cutter ordered.

Shane stared into Cutter's cold, unrevealing eyes. Deep inside those offset eyes, a monster lay in wait. It stared back at me from behind Cutter's face. It wore his face like a mask. The dark thing inside of him had no idea that it was staring at something far worse—me.

Shane responded to Cutter by slipping the lanyard over his neck. The temporary badge fell across his chest and over his tie. The white of the badge matched his wrinkled shirt.

Cutter stopped and stared at Shane's clothes for the first time since he had abruptly picked him up.

"You slept in those? Were you out all night?"

"Wild night," Shane responded, and that was all he said. The human side of Shane smiled in a playful way, the kind of playfulness that brothers shared.

"Follow me," Cutter demanded. He led Shane down the row of parking spaces. They walked a short distance to a large cement pillar.

On the opposite side of it was a fire escape leading down to the shoreline of the river.

Cutter led Shane down a flight of stairs. Then they stepped onto the bank of the Potomac River.

Shane saw the scene in much greater detail than before.

The Coast Guard used a rescue chopper to search for Townsend's body.

The helicopter was the model that they'd adopted in 1979. It was an HH-65.

The HH-65 was known for its Fenestron tail rotor, a rotor that spun inside the end of the tail. This breed of helicopter was also known for its autopilot abilities, capable of completing an unaided approach to the water and bringing the aircraft into a stable fifty-foot hover over the water's surface. It could also automatically fly search patterns, an ability which allowed the crew to engage in other rescue efforts.

In the scene in front of Shane, the crew was scanning the water with depth equipment and using simple eyesight in order to search for any sign of a human corpse in the river.

"Why are we here?" Shane asked.

"Someone killed your client last night," Cutter said.

"Townsend? Killed? How do you know that?" Shane asked.

"We found blood in his penthouse," Cutter replied.

"So you're dragging the river?"

"His tracker was last traced here," Agent Cutter said.

Then he said, "His body is either in that river or somewhere else. We will find him."

"Why am I here?" Shane asked.

"I don't like killers. I hate them. One year ago I came to you. I gave you an assignment. You were supposed to look into why so many of your clients have gone missing, but so far you have come up with nothing."

"Maybe I've come up with nothing or maybe I just don't want to help you. It's not my job to help you with yours!"

Cutter said nothing. Then he began walking through the clusters of police and forensic investigators.

The two men skirted through the crowd.

Shane was impressed by the work and manpower that surrounded him.

All of this for me? he thought.

Shane was in fact a little intimidated. He had been on national television, in front of state officials, and even posed for Vanity Fair. But the FBI—that was quite a feat. Perhaps one day he would be on their most wanted list.

Suddenly, Cutter stopped walking. He turned his toes and pivoted back in Shane's direction.

He poked his long fingers into Shane's chest.

Shane felt the power and force behind them.

Cutter said, "I know that you know more than you're saying. I know that you're more than you let people see."

A couple of the FBI agents who stood on the outer perimeter of the river turned and stared at them. The agents gazed at Shane like he was threatening their lead agent.

Two of the agents began to walk over to back up Agent Cutter.

Kirk Cutter didn't flinch. He just stared into Shane's intense blue eyes. He didn't see me. I was certain of it, but his demon sensed that I was there.

Before the two FBI agents stopped just behind Cutter's shoulders, Cutter reached his hand up and signaled for them to retreat.

“I’m fine,” he said.

The two agents knew better than to question Agent Cutter’s orders.

They glanced at each other. Shane could see that their faces questioned the situation, but their bodies didn’t dare disobey Agent Cutter. They quickly turned around and headed back to their business.

Cutter moved in closer to Shane. His breath fell across Shane’s face as Cutter exhaled.

Then Cutter whispered two single words. He said, “Follow me.”

Kirk Cutter turned and walked away into the distance. He headed toward the tree line at the top of the hill, a spot that gave a perfect sniper’s view of the landscape. It was also secluded from the swarms of FBI agents and Coast Guard patrols that canvassed the water.

He tried to get away from the other officers. He wanted to have some privacy for him and Shane, but still be near his men.

As soon as they reached the top of the hill, Cutter turned away and faced the river. He scanned over it. No prying eyes. No one looked up at them. No one seemed to even take notice that he and Shane had walked up here.

Then Kirk Cutter drew his weapon and pointed it straight at Shane’s chest. He pointed it dead center.

A Glock 22 comes in a .40 caliber. With all things equal, a .40 caliber bullet was not as damaging as a .45, but it was a lot more damaging than a 9mm.

A bullet shot at dead center mass would inflict catastrophic damage. It would be absolutely detrimental. It would be the death of Shane and of me.

In order to kill, I needed Shane. I needed his hands. I needed his mind. I needed his body. Shane was more than just my vessel, my transport, my life-pod; he was my weapon. He was my host.

The instant that the barrel of the Glock 22 touched Shane’s chest, I withdrew from hiding.

I revealed myself to Cutter. My eyes changed to black. At the same moment, Kirk Cutter’s inner demon also came out of hiding.

The trees cast shadows over us. Time seemed to slow down. We were in a standoff.

The darkness that veiled us helped to hide our true appearances from the FBI agents below us, but it also kept us from seeing each other in our complete, monstrous selves.

Cutter’s lips began to move, and he said, “Don’t mess with me. I have the FBI’s resources at my disposal. Remember that.

“Even your precious past is not sealed from me. I saw your files. I know that the StoneCutter killed your parents while you were in your mother’s womb.

“How did you survive that attack?

“Right. I know. He buried your mother alive while she was pregnant with you.

“Tell me. Did she give birth to you in that grave? Did she die after she saw you?

“Did you kill her?” Cutter said.

Silence fell between us.

Then he said, “How did it feel decades later when you had to free the StoneCutter from his conviction?

“It must have ripped you apart to have freed him only to have him kill your guardian, Terrance Graves. Right?

“That is what happened. Right? You freed him and then he murdered your adopted father?”

Shane said nothing. I listened to Cutter, but my mind was busy. I calculated six different moves to escape his Glock 22. Some were riskier than others.

Shane had trained his body his entire life. He was a fine-tuned combat weapon. And I was a deadly creature with uncanny abilities and tactics at my disposal.

However, I still liked to have good odds. Mathematically speaking, a reliable gun, especially a high-quality gun like a Glock, left very low odds of survival at point-blank range. No. Scratch that. It left no odds of survival, none at all.

The odds against escaping Cutter’s gunshot were even more distressful when I considered that he was a skilled shooter and a trained FBI agent. Cutter was in his early forties. It struck me that he was a lifelong FBI agent, so he was more deadly than most people with a gun.

Agent Cutter could probably hit Shane from more than twenty feet away while wearing a blindfold. So escaping his gunfire at this range wasn’t even worth considering. Six moves or not, I wasn’t escaping it. So I abandoned these tactics.

Instead I tried focusing on a different tactic. I focused on communication and diplomacy. Then once I diverted his attention or moved his aim away from Shane’s chest, I could make a move to escape him.

“You won’t shoot me,” I said. My voice resounded through Shane’s, like a voice modulator. It sounded feral and electronic.

“What makes you think that?”

Good. He was talking. Thinking. Considering. That was better than shooting. “How are you going to explain it to the other FBI agents? What happened? An unarmed man that you escorted onto a crime scene attacked you?”

Cutter said nothing, but his demon grinned behind Cutter’s human face. It was the kind of sinister grin that I had seen on guilty defendants in the courtroom when they were asked about killing their victims. It always seemed like they spent a microsecond relishing the memory of it.

A short burst of memory flashed across their faces. This caused the quick grin. Only Shane and I had witnessed the grin. And that grin told a story of guilt.

Cutter’s grin told me that that was exactly what he had planned to say. He’d brought me here to kill me.

Cutter began speaking in a dark voice. He mimicked a TV news anchorman.

He said, “Shane Lasher, the hated, the loved, and revered lawyer who defends serial killers, murderers, and the lowlifes of society, attacked an FBI agent today at the scene of a crime.

“The FBI agent confronted Mr. Lasher about his involvement in the disappearance of Townsend Dry, the Woodsman.

“Mr. Lasher attacked the FBI agent. And in the line of duty, the special agent shot Mr. Lasher in the chest,” Agent Cutter said.

I had steadily grown angry to the point of boiling over and rising up higher and higher through Shane. Without warning, I was so far out on the surface of him that I almost leapt completely from his body.

I shouted, but the words hissed from my lips instead.

I said, “What about you? I know what you are! You shot Miguel Crown. Shot him in cold blood. You think that I’m scared of you. You have no idea who I am. Cutter, you killed Dry, chopped him into little pieces. I found him. He was scattered all over his apartment. Tiny fragments and long, serrated appendages. He was unrecognizable.”

Cutter gripped his gun so tightly that his knuckles turned red.

I had started at six conceivable ways to break the connection from Cutter’s gun. Six ways that might lead to my successful escape.

I was now up to ten, but even with the four additional ways that I had come up with, not one of them had good odds.

I had to break away from the barrel of the Glock. Even a matter of inches could make all the difference. All I needed was two or maybe three inches of room to move away from it.

Then, suddenly, like an answered prayer, like an oddity, a miracle that was totally unexplainable and yet gratefully accepted—Cutter’s cell phone rang.

The ringer sounded from his inside jacket pocket.

Cutter broke his sights on me for only a second, but it was enough for me to back away from the gun, which I did.

I managed to remove the tip of the barrel from Shane’s chest. That was enough to give me the room that I required for the second move that I had formulated in my snake brain.

Cutter tilted his head at me. Then he made his first mistake. He released his left hand from the butt of the gun, from just underneath the magazine. It was the hand that he had used to brace the recoil from the gun and to help steady his aim.

He used this hand to reach for his phone.

The second mistake that he committed allowed me the diversion and time that I needed to make my move.

He reached into his pocket, pulled the cell phone out, and answered it.

It was that moment that I made my mistake. Well actually, it was Shane’s mistake, but it still affected me just as much. I hesitated because of the words that came from Agent Cutter’s mouth.

In a reptilian voice, he said, “Sun Good. How can I help you?”

Shane’s weakness!

“Where is Shane Lasher? I’m not sure. Have you tried his apartment?”

There was one good thing that emerged from Shane’s feelings toward Sun Good. As he had proven in the past, Shane would do anything to protect her. He’d even stopped me from killing her once. And that was not an easy feat.

At first it had angered, no, infuriated me that Shane could resist me at all, but I’ve learned to live with it. In fact, I’ve evolved and decided it was best to use his feelings for her as a weapon.

After I discovered Shane’s ability to resist me, I realized that I could use this to our advantage on occasion.

This was the way I would save us from Cutter.

As he continued to talk on the phone, he smiled at us. He taunted Shane. His eyes registered a primitive expression. This expression was common among males of almost every kind found in the wild. It was a primal notion that went back thousands of years. It was found everywhere from lions to apes to humans.

His eyes conveyed to Shane this message: I'm talking to your woman. After I shoot you in the chest, I think that I will pay her a little visit.

Maybe I'll even lead her away from the city. I'll take her out deep in the woods and have my way with her.

"Big mistake!" Shane whispered.

Agent Cutter leaned his head forward slightly and squinted his eyes. He couldn't hear Shane. So he tried to read Shane's lips. He didn't understand what Shane had mouthed.

Kirk Cutter had made my escape a hundred percent easier. I harnessed Shane's feelings for Sun Good and, with a swift strike with Shane's right hand, swiped Cutter's gun arm down and away from his body.

At the same time, Shane pivoted on his right foot and charged toward Cutter.

The Glock's slide racked and the gun fired in the process. The bullet exited the gun and shot through the air past Shane's left shoulder, barely missing us.

The bullet fired over the crowd. It traveled over the river and into the cold morning air.

The gunshot rang out. If everyone had ignored us before, they weren't ignoring us now.

FBI agents brandished their weapons. They scattered and took cover, using parked vehicles, broken trees, and large dirt mounds.

The gunshot ignited their trained instincts. They had to stay under cover and assess the situation.

The divers stayed in the water. Members of the Coast Guard ducked down into their boats.

The rescue chopper began to rise. Its rotors spun and shook as the pilot reacted and pulled the chopper up, evading the gunfire.

As the other agents took cover and watched Agent Cutter fighting with the stranger on the hill, none of them dared to fire their weapons. The two men on the hill were too close together to risk taking a shot.

I charged into Cutter, his cell phone flying into the air. We both struggled for the Glock.

As Cutter's legs moved back from the force of my charge, he responded by pulling the gun toward him and propelling me past his body. It was an excellent move, and he almost retrieved the gun, but I was quick to counter. I never let go of the weapon. It nearly pointed at my chest, and he tried to fire it, but he retreated once I had grappled his trigger finger and applied pressure to it.

Cutter's gun hand went limp. Instead of trying to recover it, he punched Shane's face, a solid left cross. It spun me away, but the gun came out of his hand and fell with me.

The moment I hit the ground, I scrambled to get the Glock. Before Cutter could reach me, I had the gun in hand and pointed directly at him.

Cutter stopped dead in his tracks. He began to pant to regain his breath. The fight was over and he knew it.

He said, "What are you going to do?"

"Shoot you," I answered.

"You can't. If you kill me you'll go to prison for the rest of your life."

"I didn't say that I would kill you. I said that I would shoot you," I said.

I could see the sudden fear engulf his eyes. The demon inside of him was scared.

"Wait! You can still get away. Most likely no one has recognized you, but if you shoot or kill me, they will find out. And I can't tell them that you shot me. I already told Sun Good on the phone that I haven't seen you," Cutter begged.

I thought about this. Then I said, "That seems like an easy lie that you could get out of. But you are right; I can't kill you here. Not in the open like this."

I watched as the terror receded from his face. He seemed to relax right in front of me. That was until I raised the gun and looked directly down the sights at him.

"Move away," Shane commanded. They moved farther away from the edge of the hill. Now none of the agents below them could see what was happening.

"Toss me your keys. Slowly!" I said.

Slowly, Cutter reached one hand into his pocket and pulled out a pair of car keys. He tossed them to me. I caught them with Shane's free hand.

I placed the keys in my pocket and backed away from him. I scooted toward the trees and away from the river and FBI agents.

"One more thing: Is that a bulletproof vest that you're wearing underneath your shirt?" I asked.

Without thinking, he simply responded like it was an involuntary reaction, a reflex.

He said, "Yes."

The second that my evil, twisted grin appeared on Shane's stubbly face, Cutter's fear returned with a vengeance. He realized exactly what I had planned for him.

A .40 caliber bullet at close range, which was where we stood from each other, was deadly. I had no idea what kind of vest Cutter wore. I had no idea if it was capable of withstanding a .40 caliber bullet. Some vests wouldn't, not at this range, but that was a chance I didn't mind taking.

So I fired the Glock into his chest. The center mass shot was deadly. It was game over for anyone. The center of a human's body houses most of the vital organs, including the heart and lungs. The lungs are huge targets at short range.

Perhaps, if I had fired a second round into the vest at this range, Cutter would have been dead right then. He would have definitely died if I had unloaded the gun, but I fired only once. I needed him alive for now.

The bullet went into his vest. Cutter fell back. The vest ripped slightly from the bullet's impact, but the bullet didn't puncture his skin. He rolled around on the ground in agony.

I wanted to stay longer. I wanted to watch him suffer more, but I had to escape. The FBI agents below were not going to wait much longer. I could hear their shouting. They had already begun to storm the hill.

I turned, scooped up Agent Cutter's fallen cell phone, and vanished into the trees.

Behind me I heard Cutter. He didn't shout after me, but he tried. The sound of his voice resonated like a loud whisper. I could make out what he said.

He said, "I'm going to kill you, Lasher. I'm going to enjoy catching you and putting a bullet in your head.

"Run, Lasher. Run.

"Get a head start.

“Run.”

I closed my eyes and saw a vision of Cutter.

In the parking structure, Agent Kirk Cutter stared at the empty space where his vehicle had been parked.

Shane had stolen it.

Cutter’s team had assembled and begun searching for evidence. The police put out an APB on the car, and the FBI began searching for the car’s GPS, but they wouldn’t find anything. Shane had ripped the GPS out of the trunk of the car and tossed it at the stoplight two blocks north of the Potomac River.

“McCarron,” Agent Cutter said to an agent who was looking at his cell phone.

“Yes?” the agent responded.

“Give me your phone.”

Agent McCarron glanced down at his phone. He’d closed whatever text message he’d been reading and handed the phone to Cutter.

Cutter didn’t acknowledge the agent’s sacrifice. He simply walked away with the phone in his hand.

The dastardly demon in his head recalled a number that he needed and Cutter dialed it.

“Hello,” a female voice said on the other end of the line.

“Lasher got away,” Agent Cutter said.

“Go after him,” the dark female voice said. I didn’t know whom he was speaking to.

Another FBI agent perhaps?

“What do you suggest?” Cutter asked.

There was a pause between him and the woman on the other end of the line.

Then she said, “I’ll get a search warrant. You should search his penthouse.”

“Good idea,” Agent Cutter said.

Another moment of silence existed between them.

Then he said, “I’ll put his name across all channels. Shane Lasher attacked an FBI agent. He is now wanted for questioning and is suspected in the disappearance of Townsend Dry.”

“Kirk, be careful. Shane is not like the others. I know him. He is deadly. Do not underestimate him,” the female voice said.

Kirk Cutter squeezed the phone in his hand. He said, “Don’t worry. Get the search warrant. Start the manhunt.

“He will be dead soon enough. Just like the others.”

A second later, Kirk Cutter was off the borrowed phone. He walked away from the group of FBI agents and looked up at the sky. Then he glanced back at the rescue chopper. It hovered over the river.

He watched as a diver came up with a black plastic object. It was an ankle tracker, Townsend’s tracker.

Cutter smiled. He now had evidence that suggested Townsend had passed through here.

This evidence would help him get a search warrant for Shane’s penthouse apartment. It would help him convince law enforcement agencies that Shane was the culprit.

This was not good. Cutter would say that Shane attacked him. Now the entire FBI would be looking for Shane. He attacked one of their own.

The unwritten rule would be shoot to kill.

The manhunt had begun.

Chapter 8

Manhunt.

"*I won't let you murder it.*"
—Muse, Our Time is Running Out

Traffic filled the streets of D.C. The police scanner in Agent Cutter's car went haywire with police chatter and radio codes that made no sense to Shane.

Someday I would invest some time in learning them, but for now I assumed that they were all in reference to Shane.

Shane sat idle in the stolen FBI car. He rested beneath a stoplight. The light turned green. Shane drove on. Traffic was heavy, but moving. He saw two police cruisers headed in the other direction. Shane didn't duck down; he didn't flinch. He just casually drove in the opposite direction.

He had to ditch the car and Cutter's phone. Both of these items were traceable.

He drove north. Shane looked down at the cup holder. There was a Bluetooth hands-free set rattling around in it. He picked it up and attached it to his ear. Then he searched through Cutter's cell phone with quick glances back at the road.

Shane saw a side street to his left that looked empty. He turned the wheel. The car cut across the road and he turned onto the side street.

He followed the street halfway down and then slowed the car. He parked near the curb and killed the engine.

Shane returned to looking through Agent Cutter's contact list on his phone. He found Sun Good's number and dialed it.

The phone rang a couple of times.

Finally, a voice answered it. It was Sun Good.

"Cutter?" she asked.

"Sun," Shane said.

She immediately recognized his voice.

"Where the hell are you? Why are you on Kirk's phone?" she asked.

Kirk's phone?

She used his first name. That was the thought that raced through Shane's mind.

Why had she called him Kirk? He wasn't comfortable that Sun Good called Cutter by his first name. It implied that they had a more than a professional working relationship.

This question was an issue that he would have to revisit. If Cutter was already tracking this phone, then he could be onto Shane soon.

Shane focused and said, “Sun! I don’t have time to answer any of your questions.”

“What the hell is going on, Shane? Kirk said that you weren’t with him like a half an hour ago, and now you’re calling me from his phone.”

Shane pushed the driver’s door open and slid out of the car.

He looked up and down the street. No one was around except for a homeless man sleeping in a shaded nook on the side of one building.

“Listen,” Shane said. “Don’t trust him! He’s lying. He’s not what he seems.

“The FBI will tell you a bunch of lies about me, about what happened.”

“What are you talking about? What the hell happened?”

“Trust me. I can’t explain right now. I have to get moving,” Shane said.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“It’s probably better that you don’t know.”

“I’m confused.”

“Look,” Shane said, and he shut his eyes and sighed.

Then he clenched his eyes tight as if he realized what he was about to do. He just said what he thought was best.

He said, “Goodbye, Sun.”

“Shane? What? Why? What the hell is going on?”

“Don’t believe them. Don’t trust Cutter. And don’t look for me. I’m going to leave the country,” he said.

I felt the pain squirming around inside his belly, like a worm going against its nature and burrowing its way back to the light.

There was a pause, a long one. Then Sun Good said, no, she half-whimpered, “Shane?”

Shane opened his mouth to speak. He let the words hang on his lips. But he said nothing and simply ended the phone call.

He paused for a moment. He rested the top of the phone on his chin. Then he took the Bluetooth out of his ear. He tossed it onto the street.

Next he pulled off the back cover of the phone. He tore the battery and SIM card out. He tossed the card on the ground and stomped on it. He tossed the battery across the street and left the remains of the phone on the sidewalk.

Shane pulled out his own iPhone. He knew that it would be traceable, but he wasn’t going to be on it long. He dialed his office.

“Hello, Shane Lasher’s office,” a familiar voice answered. It was Ally Embers.

“Ally, it’s Shane. Listen, I don’t have time to explain, but I need some information and I need it fast,” he said. He waited for her to acknowledge him.

“The Feds have called here. They’re looking for you. What’s going on? Are you in trouble?”

“I know. I didn’t do any of the things that they’re saying. Agent Cutter attacked me. He killed Townsend Dry. I don’t have time to say anything else.”

“I believe you,” she said. That was all she said. Ally knew that the time to sort out this mess would come later. Now she needed to get started on whatever request that Shane had for her.

“Good. Now listen. I need you to dig into Kirk Cutter’s past. I need to know his secrets and I need them fast, faster than any research I’ve ever had you do before.”

“I’ll get on it. Call you back?”

“No. It’s too risky. Go into my email account and draft an email. Don’t send it to anyone. Title the subject “Lost Dog.” I’ll log on later and read it.”

“Okay. Good luck.”

“Thanks. Be safe,” Shane said and hung up the iPhone.

Then he powered it down. The iPhone wouldn’t be traceable as long as it was off, so he slipped it back into his pocket.

Before Shane abandoned the car, he opened the trunk and searched through the contents. He found a first aid kit, a traffic kit, and a SWAT kit.

Shane ignored the first two items and removed a plastic cover from the top half of the trunk that read:

S.W.A.T.

Inside the large box, he found a helmet, layers of padding, a small blowtorch, and a bulletproof Kevlar vest.

Shane took the vest. If we were going to be hunted by the FBI, then a bulletproof vest would come in handy.

Shane returned to the car. He pulled his tie off and wiped down everything with it. He was good and thorough when it came to getting rid of evidence. He wiped and scrubbed everything that he had touched inside and outside the car. He wiped the steering wheel, the ignition, the handles, all the levers, and the gearshift.

This might have been a moot precaution since they already knew that Shane had stolen Cutter’s car, but he preferred not being linked to it.

No one had seen him steal the car except Cutter, and he wouldn’t be alive much longer to tell the story.

Shane locked the car and threw the keys off into the distance. Without looking back, he casually walked away from the vehicle.

He tossed his tie into a public trashcan. He liked that tie. Cutter would pay for that as well.

He strolled on, hands in pockets.

Up ahead, near the street corner, Shane saw a pharmacy. He walked in and glanced around the store. It was relatively empty.

Shane went to an ATM machine. He accessed an account that he had set up under an alias. He had several.

He took out the maximum amount that the ATM would allow and removed his card.

Shane shopped around the store and bought some supplies: bottled water, a can of Red Bull, toothbrush, razor, shaving cream, etc.

Then he left.

Shane needed to find a motel room for the night. There was no way that he was going to be able to return home. He walked and walked through the city.

He must have walked for two hours. Finally, he stopped at a cheap-looking motel. He rented a room for the night. Now he had a place to sleep.

The room was tiny and not well cared for. It wasn’t infested with roaches like Shane would have suspected, but there were a few occupants of the insect kind. They didn’t bother him.

Shane emptied his shopping bag out onto the bed and grabbed the shaving cream and razor. He went into the bathroom and stared at his face in the mirror.

The light in the bathroom had only one bulb even though there were three sockets. The single bulb flickered and forced shadows to jolt around the room.

Shane looked up at his brown hair. He had good hair. With his perfectly toned body and his hair, Shane could have competed professionally against male models. Sometimes he even did magazine spreads. The last time that Shane had graced a magazine was a year ago. Vanity Fair did a piece on him as an eligible bachelor.

Lately, no one had called his agent. He wondered why he wasn't in demand anymore.

Then he shook off his vanity and returned to the task at hand—shaving his head.

Shane wet the razor with hot water and began shaving. The heat from the blade melted through his hair and into my lair.

He stroked the razor slowly across his head. The blades scraped across his head. He returned the razor to the faucet of running water, rinsed it off, and then pulled it back across his head. The sound echoed into the ceiling of my house. Each hair follicle that fell over or was pulled back with the razor sounded like a shingle being torn off my roof.

It was like I was hunkered down during a storm.

The storm didn't pass. Instead it grew stronger and more violent. Then it began to tear through the roof as if it were coming for the occupants of my house, no matter what.

Shane's hair would grow back, so it was a necessary sacrifice. He needed to be unrecognizable. No one had ever seen Shane without his full head of hair. His clean-shaven head would help to throw the police off his trail.

Shane finished shaving his head. Staring in the mirror, Shane couldn't even recognize his own face. His head was completely bald.

Shane breathed a deep sigh.

Then he backed away from the mirror and removed his jacket. He looked at the bed. It had dusty-looking covers. He imagined that most people didn't come in here to sleep. Most used this room for extramarital activities. Others used it as a place to escape the world and take a shower.

He needed to get a few hours of sleep. Shane had a busy night ahead of him.

I had a busy night ahead.

The motel room's bed sheets and covers clung to Shane's body in the way that the darkness clung to his mind. He was fully at rest.

Back at Shane's penthouse, Kirk Cutter stood. A grin peeled away from his face, revealing his teeth just ever so slightly.

He stood watching over two FBI agents and a withdrawn Detective Sun Good.

The agents were forensic specialists. They probed every inch of Shane's penthouse, looking for any kind of evidence that would incriminate him.

They were wasting their time. They would find nothing, except of course Shane's fingerprints on everything. But what else would you expect to find in someone's

home? The answer was nothing. The most common evidence in someone's home was his fingerprints.

If they found evidence of Townsend Dry in our apartment, then that would be something amazing. They weren't going to find any such evidence. Townsend Dry had never entered our apartment, not living and not in one piece.

Now, if the FBI searched that little apartment across the roof, the one with the red door; then they might find more than they bargained for.

Inside that apartment they would find an orgy of evidence. There was a furnace, haunted by the ghosts of many dead souls. There was my kill trophy from the StoneCutter. There were my digital files, records, and other items of interest, all stored on my laptop.

The agents had been searching Shane's apartment for hours. So far, they had found nothing. And they wouldn't find anything either.

"I knew that we wouldn't find anything here," Sun said.

"We will. We will." Cutter said and half groaned back at her. He turned his back to her and the agents and walked away. He grew frustrated and didn't want them to see the darkness in his eyes.

He paced up and down the hallway near the stairs for a moment. He looked around, breathing in and then out. He tried to calm himself. He tried to steady his thoughts and emotions.

Unlike me, the monster that lived inside of him had less control over Kirk Cutter's emotions and outbursts than I had over Shane's.

Then suddenly, Kirk Cutter stopped. He gazed around the penthouse.

At the moment, I knew what he thought. A telltale realization had struck him in the face like a hammer.

Kirk knew that something wasn't right about Shane. He'd known from the beginning that Shane hid something. Kirk knew that Shane had a dark secret. He knew this not because he could sense the monster that lived inside of Shane. He did not know this because he saw me.

No.

He knew this because Shane's life was too perfect. His record was too clean. Cutter had no dirt on him. Shane seemed to be squeaky clean, but no one was that clean. No one who crossed Cutter's path was dirt-free.

Everyone turned out to be dirty. And in FBI Agent Kirk Cutter's long career of hunting killers and dealing with them, the cleaner someone looked, the dirtier they were.

Shane Lasher had one of the cleanest records that Cutter had ever seen. So now, as he looked around Shane's shiny, clean apartment, he wondered to himself. He wondered just how dirty and dark Shane's secret was.

Shane's penthouse, FBI file, career, and life were all immaculate.

Cleanliness is next to godliness. In our case, the question was: Which God?

Kirk Cutter was determined to find out Shane's secret.

He looked through the hallway and into the living room. That was when he noticed that there was a large number of windows. The sun had begun to rise an hour earlier. Now its potent light lit the sky above the city.

Even Shane's home is bright, Cutter thought.

Among the monuments, the White House and Capitol Hill's buildings, and the museums that were all brightly lit under the sun's all-powerful, all-seeing eye, one other structure was lit up. It caught Cutter's eyes. It caught the eyes of Cutter's demon.

Special Agent Kirk Cutter stared out the large windows of Shane's penthouse. Without even realizing it, his feet carried him all the way into the living room and right up against the glass. His face felt the caressing heat that transmitted through the glass as it traveled millions of miles from the surface of the sun to Earth.

Kirk Cutter smiled.

He looked through the spotless windows at a small structure that was on the roof across from the penthouse. It appeared to be another penthouse unit, but a smaller one.

To the regular onlooker, it looked like a single bedroom unit. The one thing about it that was eye-popping was the bright red backdoor. The rest of the unit's outer walls were colored in a boring off-white color. They were beaten by weather, wind-battered, and dirty from being exposed to the outside elements.

The windows had dark shutters that obstructed the view both into and out of the unit.

What Cutter did not know was that he was staring directly at my lair. He stared at the building that housed all of his answers about who Shane Lasher really was. He stared at the truth.

Shane awoke to a dying day. He had been so worn out and tired that he'd slept most of the day.

It was already late afternoon. Shane didn't overreact to his tardiness to the day. It didn't surprise him in the slightest that he had slept so long. I needed him to be at full strength. He had a busy night ahead.

The afternoon seeped away from him and the night was born. Before the night came, Shane washed and shaved his face. He stared into the mirror, studying his new bald head. It looked good.

Sun would approve, he thought.

Shane walked to the shower and pulled back the curtain. The tile was corroded and grimy, but the showerhead looked new. The old one must have ruptured and bust. That would have been the only reason why the owners would have sprung for a new one.

Shane twisted the knob and hot water sprayed out. The stream went right into the wall. Droplets of the water hit Shane's arm.

Shane turned the water to a temperature that was somewhere between scalding and lukewarm. Then he stripped down and stepped into the shower.

He showered and dressed. Then he said a farewell to one of the worst rooms that he had ever stayed in. Before leaving the keys with the night manager, Shane made a mental note never to return to this place again. As with all of Shane's mental notes, I filed it away into the depths of his brain.

He headed out into the city. Before he made his next move, he needed something from his apartment. He needed some tools. Hopefully, Cutter and the FBI would be gone already. Hopefully, they hadn't discovered my lair.

The night was infantile. Even though the darkness was technically just minutes old, it didn't seem young. That was the difference between night and darkness. The lifespan of a night was less than twelve hours. It was a thing that was born, matured, and died. It repeated this process every twenty-four hours.

Since the beginning of the Earth, nights have come and gone. Darkness was a different thing altogether. Even though darkness faded away when the sun came out, it still lived on. Darkness did not die. Darkness simply hibernated. Darkness consumed half of the planet at every moment of every day. Instead of dying, it ran from the light. It moved to the other side of the planet.

The stragglers, the ones that couldn't keep up with the majority of the darkness as they fled from the light, simply retreated behind rocks and trees. They hid behind mountains and buildings. They reflected objects and became shadows.

After Shane rode a couple of different taxis, just to make sure that he wasn't followed, he walked the rest of the way from Lincoln Square.

When he got to his penthouse, Shane saw no FBI agents. He did see one unmarked car. It was possibly Agent Cutter's.

Shane made his way into the lobby. He wasn't recognized going to the elevator.

So far so good, I thought.

He had to be ready for when the doors opened.

I crept to the edge of Shane's surface. If the doors opened to a team of FBI agents, I would be there to take as many of them to the grave with me as I could.

The doors didn't open to a room full of FBI agents. Instead they opened to an empty penthouse. The lights in the apartment switched on automatically. Shane had them set to do so.

Reacting as quickly as I could, I heaved Shane's body against the inside of the foyer's wall. I swept over it. Instantly, he was under my control. I became him.

I hugged tightly to the wall and waited. I breathed in and breathed out. Shane's chest cavity slowly rose and fell. I repeated the process again and again.

The human body was an amazing machine.

It created energy in two main ways.

The first way was through the respiratory system. The body took in air, separated oxygen from everything else, and discarded the remains as carbon dioxide.

The second way was with the digestive system. Food was taken in. The body created a transaction with the food. It took in all nutrients, stored fat, and then wasted the rest.

But there was a third way that the body took in energy. The way was through a power utilized and controlled by the brain. Humans called this energy adrenaline.

The brain released adrenaline in moments of heightened awareness or when unusual stress was created. It was in these moments that the brain functioned at a higher capacity than normal.

Shane was unique because I was in control of his brain. Every moment that I was in control of Shane's body, I released adrenaline into his bloodstream.

I was his alternate source of energy.

I used his adrenaline to hug that wall for a long period of time. No shaking. No twitching. No nervous movement at all.

In case someone was alerted by the automatic light, I waited patiently. There was no sign of an ambush. No one came out of hiding. No flood lights lit up the penthouse. No choppers circled overhead. Nothing.

I had Cutter's Glock tucked into the waistband of Shane's pants, just above the small of his back. I wasn't going to shoot at the FBI unless I had to. That would be stupid. That would be murder one.

So basically, I was unarmed. Certainly any FBI agents that waited around the corner also had their guns drawn. I made Shane stronger, but I didn't make him impervious to bullets. He could be killed just like any other human.

I hadn't planned to be gunned down in my own home. Not today. Not ever.

Several minutes went by and the lights sensed that there had been no movement beyond the elevator doors opening. They automatically switched off. They assumed that there was no one there.

I waited just a little longer. If someone else was in the house he would retreat from the hallway. Then the lights would switch on again and reveal his location.

But the lights did not come on again. There was no one waiting around the corner. There were no FBI agents. They would have made their presence known already. No way had anyone outlasted me. So there was no ambush.

I relaxed Shane's muscles and left his alertness on standby.

I removed myself from the wall and slowly slid toward the hallway. Moving slowly enough would keep the motion sensor lights from switching on. I wanted to keep the penthouse dark.

So I crept through the hallway and into the living room. There were no signs of disturbance except for some scuffing on the floors and some furniture moved to different positions. It appeared the FBI hadn't taken much care to put things back the way they found them.

I ventured farther into the apartment.

Still, nothing happened. There were no sirens or alarms or people jumping from doorways with their guns drawn.

I took Shane through the house and up the stairs. I wanted to inspect and make sure that the upstairs was unoccupied. It was.

Then from the upstairs window, I saw a figure standing on the roof across from me. He was in front of my lair. The man's back was to me. He stared at the red door. He hadn't noticed the lights come on in the penthouse earlier.

I knew who it was from his height and build. It was Cutter; he was alone.

He had no FBI windbreaker on and no suit. He wore a black sweater, black pants, black shoes, and black gloves.

He wasn't here to catch Shane with a team of FBI agents. He was here to break into our lair. He was here to learn about the monster that he thought he knew.

I wasn't surprised. I hadn't come here to stop him. I was no match for him at the moment, unless I used the gun. But I preferred not to rely on the gun. It was a noisy weapon. It would most certainly garner unwanted attention. I couldn't risk having neighbors calling the police.

Then again it was my only weapon. So I pulled out the gun, but it was only a last resort.

Special Agent Cutter did not have that same type of logic. If Cutter were to shoot me, he could just claim that it was self-defense. That was not an option for me. If I shot him, it was murder. I would be hunted and captured.

Cutter held a dark, metal object in his hand. It was a pry bar. In a flash, he stabbed the bar into the border between the doorframe and the red door.

With a short burst of muscle mass and skill, Cutter pried the door open. It swung open hard and the wood around the lock exploded and splintered into small red fragments.

He stood in the doorway and peered in with an expression of triumph. Cutter had gained access to the part of my life that no one else ever had. He stood in the home of a mass murderer.

There was nothing that I could do to stop him. I couldn't engage him here and expect to win, so I had to let him see my secrets, but he would not live long.

After he entered and vanished into the darkness of my lair, I saw a beam of light protrude out through the blackened windows. He had switched on his flashlight.

The lair was not large. Sneaking in behind him wouldn't be a good idea. The space was too crammed for that. He would've spotted me immediately. It was only a couple of rooms.

So I continued to creep slowly through Shane's apartment. I avoided the automatic lights with great success. I didn't need them. After all, the darkness was my true home. I could see just fine.

In Shane's bedroom, I found my way to his closet. Quickly, I stripped off his clothes and casually tossed them on the bed. They draped across the master bed in the perfect shape of a man. In the dark they looked like a dead man who had been flattened by a steamroller.

For the first time in a long time, I wasn't going to need my kill-suit.

I was going after a crazed, violent FBI agent. Shane was going to have to wear attire that was better suited for the job. I reached into the back of the closet and pulled out a vital piece of gear. It was something that I normally didn't wear.

After I had grabbed all of Shane's gear, I began dressing him. He wore black cargo pants with plenty of extra pockets, a long-sleeved black shirt, black socks, black shoes, and that one piece of vital clothing: an Aramid Level III bulletproof vest. This version of the vest was tight-fitting. It was easily concealable and protected most vital organs.

I strapped the vest on beneath the black long-sleeved shirt. The interior of the vest was rough like sandpaper against Shane's skin.

I put on his shoes and socks and checked out the upstairs window.

Agent Cutter was still investigating my other apartment.

I needed to get some gear from my lair. So I waited and waited until Cutter was finished.

I sat on the floor Indian style and watched from my perch. Cutter finally came out of my lair. He had a grin from ear to ear, like he had found the epitome of everything that he had ever looked for in a serial killer. It was like he'd found the devil himself.

He pulled out a new cell phone.

I slid the latch off the lock on the window and cracked it open enough so that I could hear him. My lair was less than twenty yards from Shane's penthouse.

He sifted through his contacts and dialed one of them.

The phone rang and a voice answered.

I could not hear what the voice said. But Kirk Cutter said, “I will handle the FBI when the time comes. For now let’s keep them out of it. This means that you need to keep it a secret from your bosses as well.”

Cutter walked slowly back toward the penthouse. I didn’t retreat into Shane’s bedroom and away from the window. Not yet. I waited. I wanted to hear Cutter’s conversation.

“Sun, meet me in the morning. We have a long drive to make,” Cutter said. Then he paused as if he was listening to Sun Good’s answer.

“We’re going to check out some new evidence. I promise we’ll do whatever we can to keep Shane safe. So I’ll see you in the morning,” Cutter said, and then he hung up the phone.

The cell phone’s backlight lit up his features. His eyes were thick, black orbs. They were like the eyes of an eel.

Suddenly, he stopped, as if he’d sensed my presence, and he looked up directly at the window.

But I was already back in the room. I could have left, but I really needed some supplies.

He stayed for a moment, staring at the open window. He wondered if it had always been open. Then he shrugged it off and entered the penthouse.

I waited until he left our home. Then I went to my lair and gathered the necessary gear to face off against Cutter.

Tomorrow we would have a showdown. I hoped Sun Good would not get in the way. I felt Shane’s urge to protect her. It was strong.

His feelings for her would come in handy. I would use his attachment to her to strengthen him. Now we were back and working in a dark synchronicity.

Chapter 9

Two Graves.

“*Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.*”
—Confucius

The next morning he woke up with the sun. He had spent the rest of the night sleeping in a storage unit. It was owned by Shane, but listed under a different name.

The inside of the unit was comfortable enough. The floor was concrete and cold. Shane had slept on a thick comforter that he had rolled up in the corner. Before Shane slept on it, he had taken it outside and shaken it violently. It’d had a few insects on it that he didn’t want to share sleeping arrangements with.

This storage unit housed some extra furniture and things that he’d ended up not using after he’d moved into the penthouse in D.C.

It was good practice for him to sleep on a cold concrete slab. It was good because that was where he was going to end up if he didn't get the best of Cutter. And Shane had better get used to it.

Shane left the comforter where it was and walked to the unit's only door.

He reached down and pulled it up. As if a heavy shade had been lifted, the morning's early sunbeams hit his face. He felt the warmth and smiled. It was a reactionary smile that humans had to sunlight. I guess it was the same feeling that I had when I met the darkness.

A throwaway cell phone that Shane had stored inside the unit began to vibrate.

The screen had a graphic of a jumping envelope. It alerted Shane that he had a new text message. The name on the screen said Sun Good. It was the only number that he had programmed into the new phone.

He had given her the number once. He never told her it was in case he was being hunted by the law. He just told her it was a backup number.

She must have decided to try it because his other phone was still powered down.

Shane touched the screen. The action brought up the text message screen and an image appeared.

At first, even he didn't register the image. And then it hit both of him at the same time.

It was a picture of Sun. The woman he loved as much as a monster like us could love. She was asleep. Her head rested against a passenger side window. She had fallen asleep. Someone else drove.

Then the phone vibrated again. Shane received another message from her phone. It was Cutter.

It read:

She looks so good sleeping.

If you want her to live, come to the place where you were born. Come alone and unarmed.

Shane's blood boiled. The rage that suddenly overcame him was a madness that I had never felt in him before. Sun Good was the one human relationship that he had left. It was the one thing that gave him a sense of humanity. It was a relationship that he couldn't afford to lose.

Shane's rage consumed him.

He dropped the cell phone.

He clenched his fists and began beating them against the metal walls on the outside of the storage unit.

The sounds of sheet metal wobbling back and forth echoed throughout the complex.

The cell phone vibrated again. He ignored it.

He pounded and slammed his fists into the wall for several minutes. Blood began to trickle from his knuckles.

Every day, I was learning more and more that there was a strong, caring person inside of Shane. Using force to control him was becoming more difficult for me. I

would have to start employing other tactics. I had to use more manipulation on his thoughts.

I jerked around inside his brain, my tentacles shifting. I repeated this action until he was calmer. I didn't want him completely calm. I just didn't want him to lose so much control that he was rendered ineffective.

My efforts slowly sank in and Shane began to breathe more normally. He leaned his head against the wall he had been hitting. A bloodstain from his knuckles marked the spot. His forehead now leaned against the middle of it. He left an imprint in the blood.

After a moment of thinking of only breathing, Shane stood upright. The bloodstain was smeared. Some of it was across his forehead.

He reached down and picked up the phone. The glass was cracked from where it had hit the concrete.

The text message read:

Be There!

Shane would be there.

We would both be there. He would be there for Sun Good, and I would be there to pull the monster out of Cutter and strangle it to death.

Come to the place where you were born, he had said.

How Cutter knew where we were born was not a surprise. Shane's childhood records were sealed by court order. Shane's departed guardian, Terrance Graves, had made sure of that. They were sealed to everyone, including law enforcement.

But it was not hard to imagine that FBI Agent Cutter had all kinds of ways to circumvent the law. He knew how to get information, and he had gotten hold of those records.

So the place where we were born was the literal location where he held Detective Sun Good.

Shane drove a 1993 Jeep Wrangler. It was all black and chromed out. He saw it parked in front of a bar. The place was closed. The car had most likely been left overnight. The owner might have been too drunk to drive and he had decided to leave it until the next day.

He had decided to do the responsible thing and not drive drunk and his vehicle been stolen by a serial killer.

How ironic the universe is? I thought.

With some luck, it would not be reported as stolen until later today.

Shane drove the Jeep onto the interstate and headed north.

Cutter and Sun were at least an hour ahead of us. They were headed to where Shane and I were born. They were headed to the place where Shane's parents were killed. They drove to Shane's family estate.

Shane concentrated on the road. He avoided police cruisers as best as he could. One time Shane even pulled off the road and into a gas station just to let a trooper pass by.

Shane drove until the late morning and slowed close to the street where his family's house was.

The house was on a lake. The water came right up to the backyard.

Shane didn't want to drive on his street in broad daylight. So he circled around the lake. Driving the roads around the lake was more like zigzagging.

He passed through the streets and admired the homes. Most were huge. The garages alone were big enough to be someone's house. Shane could only imagine the cars that were stored inside.

The farther he drove, the bigger the houses got.

Shane had forgotten the last time that he'd driven to the other side of the lake. I remembered that one time Terrance had driven us around to the other side when Shane was a small boy. But that memory was not one that Shane retained.

He never imagined that his side of the lake would be the poorer side. Then again, the houses on the opposite side of the lake were bigger, but the lot sizes were smaller.

The Lasher house was on a large piece of land. It had high property value. So I'm sure that Shane's father, Sebastian Lasher, had paid a very nice amount for this land. It was probably equal to one of these other larger houses.

Shane parked the Jeep on a patch of grass that was near the edge of a neighbor's property line. Then Shane jumped out of the Wrangler and opened the tailgate. He grabbed a black knapsack with only one shoulder strap. He flung it across his back. Before closing the tailgate, he reached into the cargo bay of the Jeep and pulled out a pair of binoculars.

Shane closed the Jeep, locked it, and tossed the keys onto the driver's seat. The vehicle was unharmed. The police would eventually find it and return it to the owner in the same condition it was when stolen, except it now had a nearly full tank of gas.

Shane had the rest of the day to wait until nightfall. That was when he wanted to be at his house. Cutter would wait. He wouldn't kill Sun Good until he had Shane. I was sure of this. If she died, then he would lose his leverage over us.

Cutter knew that I was coming. He had an ambush planned for me. The best that I could do was approach undetected.

Shane used the binoculars and studied the rear of the house. There were many points of entry to cover: windows, doors, ledges, and even a cellar. There was no way for Cutter to guard them all by himself.

In no way did I expect that Cutter planned to guard them all. In fact, he probably wanted the house to look as penetrable as it could, so it would be inviting.

Shane endured through the anticipation of waiting out the daylight, which was very hard for him. He wanted nothing more to do than to rush the house and save Sun.

I held us back.

We had spent the entire day slowly making our way to a boathouse that was across the lake from Shane's manor. Shane took great precautions in making sure that he wasn't seen.

As the sun set behind the trees and the sky filled with tones of reddish colors, Shane picked the lock on the boathouse. Inside he found a twenty-foot boat. It was well-maintained, a personal project of the owner. It glistened from a brand new

paint job. The primary color was royal blue. Yellow-colored words were written across the side. They read:

Lake Red

Next to it was a small Zodiac inflatable boat. It was probably the smallest motorized Zodiac ever created and sold in the marketplace. The Zodiac was colored in woodland camouflage. It was a dark shade, so it would blend in nicely with the water at night, perfect for crossing the lake undetected.

Shane rubbed his shaven head. His hair had always grown fast, and now his head was already covered in stubble.

He felt the stubble beneath his fingers. It tickled. The sensation penetrated through his skin and filled his nerve endings.

He realized that he knew nothing about boats. Even though he had owned a mansion on a lake in New Hampshire, he had never really had much experience on the water. There were so many things that he had spent his childhood learning, but sailing was not one of them.

Luckily, the Zodiac seemed elementary, so he jumped into the vessel and studied the motor for a moment.

Don't run the motor, I said to him.

He backed away from it and saw a pair of medium-sized plastic oars. They were around five feet long, possibly shorter.

The lake wasn't too wide, so rowing across wasn't going to require much effort.

Shane untied the Zodiac from the ledge of the wooden pier that ran inside the boathouse.

He tossed the line into the boat. He picked up the oars and pushed away from the pier. The Zodiac cast off.

He drifted from the boathouse opening and onto the lake.

The reddening sky cast a myriad of dark orange and crimson colors across the surface of the lake.

Shane's house appeared still. There was no sign of Agent Cutter or Sun Good.

Slowly, Shane rowed the Zodiac across the lake. The act started to take a toll on his arm muscles as he passed the halfway point.

He took his time. He tried to go as slowly as he could without simply riding the current. Then when the Zodiac reached three-quarters of the way across the lake, the current seemed to switch directions. It rushed against him.

Shane began to row harder. His arm muscles burned. Shane's efforts produced more waves, and with them, a little noise.

After another twenty minutes or so of rowing at a more brisk pace, Shane approached the edge of the lake.

The trees near the shore had swayed and wallowed. Their movements emitted whistling sounds that sounded like distant screeches, like banshees.

It was all quite peaceful actually. At least it was to me, but then again I liked screaming. In that moment, Shane regretted not visiting this place more often. Perhaps he never visited because of the sad, dark memories that these grounds held.

Right then he imagined spending summers here. Then his mind was flooded with images of fathers teaching their young sons how to fish. He saw mothers teaching their sons about gardening. He even imagined parents punishing their children, teaching them how to become better people.

A thought hit him square in the mind. Shane had missed out on all of these normal family moments. In fact, he was abruptly reminded that he was anything but normal. He was reminded that he was born here. He was born into darkness. And he was not alone in his time of birth. He had been born in the darkness of a coffin and he had brought something with him. He had brought me.

Shane was never going to have a normal life. Not then. Not now.

Sun Good could never be his wife. How could he expect to hide me from her forever?

Suddenly, I felt something, even though I was a creature of darkness, even though I was a stone cold killer. I realized that if I had rubbed off on Shane, then it was possible that he had also rubbed off on me. It had happened. It had happened slowly, and I was only now realizing it, but I wanted Sun Good to remain alive as well. Part of me was becoming good.

Shane stopped rowing. The Zodiac drifted into the shallows. The moment that it touched the edge of the water, Shane stepped out and pulled the vessel in. He peered around the backyard, looking for any signs that Agent Cutter had seen him. There was nothing.

So Shane towed the Zodiac onto the sand, then the grass, and finally all the way into the brush surrounding the trees.

He didn't want the owners of the Zodiac staring across the lake and noticing it resting on the shoreline. He didn't need the attention.

Satisfied with the Zodiac's hiding place, Shane released it and headed toward the house.

As he carefully stepped through the trees and into the backyard, he heard the winds cry again through the branches. This time it was much louder than it had been from the water. The breeze picked up and the leaves that had survived into the winter rustled.

Shane smiled. He hadn't expected to get this far. He had covertly invaded his own property. He had successfully circumvented the training and astuteness of FBI Special Agent Kirk Cutter.

Then suddenly, as if it were a straight punch in the solar plexus, the backdoor to Shane's house swung violently open. A stream of bright lights flooded out, casting a lit cone across the grass.

Shane looked up and stared at a figure that stood in the open doorway.

Kirk Cutter stared back at Shane. He held a solid black Mossberg 500 Shotgun Persuader with a stock, a powerful weapon.

Agent Kirk Cutter was a good twenty-five feet from Shane, but trying to run would have been useless. Shane was fast. He probably could have made a run for the trees and avoided the blast from the Persuader. If the man holding the shotgun were an amateur, then this would have worked. But he wasn't going to run while a career FBI agent held the weapon. And there was no way, not one chance, that Agent Cutter was an amateur with that weapon.

Shane was convinced that Cutter would blow us to bits before we could even turn around, even at that range.

Right there, underneath the setting sun and the blood-red sky, our enemy stared at us with a sinister smile.

He said, “Shane, why don’t you step inside? Join us.”

Without even hesitating, without even missing a beat, Shane’s legs moved and he walked toward the cone of light.

“Leave your weapons,” Cutter ordered, as if to one of his own agents.

Shane approached the menacing FBI agent and stopped at the door. Shane’s hand reached up to the strap on his knapsack. He moved it slightly, too fast for Cutter’s liking, so Agent Cutter stepped quickly out of the light of the doorway. In one quick move, he aimed the Persuader directly at Shane’s head.

He calmly said, “Slowly.”

Shane slowed his movements to minimal pace. The barrel of the shotgun wasn’t touching his face this time. Just knowing that it wasn’t far was intimidation enough.

Shane closed his eyes. I recoiled to the farthest part of his brain. I knew that we were walking into a trap and I had made a serious error. I had made an error that I’d never made before. It was a simple mistake that was going to cost us our life.

I had no plan.

It was this frightening thought that made me realize that my fear of caring about Sun Good was coming true. Shane and I had been so blinded by rescuing her that our only plan was to come for her and hope for the best.

Now I faced the deadliest opponent that I had ever known. On top of that he was armed with a Mossberg Shotgun.

Shane’s only hope for survival was me. And I was paralyzed.

Shane walked first through the backdoor to his family manor. Cutter followed with the shotgun. Shane stopped cold just inside the kitchen. Then Cutter shoved him with the Persuader.

“Move!” he commanded. His voice was stern and powerful. It was just the way that the FBI had trained it to sound.

Shane stepped forward. He continued through the kitchen and into the hallway where he laid his eyes upon Sun Good. She was sprawled out on the floor. Her hands and feet were bound with duct tape. The silvery color shimmered just slightly in the dim hallway light.

She looked up at Shane with bewilderment and then a sudden burst of hope. Her demeanor seemed panicked, which was expected. But there was also something else in her eyes.

I peered through my portholes, which doubled as Shane’s eyes, and I studied her. It was in that moment that I saw the sheer terror that reflected in her eyes.

Shane reached out to her. She began to try to retreat from him. She squirmed away from him like an injured worm trying to escape the clutches of a bird.

My scales chilled and I felt an unfamiliar feeling. No. It was more than a feeling or a sensation. I felt a cold stinging.

Sun Good was terrified of me. She’d seen the dark side of Shane.

She’d seen me.

I was actually ashamed. I had started to come over to Shane's thinking on the subject of her. She was important to him. And in a way she was important to me.

I couldn't tell if she was injured.

I began to reach out to her again, to help her up, but she rejected me. She had seen the snake that lived inside of Shane and was horrified.

"Why is she here, Kirk? You've unveiled yourself to a cop. No one is going to believe your story now. You should just let her go."

"Don't worry. She won't be judging you for much longer," Cutter said. He paused for a moment.

Then he said, "I used one of your tranquilizers on her."

Shane reached inside himself, grabbed me, and gripped tight. He was furious. He knew that Cutter planned on killing them both.

When it came to himself, Shane wasn't that worried, but he loved Sun Good. I hated to admit it, but the truth was that I'd ignored his true feelings. Shane had loved her for a long time. Now she was going to die and it was all my fault.

"Say goodbye. Sun Good may never be coherent again," Cutter said.

Shane gazed back over his shoulder. It was a slow, cold act. The piercing blackness that leapt from his eyes toward Agent Cutter would have chilled a normal man to his core.

Of course, Agent Cutter was no ordinary man.

"So you are going to kill us? Then why this charade? Why not just do it?" Shane asked.

"You want to know? You want to spoil it?

"Then let me play out the scenario for you," Cutter said.

"I've seen your records, the court-sealed ones. I know about you. Terrance Graves couldn't hide your past from me. I know who you really are. I know about your parents. I know about the demon that lives inside of you," he said.

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"You are no better than me. You killed people. You killed Townsend Dry. No jury. No judge. No trial. You are playing God," Shane said.

He turned to face Cutter. Shane's hands were down by his sides. He turned the palms of his hands away from Cutter's view. Very stealthily he motioned to Sun Good to move away.

It was a slim chance, but Shane planned to distract Cutter as best he could. Maybe Sun Good could squirm into a closet or a nook somewhere and hide. Old manors like the one that Shane had been reared in were full of forgotten nooks and crannies.

There were numerous hiding places everywhere. Maybe Sun Good would get lucky. Maybe she would get a fighting chance. But I doubted it.

"It doesn't have to be like this, Shane. You can join us."

Us? I thought.

Kirk Cutter must have been speaking of the monster within himself. Shane never spoke like that. He was aware of me, but we didn't communicate as friends. He was my vessel. It wasn't a partnership.

“Join us. Join me. Together we can hunt and kill. Look at how we can turn the system on its head. I catch the criminals and you defend them. I can use all of the FBI’s resources to hunt them down. You can take on their cases.

“Together we can kill so many killers. Think about how precise we will be together.

“You know that Gillard Shutter was the wrong man. He was never the StoneCutter. The guilt that you must feel over that. It would haunt me. But together we can be absolutely sure that we have the right man. We can kill together,” Cutter said. He moved closer and closer to Shane.

Then he said, “Wolves hunt together. So should we. Join my pack.”

The shotgun was steadfast in his hands. He never flinched. The muzzle stayed constantly pointed at Shane’s center mass.

“Although your proposition sounds enticing, I have to point out two things that you are wrong about.

“First, you imply that I kill men like you do, like it’s out of some sick, twisted sense of justice. And I can understand how you might see it like that, but I can assure you that it simply isn’t that way,” Shane said.

I grew inside of him. My claws retracted like switchblades. The points were razor sharp. I dug them into Shane’s brain matter. Blood seeped from the marks that I left. I was taking full and complete control over him. I wasn’t sure what Cutter had planned, but we had to make our move. We had to get that Persuader away from him.

“The second thing that you are mistaken about is that you inferred that I felt guilt over Gillard Shutter, the man that I killed because I thought he was the StoneCutter.

“Kirk, let me tell you that I feel nothing for anyone.

“You have spent your whole adult life studying and chasing after my kind. You should already know that the reason why I kill is because I am a serial killer.

“I kill for the same reason as the lion roars, the shark migrates, and the sun sets. It is my nature,” I said.

I paused.

Then I said, “We do have one thing in common. We both have killed.”

He was growing angry. He was growing emotional, distracted. This was the best chance that I was going to get. So I rushed him.

I reached for the barrel of the Mossberg. With all of the speed, agility, and strength that I could muster, I swiped the gun barrel toward the left and away from Shane. Cutter was fast, as I’d expected.

I managed to move Shane out of the line of fire. At that moment, Cutter fired the gun. The blast nearly knocked me off my feet.

I used the propulsion to advance my body into a tackling move. It was a standard NFL tackle, the kind that sent wide receivers off their feet just before they reached up to catch the ball.

Agent Cutter was built bigger than a wide receiver. He wasn’t thick enough to be on the line, but he was still a mountain of a man. I felt all of the muscles and bones in Shane’s right shoulder scream in pain as they drove into Cutter’s chest.

A sharp impact pain shot through Shane’s neck. It had originated in his shoulder and fired through the tunnels of his nervous system and into his neck.

It hurt like hell, and Shane was the most disciplined human that I knew when it came to his body. He was all lean muscle, but what Agent Cutter was carrying around was genetic muscle.

On top of his awesome genetics, Kirk Cutter was also wearing a Kevlar Vest. So his body was protected. He had his muscle and the body armor.

Luckily for me, Shane also wore body armor. He still had the Kevlar vest that he'd found in the trunk of the FBI car.

The tackle that we had executed on Cutter sent him back a few paces. He didn't tumble over, not like he should have. A normal man, hell even a regular NFL player, would have tipped completely over, off his feet.

Not Cutter.

He was too powerful. It was more like he slid backward on his feet from the force of my push.

I was ready for the next move, but Shane's body couldn't recover fast enough. It was Cutter who delivered the next blow.

He should have cocked the shotgun and fired again. Instead, he used the shotgun and came back down on Shane with the butt of the rifle. It cracked across Shane's face. It landed just above his left eye. Blood seeped from the wound and leaked across his brow.

It nearly blinded me.

I planned on jumping up and grappling the gun away from Cutter, but before I could make such a move, before I could even blink the blood out of Shane's left eye socket, Cutter cocked the shotgun's slide all the way back.

It emitted a loud sound. It was a terrifying sound, the kind of sound that was universally known.

CRUNCH!

The shotgun was now reloaded. The spent case from the last shell had ejected into the air.

The split second before it even bounced off the ground, I knew that Shane and I were done.

I looked back over my shoulder to check on Sun Good.

First, I saw the damage that was done by the blast from the shotgun. The wall in the hallway was utterly destroyed. Wood had splintered. Glass from several old, hanging pictures had shattered.

The frames themselves were nothing but dust.

An old rug that lay near the baseboards was torn up. Some of it was even on fire. Small areas of flame had erupted from the blast.

Then there was Sun Good. She had taken the opportunity to squirm away. But she hadn't made it very far. The tranquilizer that Cutter had injected into her had taken affect. She was motionless, but breathing.

I saw that the radius from the shotgun blast had missed her legs by just inches.

Cutter stood up. His chest heaved as he recovered his breath from the exertion of our short fight.

"Now let's talk about…" he said and then waited to take a couple of deep breaths before continuing, "What happens next? Thirty years ago, the StoneCutter killed your parents and tried to kill you.

“Tonight, I am going to succeed where he failed. You will bury Sun Good alive and then you will meet your own demise.”

“And if I refuse, Cutter?” I said, noticing that my breath was back. It seemed that Shane’s body could recover faster than Cutter’s. Perhaps Shane’s core strength made his endurance higher.

“If you refuse, then I will blow her into bits right in front of you,” he said.

He watched my eyes.

“If you go along with it,” he continued. “If you bury her alive, I will give you a fighting chance. I will not shoot you. I will bury you alive. If you can manage to escape again, you can dig her up and possibly save her life. If you choose to fight me, I will simply shoot you both.”

“That’s the same lie that the StoneCutter told his victims! Then he shot them.”

Kirk Cutter smiled and said, “What choice do you have?”

I could feel Shane’s inner self, his human side, his soul. He looked to me for a solution. He looked to me to consume him in darkness and save Sun Good. But even I couldn’t attempt to take on Cutter again. He had the advantage. He was the better killer.

“Pick her up,” Cutter said. He pointed the shotgun at her and made a gesture with it.

As Shane walked to her, I began receding into his background. My darkness seeped back into his pores, under his finger and toenails, and back through his eye sockets.

Shane reached down and picked Sun Good up, and like a husband carrying his new bride across the threshold of their house, he carried her out of his.

Shane carried Sun Good across his backyard for several minutes. He weaved through the trees toward the west side of the property. He didn’t even ask Cutter for directions or instructions. He already knew where they were headed.

Shane felt the sting of defeat inside and out. His muscles began to ache from carrying Sun Good. At this point her muscular, toned body was nothing more than dead weight. But somewhere inside her, beneath the muscle tissue and organs, rested a woman and a soul that Shane needed in his life. She had become his closest attachment to his humanity. And although I was a lizard, Shane’s stability was important to me.

Shane walked on. He reached the plot where his parents were buried.

There were a couple of headstones surrounded by an old, spiked fence. It was no more than knee height. The whole thing looked like something from a Tim Burton movie. It was old and gothic.

There were two open graves.

“Stop here,” Cutter commanded.

Shane stopped at the edge of the graves and turned slightly. He peered down into the open graves and saw a human-sized trunk. He glanced at Sun Good. She drifted in and out of consciousness.

Then Shane looked back at Cutter.

“I know it’s not a coffin. I am not as talented as the StoneCutter. I can’t make a coffin. I wouldn’t have the first idea where to begin.

“And I wasn’t going to purchase one. They are very expensive and traceable,” he said.

Shane said nothing.

Cutter held the shotgun one-handed and pointed at the open grave, the one with the trunk.

Then he said, “Put her in.”

With a very sudden feeling of despair, a feeling that Shane had never emitted before, he looked deeply into Sun Good’s face. Her eyes were shut tight. He stared at her like he was reading the headstones of his dead parents for the first time.

Memories flashed across his mind.

He remembered one time when he dated her that she had taken him out to the gun range. The range was crowded with cops, most of whom knew Shane’s reputation. Most of them loathed him.

They hated that they worked hard on a high-profile case and then he came along and saved the bad guy.

However, this never stopped Shane from having a good time.

I watched his memories of Sun Good replay through his head. The one that dominated was her smiling and laughing.

It was more than that. It was more than attraction. Shane loved her. Even a dark, reptilian creature like me could see that.

And now he was going to bury her alive.

“Please,” Shane muttered. The word slipped from his lips like a puff of air.

“What? Speak up!” Cutter demanded.

“Don’t make me do this,” Shane begged. He turned to look at Cutter. A single tear slid from his eye and down his face.

Cutter raised the shotgun. He leveled his aim straight at Shane’s face, and then he lowered it slowly, taunting us. He stopped the gun’s aim straight at Shane’s center mass, directly where Sun Good’s body was.

One blast from the Mossberg 500 Persuader would completely rip her in half. It would tear through flesh and bone. It would tear through all of that and still rip through enough of Shane’s Kevlar to destroy most of his major organs.

They would both be dead in a matter of seconds.

Agent Cutter smiled like he knew exactly what image was playing out in Shane’s mind.

Then he repeated, “Put her in.”

At the exact moment that he ended his command, the moment that the last letter left his lips and the sound resonated into the air, Cutter cocked the shotgun.

CRUNCH!

The sound was deafening in the night air.

Shane gazed down at Sun Good one last time. Then he knelt down over the grave, and as gently as he could, he lowered her in.

He couldn’t reach all the way to the bottom. So he had to drop her. Her body hit the bottom of the box with a thud.

“The lid,” Cutter said. He leaned in to watch.

Shane slid the lid over the box and saw Sun Good’s face for the last time. For a brief moment, Shane thought that he saw her regain consciousness. He thought

that he had seen her eyes open. It looked like she had stared right up at him. Her last sight was of Shane burying her alive.

"Get the shovel," Cutter ordered.

He stepped back away from the grave and made a gesture, pointing the barrel of the shotgun at a shovel on the ground and near the fence.

Shane picked it up.

"Bury her," Cutter said.

In his mind, Shane imagined that horrible night when the StoneCutter had buried his parents alive. He reimagined our birth.

I whipped my tail around in Shane's brain. I tried to distract him from this memory. I tried to keep his mind fresh. He needed to focus. He needed a plan to escape. But nothing worked. Cutter's evil act was too powerful. Shane's senses and mind were lost.

It took twenty minutes. And finally Sun Good was buried under six feet of dirt.

Suddenly, a noise like a banshee cried through the night. It sounded muffled, yet nearby. It made Shane cringe. It made his blood boil. It was Sun Good. The drugs had worn off because now she was awake and screaming.

Shane tightened his grip on the shovel. Cutter saw him doing it. So Cutter took a big step back and pointed the shotgun at Shane's face.

"Don't even try it!" Cutter said.

Shane said nothing.

He tossed the shovel off to the side. It flew through the air and clanked off his father's tombstone.

"Remember, she may only have an hour before her air runs out.

"I'm going to give you the chance to save her," Cutter said.

Shane knew that it was probably bullshit. He knew that Agent Cutter had no intention of giving him the chance to survive. But what other choice did he have?

Shane waited for me. He hoped. No he prayed that I would save him.

My instincts were ancient, the oldest on the planet. Primal urges were as old as blood and bone. Still, I had no plan. There was no chance left.

"Go over to the other grave," Cutter said.

Shane moved to the other grave. He stopped and looked down into the dark pit.

He stood over his own grave.

A man standing over his own grave was a rare thing. But it did happen. And now it was happening to Shane.

At the hour of a man's execution, typically he prayed to God. Not Shane. He closed his eyes and prayed for me.

For the very first, and possibly last, time in our life, he spoke to me out loud.

He said, "If you are there, I need you now. I need you now more than ever."

"God?" Cutter asked. "I never would have pegged you for the religious type."

Shane closed his eyes and said one final thing. He said, "Save her."

Cutter lowered the shotgun all the way down to his side.

He didn't want to kill Shane that quickly. He wanted Shane to suffer in his tomb. Cutter brandished his Glock and shot Shane twice in the chest.

During Cutter's earlier struggle with Shane, there'd been a moment when he'd felt Shane's body. In that moment, he'd never realized that Shane wore the Kevlar from the trunk of his FBI car.

The moment when Cutter's second shot rang out into the night, something else happened. A thunderclap echoed through the night sky.

A once clear and starry night had turned black and stormy. Another thunderclap sounded. It echoed over the lake, through the trees, and off the exterior of the manor.

A lightning bolt fired across the sky. Then another.

Cutter cursed. He holstered his gun. He made one quick glance down at Shane in the grave.

Shane was unconscious. He looked as good as dead.

Cutter wanted to be done with it and on the road before the rain started. He grabbed the shovel and began to cover Shane's body with dirt.

Shane wasn't lying in a box like Sun Good. He lay in a pit with nothing but dirt.

Cutter figured that with the two gunshot wounds, not having any oxygen, and soon being flooded in wet mud, Shane was going to die.

No question.

Cutter used all of his strength and focus. He had Shane's body buried under a heap of dirt in minutes.

The rain began to pour down just as the last shovelful of dirt fell over the grave.

In seconds, rain poured even harder. It was really coming down.

Below the surface of the dirt, I slithered back and forth in Shane's head. He was not moving.

The gunshots hadn't pierced the Kevlar. The bullets were caught in the advanced weave of the bulletproof vest. Shane's chest had not been penetrated. The vest worked exactly as the manufacturer had claimed it would.

Still, the impact from both bullets hurt like hell.

The pain and the fall had been so intense that Shane had completely passed out from it.

I rattled around in his head as much as I could, but he wouldn't wake up.

Not good. Shane's body had shut down, which meant that I was about to shut down.

There was too much immediate danger for him to be unconscious. He was running out of oxygen. And now water was beginning to seep through the dirt above him. Soon he would drown.

Like a computer that melted down, I had to reboot Shane.

Vigorously, I pounded on his insides. The impact of the bullet had cracked a few of his ribs. I stitched and glued them back together as best I could. I was not gentle to Shane's body. He was running out of time.

I rammed his heart on my way back to his brain. Suddenly his eyes opened wide.

Dirt and water seeped across his face. It was thick. He couldn't see anything but darkness. It took a second, but he realized that he was buried in the mud.

Shane didn't attempt to breathe. I had wrapped my tail tightly around his inner throat, preventing him from breathing. It was better for him to be slightly choking rather than breathing in thick mud. The mud would have drowned him—fast.

Although I could prevent him from swallowing and breathing in pints of dirt, the one thing that I couldn't stop was the paralysis that hit him like a truck. He knew that he was buried in the ground, and the one thing that Shane feared was closed-in spaces.

Shane's degree of claustrophobia was paralyzing. It was his kryptonite.

He didn't have time for it. So I stretched out and buried my claws into his brain. Blood seeped from the holes. He was now at my full control.

Forgetting his fears, putting everything aside, Shane was now determined to escape and save Sun Good.

He began burrowing through the wet mud in front of him. He burrowed and fought and struggled. He kept his eyes shut. The mud stung them.

After a dramatic climb, Shane's fist punched through the surface of the ground. He felt the cold night air blow across his wet knuckles.

Shane grabbed the side of the grave and pulled with his hand and pushed up with his legs. It was like trying to climb out of quicksand, but eventually the effort paid off, and he escaped the grave.

Shane slumped over, exhausted from the climb from the grave. This was the second time in his life that he'd escaped his own grave.

Shane stopped to catch his breath for only a moment. Then he jumped to his feet. The rain pounded down on top of him.

I heard it hammering on the top of his shaven head. The sound echoed through the chamber of his skull.

In the struggle to escape, Shane had lost most of his kill-suit. The scarf, tie, and even the pea coat had been swallowed up by the ground. Shane glanced back at the grave. The hole that he had left was now gone. It had been swallowed up by a deep puddle of mud like a sinkhole.

Shane fell to his knees and huffed the air. He sucked in the wet air in deep, repeating breaths. Then he gasped as the pain from his chest returned.

Shane grabbed at his chest. Then he ripped away the rest of his shirt. He pulled the Kevlar completely off.

His bare chest was cold and exposed to the relentless, beating rain, but at least the Kevlar wasn't constricting his breathing any longer.

Shane enjoyed some more air and then refocused on Sun Good.

He had lost track of the time, but it hadn't been long. There was a chance that she was alive.

Shane scampered to the shovel and picked it up.

"Sun!" he screamed out. The rain and thunder made his words barely audible, even to himself.

"I am coming! Hold on!"

Shane used all of his might and stabbed the wet, soggy ground. He stabbed it like he was killing it. The shovel pierced into the muddy ground.

Shane stabbed and tossed a shovel full of mud off to the side. He stabbed and tossed. Stabbed and tossed. Stabbed and tossed.

The entire endeavor to rescue Sun Good took only a few minutes, but it felt like an eternity. The wet mud made it ten times easier, but the rain kept refilling the hole with more water, better than dirt. Dry, hard dirt would've taken forever to dig up.

After he reached the top of the trunk, Shane threw the shovel aside. He knelt down on top of her coffin and tore the lid off.

He gasped.

The box was flooded with muddy water. As his eyes focused on the murky water, Shane saw Sun Good's pale skin. Her eyes were wide open and lifeless. She was dead.

Shane stared at the corpse of the love of his life. She was the only woman that had ever made him feel normal—human.

And he had killed her.

Her corpse floated between the top layer of the murky water and the floor of her coffin.

Shane didn't shed a tear. Nothing happened. I mean nothing. His heart kept beating. His mind was empty. He had become colder and more primal at that moment than I had ever seen him.

Sun Good was dead. And so was the human side of Shane Lasher.

Shane stood in the open doorway to his house. The rain poured behind him like cold, wet shell casings bouncing from a semiautomatic rifle. The thunder rolled like dynamite exploding in the distance. The lightning crackled and sent flashes across the sky like violent comets.

And the fury raged inside him. On the inside, he fumed, he boiled, he brimmed, and he roared.

The only way to describe what I could see from inside my cockpit, the only word that would describe what it looked like from in here, was red.

Shane stepped inside the hallway to his house. He didn't bother closing the door behind him. He didn't care about the wet footprints that his shoes made. He didn't care about the noise that he made. He didn't even care about the mud and dirt that he trailed through the old house.

Shane moved through the kitchen and into the long hallway to the living room. He stopped in the center of the hallway and looked at the splintered wall from the shotgun blast.

He stared at it.

Then he arched his eyebrow and raised his head. A thought crossed my mind, and I whispered it to him.

I said, "What if Cutter is still here?"

Shane's face showed the slightest hint of recognition. It was in the corners of his mouth. Wet dirt seeped past his lips and he smiled.

He walked through the foyer and into the living room.

The enormous living room had high ceilings, a fireplace, dusty bookshelves, and a large staircase. The furniture was old and still covered by sheets.

Shane studied the floor toward the staircase. A layer of dust had settled across it. No one had walked those stairs in years.

Shane turned toward the front door and violently threw it open. The driveway was empty.

Cutter had left.

Shane returned to the living room. He looked around. There was nothing of interest.

Shane returned to the kitchen and shut the backdoor. He glanced around the room and that was when he noticed it.

Sun Good's purse was on the countertop of the island in the center of the kitchen.

Shane went to it and emptied the contents onto the countertop.

He stared at the pile of Sun Good's belongings. There was her cell phone, lipstick, some other make-up items, a three-inch retractable blade, a crumpled paper, a wallet, a business card, a notepad, and a Taser.

Shane grabbed the Taser. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the Taser that he had stolen from the FBI car. He doubted that it still worked after climbing out of that muddy grave.

He flicked the switch on the side of the device.

At first nothing happened, but after a second attempt, sparks formed and a tiny bolt of artificial lightning shot from the end of the Taser.

Shane held up both Tasers and fired them simultaneously.

The little bolts of lightning danced from the tips of both Tasers.

They reflected in his eyes. I watched from inside him and smiled.

Cutter would die.

Shane sifted through his father's closet. He hadn't set foot in his parents' bedroom in over a decade. He'd spent most of his childhood far away from this place.

Shane had never really even seen any of his father's clothes.

His father had died the night that he was born; he had never even known what size his father was. He had seen photographs of his parents, but he'd never really thought about how big the man was.

Luckily, it appeared that he was average build. Actually, he was smaller in the chest than Shane, so his shirts were tight on Shane. But he'd make one fit.

Shane sifted through them, not really caring about style. He was more concerned about getting mud all over his dead father's closet.

Shane pulled out a black V-neck sweater. It would do. He pulled it on. It was a little small; the sleeves weren't quite long enough. Shane had long arms. Apparently, Sebastian Lasher hadn't had the same problem.

Shane rolled up the sleeves and settled for just the sweater. Then he thought about his shoes and socks. They were soaked. They made his feet very cold. It was just uncomfortable.

Shrugging off the fact that he would muddy up the old bed covers, Shane sat on the bed. Dust flew into the air. He ignored it and reached down. He didn't even care about his laces. He simply flung his shoes off. Then his wet socks.

Shane's feet felt incredibly liberated to be out of them.

He walked to a dresser and started pulling the drawers open until he came to his father's sock drawer. He pulled out a random pair of black dress socks. They worked fine. He returned to sitting on the bed and slipped the socks on.

Shane looked down at his shoes and thought of putting them back on. That was when he noticed how immense the water damage was. The soles of the shoes had peeled away in the fronts of both shoes. One of them was dangerously close to being absolutely worthless.

Shane shrugged and stood up on his new, dry socks. He went back to the closet and looked at the shoes. He looked for comfort. He found five different pairs of running shoes. He grabbed the darkest pair, black shoes with gray and white stripes.

He returned to the bed and put the shoes on. They were a size ten and he wore an eleven, so he loosened the laces as best he could and tied the shoes. They were comfortable enough.

Shane thought about changing into a dry pair of pants, but from the look of the pants that hung in the closet, Shane knew they were all too short. So he settled on just keeping his own. They were still wet, but eventually they would dry.

Shane walked down the stairs, through the living room, and back into the foyer.

He walked back into the kitchen. He grabbed Sun Good's cell phone. He turned it on. There was no signal. Then a message flashed across the screen.

It read:

No SIM Card

Cutter must have removed it so that no one could trace Sun Good.

Shane didn't need to make a call. He only needed the Internet. However, he was going to require her SIM card to use the network. The house had been empty for years, so there was no Wi-Fi network set up.

He reassessed the items on the countertop. There was no SIM card.

Where would Agent Cutter have put it?

Most likely Cutter had tossed the SIM card or he had it on him.

Shane was wrong.

He found it inside Sun's wallet. Perhaps she had disconnected it herself. Maybe she had suspected something was wrong. Or she had a back-up for some reason. Maybe it was from an older phone and she kept it on her as a back-up. No matter. This was good news.

Quickly, Shane reattached the card. He booted up the phone and waited for the signal.

Once he had it, he opened the Internet browser and went to his email account. He went to his draft emails and found one with the subject line "Lost Dog."

This was the email that contained Ally's findings about Cutter.

As usual, Ally's research was more than competent. She'd written a three-page report that highlighted all of the details of Agent Kirk Cutter's past. The first thing that was listed was his home address in Virginia, just outside of D.C.

Shane read on.

Kirk Cutter lived north of Bethesda.

If Shane left now, he could be there, and it would still be nighttime.

Shane skimmed over the rest of the message and stopped when he came to part that read:

"***His wife was murdered in the bathtub in their house***."

Shane read on and I followed. My interest was also piqued by this news.

Ally had included a hyperlink in the message underneath a line that read "Click here for details."

The link led to an old story. It was from ten years ago. There was a color picture of a Jeffersonian style townhouse sandwiched between two others, with no more than an eight-foot gap between them. The house was surrounded by police tape.

The article told the story of a happy couple. The husband was a successful FBI agent and the wife was a lawyer, just like Shane.

One night the FBI agent had come home after catching a serial killer who was known as the ID Killer. He was called this because apparently he would assume his victims' identities for days, weeks, or even months after killing them.

As it turned out, the man that Cutter had arrested had killed himself in prison the very night that he was convicted.

The article went on to say that there was doubt that he was the real ID Killer, but he had no family. And he was dead so no lawyers pushed any further for an appeal.

Why would they? I thought.

Then, law enforcement assumed that he was innocent because of what happened the night that he was convicted.

The night that Carl Reagan had been convicted, the last night of his life, someone had broken into Agent Cutter's home and murdered his wife in the bathtub.

It was assumed that this murder was retaliation. The real ID Killer had broken into Cutter's home and killed his wife as a message. It was a tragic and morbid message telling Cutter that he had failed and now his wife was dead.

Kirk Cutter was removed from the case. He wasn't reprimanded for arresting the wrong man. The Bureau let it go since he had lost his wife. There was tremendous public sympathy for him.

The trail for the ID Killer had gone cold and no trace of him was ever found again.

Now I understood Cutter's motivation. He never found the ID Killer. And so he blamed himself for his wife's death. Now he hunted other serial killers and murdered them instead of the ID Killer. He inflicted his revenge on others of his kind. He probably didn't even realize that he was no better.

In a way, I felt empathy for Cutter. He was like Frankenstein's creature. Shane and I both felt compassion and even sympathy for the monster. But he was still a monster. It was time to put him down.

Shane put the phone away. He had read enough. He walked back to the front door.

He stopped at a closet at the edge of the hallway. He opened it and grabbed an old, dark blue poncho. He pulled it on and adjusted the hood over his head.

Shane lifted an old set of keys that hung near the front door. He opened the front door and returned to the night.

Outside Shane walked the length of the house toward the east. He went to the very edge of the driveway and stopped in front of a garage. Shane bent down, grabbed the handle, and lifted the door open. The metal door creaked on its hinges.

As the door opened all the way, Shane released the handle and peered in.

The garage was full of old boxes, tools, and a lawnmower that hadn't been started in years.

The only thing that Shane was interested in was a red 1956 Harley Davidson that rested in a back corner. It had been a pet project of his dead father.

Shane just hoped that it would start. He had no idea the last time it had been started.

Shane entered the key, slid his leg over the seat, and then pulled the bike's handles away from the wall. He grabbed the key, closed his eyes, and turned the switch.

At first the motorcycle did come to life, but then it didn't start. It made a cranking sound.

It sputtered and then died.

Shane closed his eyes and tried it again. Nothing happened.

He tried a third time. The bike sputtered and died again.

He stood up in the seat and began rocking the bike back and forth. He tried to move the gas around in the tank. It probably had all evaporated or eaten through the tank from being in the engine over the years. We both hoped that neither had been the case, but certainly the former would be better.

Shane waited a brief moment then and turned the key again.

This time the motorcycle roared to life. Shane revved it and then let it sit idle.

At first, the engine sputtered and coughed, but then it started to hum normally. The bike was ready to go, even after years of resting in the garage.

Shane checked the gas gauge. The needle slowly rose just enough to make it to a gas station. What kind of gas to put in it? That was a whole other question. We guessed just regular unleaded.

He sat back and reached over and grabbed a motorcycle helmet from a nearby counter.

He paid no attention to the tribal designs that were painted across the helmet. He slipped it on.

Shane revved the motorcycle again and drove out of the garage.

At the end of the driveway, he lowered the helmet's visor over his eyes to keep the rain out.

Common sense warned Shane not to ride the bike in the pouring rain. It was very dangerous. The roads were slick. Some of these back country roads were even flooded.

Shane didn't care. He had an advantage over most riders. He had me.

Special Agent Kirk Cutter felt satisfied. He pulled his FBI car to the street in front of his house. He parked it and walked up his walkway and entered his house.

He carried his Mossberg under his arm. The stock was nestled inside his armpit. The barrel rested over the top of his right forearm. The gun was black and it blended in with his coat.

Even if one of his neighbors had seen the gun, they wouldn't think anything of it. After all, he was an FBI agent. He carried guns in and out of his house every day.

He locked the door behind him and hung up his coat.

The rain had slowed, but he could still hear the drops pounding on the rooftop and the windows.

Cutter went into his kitchen and turned on the stovetop. The gas ignited and a blue flame burned to the bottom of the grill.

Cutter returned to the hallway. He opened the door to a closet and kicked off his shoes. They landed on the floor—crooked, but he didn't care. He left them that way and closed the door.

Cutter walked down the hallway to his study. This room had originally been intended to be a downstairs bedroom. Since he lived alone, he'd decided to turn it into a study.

There was a small bookshelf, a desk with a MacBook on it, some furniture, and a locked gun case.

Cutter opened the case and put his shotgun into the empty slot between a hunting rifle with a scope and an AR-15 assault rifle.

He unclipped his sidearm holster with the Glock still in it. He placed it on the floorboard of the gun case, next to a snub-nose revolver.

As a measure of safety, he kept all of his guns unloaded, except for the Glock.

Then he pulled a large hunting knife from the gun case.

He returned to the kitchen and slid the sharp blade of the knife into the rack of the burning grill. He let it rest there for a while.

He went back to the study and locked the gun case. He put the key in his pocket and sat at the MacBook. He turned it on and spent the next several minutes checking through his email.

Cutter rose from his desk and walked back to the kitchen. Then he pulled off his shirt and stood over the stove, bare-chested.

His upper body was covered in scars. Each was a self-inflicted singular swipe from a knife blade. There were dozens.

Cutter pulled the large hunting knife from the blue flame and inspected it. It was white hot.

He proceeded to slash his chest. He cut himself, leaving two long gashes.

He smiled and said, "One for each of you."

Cutter was a self-mutilator.

Serial killers kept trophies. Kirk Cutter kept these scars to remind himself of his victims.

Cutter tossed the knife into the sink and left it there, still bloody from his wounds.

Shirtless, he walked up the stairs and through the master bedroom. He entered his bathroom. He bent over the tub and plugged the drain. Then he began running the water.

After the whole mess with Shane Lasher, the only thing that he wanted to do now was soak in a bath and then drift off to sleep.

When he turned to leave the bathroom, he stopped cold in his tracks. He looked down at the floor. There were wet shoeprints everywhere. He looked over at the sink. It took a second to register, but he finally noticed that his first aid kit had been robbed of medical wrap.

A bottle of his painkillers was open and lying on his counter.

Cutter's face remained expressionless.

He walked out of his bedroom and quickly down the stairs. He went to his study and pulled out his keys. He opened his gun case and grabbed his Glock.

He pulled the slide back and chambered a bullet. Then he slowly began to search the house for the intruder.

He walked from the study into the living room. There was no sign of anyone. Then he searched the kitchen. Still he saw no one.

As he turned back to the living room, the lights in the house began to flicker on and off.

The fuse box was in the closet of the master bedroom. So he knew that the intruder must be there. Then the lights went off completely.

The house was in pitch blackness. The rain outside began to pick up. The wind howled and the lightning splintered.

One large bolt cracked across the sky and hit a nearby transformer.

Cutter heard a boom. It came from a couple streets over. Then all of the lights on his street went out. Next the houses across from him went dark. And finally, his house lost power. The entire neighborhood blacked out.

Cutter walked back to his study. There was still a dim light emitting from the screensaver on his MacBook.

Cutter opened the drawer on his desk and grabbed a small flashlight from it. He switched the light on and searched around the room.

The study was empty.

He heard a creak from upstairs. It sounded like it was on the tiles in his bathroom. He had one tile in particular that was loose.

Cutter slowly made his way back up the stairs.

"I know you're there," he said into the darkness above him.

"Show yourself!" he shouted.

Nothing happened.

"I am an FBI agent! Now show yourself!"

Still the darkness was silent.

Cutter ascended the staircase and pointed the light down the upstairs hallway.

He saw that the attic ladder was down. Then he heard another creak from above him. There was someone in the attic.

With the Glock pointed up into the attic's opening, he climbed the ladder.

Once he reached the top, he poked his head in. He looked around the dark room. He saw no sign of anyone. No intruder.

Then he put the butt of the flashlight into his mouth. He grabbed the opening by his free hand and used all of his strength to quickly catapult himself into the attic. In one breath, he landed on his feet and had both hands around the Glock.

He pointed it in every direction, but he saw no one. No movement. Nothing. There was still just blackness.

He relaxed a little and returned the flashlight to his hand.

Then suddenly, he heard a dark voice. It spoke low. It sounded more like an echo from a ghost.

Then the voice whispered again. It said, "You unsealed my files. So I unsealed yours."

Nervously, Cutter searched around the attic. Still, he saw no one.

"I know who you really are," the voice whispered.

"Shane? Is that you? How did you get out?" he asked.

Silence.

Then the voice said, "I know who you are. Your first victim was not a killer at all. It was your own wife."

"Where are you?"

"Ten years ago you were in an unhappy marriage. You were tired of pretending to be normal. You had spent your life studying and hunting killers, but you were really a killer yourself."

"Come out!" Cutter screamed.

"You couldn't catch the ID Killer. So you decided to kill your wife and pin it on him. Did he even exist? Was there ever really an ID Killer?

"I looked into it. The evidence that any of his murders are even related is circumstantial. You created him. Didn't you? A mysterious phantom killer that never existed," the dark voice said.

Cutter moved from one corner of the attic to the next. He hunched over to avoid the low ceiling.

He moved slowly, making sure that he stepped on the beams. The attic was full of boxes. There were many hiding places.

"I think that Carl Reagan was innocent. And you knew it. You actually planted enough evidence on him to make it look like he was the ID Killer.

"Of course, you made up the ID Killer. And you knew that eventually someone would look closely at the evidence. Someone, his lawyer, a distant relative, a journalist, would look closer at his case. Someone would believe him at some point. Eventually he'd get a retrial. So you had him killed. You had some guys make it look like he'd killed himself.

"No Carl Reagan alive and who was going to ever prove whether he was guilty or not? I think that you did this just so you could kill your wife," the voice said.

Cutter moved toward the sound of the voice. He knew where it was coming from now. It was from the far northeast corner of the attic.

Cutter pointed the Glock at the corner and crept toward it. Still he was careful to not miss the beams.

"You have no idea what you're talking about!" he shouted.

"She was your wife and you drowned her in the tub."

As Cutter reached the corner of the attic, he focused his eyes on the horrific sight that sat in front of him.

He followed the beam of his flashlight to it. He followed the sound of Shane's dark voice. All of this was only to find himself staring at a baby monitor.

The baby monitor rested in an old, plastic baby crib. The crib was covered in cobwebs.

My dark voice pierced through the speakers and into Cutter's ears.

He heard a loud noise below him on the second floor.

He turned and ran. He leapt from beam to beam without missing a single one. Then he half slid down the ladder and landed in the hallway.

Frantically, he searched the second floor of his townhouse. He found muddy shoeprints throughout the hallway. They led into the master bedroom.

Cutter's ears filled with the sound of running water. The bathtub was running over from when he had started a bath.

The door to the bathroom was shut. He kicked it open and saw that the water ran over, spilling onto the floor.

The bathroom had no window, so it was pitch black.

Cutter shone his light over the tub that he had drowned his wife in ten years ago.

Then he saw a dark shadow lying in the tub.

He fired his gun at it. Outside the thunder rolled and the lightning continued to crack across the sky. The thunder muffled the sounds of Cutter's gunfire.

Cutter fired four rounds into the figure in the bathtub. He hadn't even hesitated. He hadn't even stopped to confirm that it was Shane. He had just fired his weapon.

He stopped. The smoke from the muzzle of the gun covered the beam of his flashlight. He waited for it to clear and then he shone the beam of light across the overflowing water from the tub.

Kirk Cutter was one of the hardest and best-trained FBI agents around. He had seen it all. He had murdered and done horrible things. And all of his experience, all of his training, all of his demons, nothing could have prepared him for what he saw next.

A ghastly expression came over his face. The life force that drove him on skipped a beat.

He recoiled away from the tub and dropped his Glock.

The tub was filled with the muddiest water that he had ever laid his eyes upon, but that was not what terrified him.

The thing that terrified Cutter to his very core, to his bones, to the bowels of his brain was the figure that he had shot.

Floating in the mud and filth in his bathtub was a skeleton.

The skeleton's eyeless eye sockets stared back at Cutter.

Ally's research had been thorough as always. And one of the things that Shane had also read in her message was where Kirk Cutter's wife had been buried.

The article about him and his murdered wife did forget to mention one minor detail. When Millie Cutter was murdered she had been eight months pregnant. I guess the police decided to keep that from the media due to sensitivity of the case.

Cutter's eyes focused and scanned the entire skeletal remains. That was when he saw something that terrified him even more.

He saw tiny skeletal remains floating inside his wife's ribcage.

As he moved closer and leaned in, he saw the under-developed bones of an unborn child.

"She was pregnant," I said. My dark voice hissed in his ears.

He swung around, but I was not in his sight.

"But you already knew that. You murdered your wife. You blamed it on a ghost. And you murdered her while she was pregnant," I said.

"Then you got the taste for killing. And you couldn't get that taste out of your system."

Cutter charged into the master bedroom, looking for me. His Glock was drawn out in front of him like a lance.

Before Cutter could sweep the room with the gun, I swiped it out of his grip with a violent strike.

The gun went flying against the wall.

In the darkness of the master bedroom, two sparks of light lit the room. The sparks were from the dual Tasers that I wielded.

After Cutter's Glock went flying from his hands, I struck him straight in the chest with Sun Good's Taser.

The Taser had two prongs at the end. They were nestled at opposite ends of an arch. They faced each other like twin serpent heads. Instead of hissing their tongues at each other, these serpents spit out a powerful electric current.

The Taser shocked Cutter.

He screamed.

I held down the trigger for only a few seconds, which was about as long as I could do, since he fell back and away from me.

The scales on my skin crawled, but not from fear. I was excited.

Cutter had fallen back against a dresser. I closed in on him.

He was badly dazed, but he was not down for the count.

He immediately rose to his feet. Before he could fight me, I showed him both Tasers.

I taunted him with them. I switched them both on. Like a boxer showing his opponent his blood-soaked gloved hands, I taunted my opponent. I faked each Taser in sequence.

Left. Right. Left. Right.

Then in one quick move, I jabbed with my right hand.

I hit Cutter square in the solar plexus. It was a powerful move. The jab brought the force of a punch, but it hadn't ended with just that. This jab ended with volts of electricity.

Agent Cutter was the most powerful monster that I'd ever faced. In that moment, I saw just how powerful.

I used Shane's left hand and struck toward Cutter's head with the other Taser.

The sparks from the Taser in my right hand shocked his body, but he was so powerful that he grabbed my left hand and deflected the blow.

I struggled for what felt like minutes, but it was actually only mere seconds.

Of course, the human body was a perfect conduit. The powerful shock from the Taser in my right hand jolted through Cutter's body and into my left hand.

I felt Shane stirring inside me. The electricity jolted our circuits. This was painful, but at the same time, it satisfied. Feeling that pain made me realize that it was really jarring the monster inside Cutter.

Suddenly, Cutter twisted his hips in a throwing maneuver. He threw me into the dresser and loosened my electric grip on him.

Shane's body recovered quickly from Cutter's throw. Then I was back on my feet.

Cutter shook his head as if the creature inside it had been shaken loose from the voltage.

My first instinct was that he would make a move for his Glock.

I was wrong. Cutter charged at me.

He jabbed at my head and then at my chest. Shane's powerful muscles absorbed the blows, but then Cutter popped me once more in the face.

The blow whipped Shane's head back. Without even realizing it, I stumbled backward. I soon realized that the force of Cutter's blow sent me into the bedroom window.

Then came the feel and sound of broken glass and I was falling backward into the rain.

Shane's back hit an overhang below the master bedroom. The weight of his body bent the rods, but they remained attached to the house. I rolled off the overhang and landed violently on the ground.

The rain pounded down on me. I could hear it echoing through Shane's ears.

Lightning struck somewhere in a nearby yard. It lit up the sky. I looked up and saw Cutter leaping through the window after me.

His monster must have been enraged. Or maybe those shocks to his chest had blinded his senses.

Perhaps he was simply out of control.

At any rate, Cutter's monster forgot one very important detail when he jumped from that window. He forgot his gun.

Cutter landed on his feet.

I spun around and rose to my feet.

The rain fell between us. Cutter and I stood, staring at each other in a final showdown.

This would be the final moment for one of us. I smiled inside Shane's skin. That was when I noticed that I held in my left hand only the Taser that I'd removed from the SWAT gear in the trunk of Cutter's FBI car.

The other Taser, Sun Good's Taser, was on the ground. It was closer to Cutter than it was to me.

We charged for it at the same time, like two rams in the wild about to butt heads.

We reached the Taser at the same time.

I squeezed the button on mine and sparks shot from the tip.

Cutter grabbed my wrist. He deflected it from his face. Then he pulled Sun's Taser from the ground. My free hand grabbed at his forearm, but the glove and the rain made it hard to get a grip.

Cutter mashed the button on Sun's Taser and sparks flew from it.

He shoved it into my stomach, but I managed to grab at his hand with my free hand and hold his attack at bay.

The two of us struggled with the sparks shooting and wailing between us.

I forced my Taser closer and closer to Cutter's center mass, overhanded.

I came close, but then he used the momentum of his upper body and pulled away from my attack.

The two of us were at an impasse.

The rain pounded harder and harder.

A set of three thunder claps rolled through the sky.

Suddenly, I realized that Cutter was speaking.

He said, "You will die!"

Then I said, "You killed your own wife and used a made-up serial killer to hide behind. I think it's time for…"

Before I could finish, Cutter pulled farther away and forced me to move forward.

A second later, I regained my breath and continued, "It's time for you to own up to it. It's time for YOU to die."

Cutter replied, "I am like you!"

"Like me? You are nothing like me!"

Cutter pulled away a little more, and then I realized why he kept pulling me back. It wasn't to get away from our struggle. He did it so he could lean back on his feet and use the full strength in his legs to drive a powerful head butt directly into my face.

The blow sent me completely out of a deadlocked grip. The force from it threw me almost off my feet.

I recovered as quickly as I could. It was just in time to see Cutter charging at me again. He had Sun Good's Taser at the ready.

He jabbed the Taser at my face. I deflected it with my Taser, like parrying a sword attack with my own sword.

The Tasers sparked. Electricity flung wildly as the currents met for an instant.

"I have watched you for a long time. I like what you do. I am like you," he said.

Then Cutter backed away. He retreated, circled me, and attacked again.

Like before, I held off his attack with my free hand. Simultaneously, he held my attack back with his free hand.

Our faces were only inches apart. That was the first time that he saw just how dark I was. I could see the recoil in his eyes. The monster inside of him feared me.

"You are not like me. I am a serial killer. You are a monster who murdered his own wife and unborn child," I said.

He said, "I never murdered MY wife. I murdered Kirk Cutter's wife after I murdered him."

A sharp, dark realization stabbed through me like a stiletto blade had pierced it.

Then he said, "The ID Killer is real. And Kirk Cutter did discover me. Only he discovered me more than ten years ago, before he joined the FBI. He discovered me back in law school, or rather, I discovered him.

"His wife—or actually, she was really married to me—she did marry me, but she thought she was marrying a man named Kirk Cutter," he said.

My grip began slipping. My forehead was bleeding and the blood seeped down past my eyebrows and into the corners of my eyes.

The rain pounded harder on Shane's shaved head.

Cutter's Taser got closer and closer. Meanwhile, he managed to keep mine at a safe distance from his head.

"I am the ID Killer. How do you think I found other serial killers so easily?

"I was getting bored in Cutter's life until I found you. After I kill you, I think I might try on Shane Lasher's skin and see what it's like being you—defender of killers. That is, until you kill them."

The blood began pooling in the corner of Shane's right eye. I was losing vision because of the blood and the dense, pouring rain.

The ID Killer began to reel back again like he was going to deliver another head butt.

I couldn't withstand another head butt attack. If he delivered one more, I knew it would be lights out.

As he began to snap back, I surprised him. I let go of my grip from his Taser. Instead, I leaned into it. As it shocked me, the voltage was so intense that I struggled not to scream in Shane's skull.

The voltage fired through Shane's body. It seared the tip of my tail and tendrils, but I held onto his brain.

Then the shock conducted through his body and his grip on Cutter's forearm hand.

The ID Killer jumped back violently and dropped Sun Good's Taser.

The electricity that fired through Shane's body was gone.

Before Cutter could recover, I picked up Sun Good's Taser. I held both Tasers.

The ID Killer had fallen to the ground. He began to stand up.

I shoved both Tasers against his head. One Taser touched the tip of one of his ears.

I studied him for a second. He looked up into my eyes.

I pressed the buttons on both Tasers.

Electricity seared through the prongs on the Tasers. The high voltage shock charged through his head. He squirmed and whipped.

I couldn't even imagine the pain that he felt. His body fluttered and flailed violently.

Shane's fingers mashed the buttons down hard on the Tasers.

He watched for several minutes while the ID Killer wailed around. Blood flooded from his nose and foam formed in his mouth.

I imagined how the creature inside his head seared and charred.

When I felt that Shane was satisfied, I released the buttons. Shane's fingers were blood-filled from how hard he had pressed down on the buttons.

Cutter's body slinked over and fell to the ground. A normal person would have been dead for sure. That amount of electrical current should have killed him, but it didn't. He was still alive, but he would never move again.

The ID Killer's brain was mush and the monster inside of him had fried. Nothing was left but a motionless shell of a man.

Cutter's cell phone rang in his pocket. I looked at him.

Shane came back. He huffed and breathed hard.

The struggle had exerted him to the limits.

He knelt over Cutter's body and reached in his pocket. He pulled out the phone.

Shane looked at the caller ID.

The ID read:

Hanna Cutter

Who is this? Shane wondered.

Too late to worry about it now. Certainly there would be police here at some point. Shane thought it best to get out.

Normally, he would have taken Cutter's body to his furnace. Normally, he would take his weapon that he had used. That was what he kept as a souvenir, the weapon of his victims.

Instead, Shane thought that it would be best to keep the Tasers. They would make good trophies.

He bent over Cutter and picked up the Taser.

He stopped and studied Cutter's scars. Self-inflicted. Those were his trophies.

Each cut represented a murder.

Shane wondered how many were murderers and how many were innocent victims like Sun Good.

Cutter's phone rang again. Same ID on the caller screen.

Shane decided to take the phone. There might be evidence on it that he'd rather erase.

He ignored Hanna Cutter and slipped the phone in his pocket. Then he left.

Chapter 10

Partners.

"…research on serial killers' partners is limited because often these women feel they can't talk unless given permission by the serial killer."

—Dr. Helen Morrison, Psychiatrist

The next week was January. It was cold and windy.

Shane felt the New Year all around him. Time moved quickly like it was just last year and then that year was gone.

It was time to wake up. It was time to start the new day, the New Year.

Shane's black Mercedes was parked in the driveway. His father's old Harley Davidson was buried in the depths of his garage.

He wore a thick, black pea coat over a suit. His blood-red tie was tucked neatly into the coat. Everything about his outfit was like his kill-suit, except for his scarf. It was black. After all, he was attending a funeral.

Shane stood over the newly patted down grave of Detective Sun Good. He had reburied her in his backyard. He'd buried her in his family cemetery, a small patch of land on his family manor. And now, on this new day, he was having a funeral for his friend.

She was far from D.C. She was far from her friends and colleagues. Shane felt regret that he could never tell her family about their daughter. He felt bad that her mother would never know what had happened to her.

Most of all Shane regretted that she had died because of him.

Shane blamed himself.

Even though Shane felt this guilt, he still seemed more at peace now than he had before. I knew that the road to forgive himself was hard and long, but he would endure.

"You were a good cop, a good friend, and a good person. I am sorry," Shane said. He looked out over the lake and then toward the sky.

Then he said, "Now you know my secret. Now you know me. I hope that wherever you are, you also know that I loved you."

That was all he said. He stood over her grave in silence. I remained coiled in his head. I was silent.

Across from Shane sat a man named Grant Carter.

Mr. Carter was a South African who was living in the U.S. and searching for work.

He had a very special skill set. He was a man of fifty-five years, but he could have passed for late forties. He was relatively healthy.

Although he had always been a meat and potatoes guy, it didn't show.

Shane had done a background check on him.

He'd found that Carter was former military. He had started out as an idealist, but later he'd become a mercenary for hire. He'd worked with black ops outfits all across Africa.

Mr. Carter was the kind of man who had a dark past, the kind of past that he ran from.

Shane looked into his eyes. He assessed Carter. Mr. Carter was the right man for the job. The black ops background could come in handy one day. And the fact that he had secrets of his own meant that he knew better than to ask questions.

"Mr. Carter, I don't really have any other questions. You have told me enough. You were honest with me. And I appreciate that. The job is yours," Shane said.

The man looked at Shane with surprise.

"Sir, I have been on several interviews in this country. And I have been turned down. I was almost on the verge of lying to you," Grant said. He sucked in his lips as if he wanted to taste the tip of his mustache.

"Mr. Carter, I need a caretaker with a certain level of discretion, someone who can handle the job, and also is capable of protecting my family estate. Where most people might see your unique past as dangerous, I see it as an asset.

"Plus, I can look into your eyes and see that you are trying to start over. I can appreciate a man with a past. I can appreciate a man who has committed dark acts, maybe even done things that he's regretted. And now you want a fresh start," Shane said.

"You won't regret this," Mr. Carter said.

Shane stood up from the cloth-covered couch. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys.

He tossed them to Carter.

Then he said, “Mr. Carter, you are the new caretaker for my home. Move your things in and get started.”

Shane smiled. In his heart he was happy that there was going to be a little life breathed back into his family home.

Unusual, violent ice storms had swept across the Northeast over the last few weeks. The roads were icy and the terrain was covered in snow.

Deep inside a hospital north of D.C., a man slept in a warm, mechanical bed.

The world had once known him as Special Agent Kirk Cutter. Now he was a vegetable.

The doctors declared him brain dead.

He was found at the emergency entrance to the hospital in the freezing cold. He was in bad shape.

A local sheriff’s deputy had been dispatched to check him out.

The deputy had checked with hospital staff and security. No one had reported witnessing anything or anyone.

One of the nurses had gone outside to smoke and found the man laid out across the bench.

Upon further investigation, the deputy saw that the outside security cameras had captured a small person in a hooded coat, the hood pulled down.

It looked like a woman because of the stranger’s stature and build, but there was no way of being certain.

The unidentified man’s fingerprints didn’t match any database because he was not the real Kirk Cutter. His photograph was released to the local news station, but no one claimed to know him.

The FBI was never notified.

Last year in D.C., one hundred twenty-one murder victims were never identified. Last month fourteen weren’t identified. All of these cases remained unsolved.

The man who had called himself Kirk Cutter was not Kirk Cutter, so none of his identifying features matched any records that were searched. Nothing was found on him.

The doctors believed that the patient had suffered from a traumatic electrical shock to the brain. They suspected that he had been in some kind of accident working with high voltage.

Maybe he worked for the power company. Maybe he had wondered off the job site after severely electrocuting himself and someone had found him. That someone may have wanted to remain anonymous and dumped him on the bench.

Another theory was that he had been struck by lightning, but the sheriffs dismissed this theory, as there were no burn signs on his body.

A week had passed. Since no one claimed to know him and there was little likelihood that this man would ever wake up, the sheriff’s office placed the case on low priority.

Washington D.C. was cold and very windy the next day. Shane had to wear his beanie over his head. It was not something that he wore often. It was a gray beanie with a blue stripe. He had purchased it in his early twenties. Beanies

were the fad then. Holding onto things like that helped remind Shane of his humanity.

Ally Embers hugged him the moment that he walked off the elevator.

"I missed you," she said.

It was an awkward moment, but it happened.

Shane said nothing.

He left her standing there and went into his old office. He had missed it.

He collapsed down in his chair. His briefcase was still by the door. He didn't care. He hadn't planned on doing any real work today.

He still mourned Sun Good's death. So the only thing that he had planned on doing today was hanging out in his office. Maybe he would read the paper. Maybe he would do the crossword. He remembered that the daily crossword was one of her morning traditions. Sun was an early riser. That was probably one of the reasons that she was such a good cop.

"I do them whenever I can," she had said.

He had only seen her do them once. But that one memory had stuck with him. So, the crossword reminded him of her.

Shane tried to focus on the crossword. Sixteen down read:

Smokescreen

Shane stared at it. He looked down at his hands. He looked at his skin. He thought about me.

Then he wrote "Camouflage."

Instead of going on to the next clue, he puzzled over the last one.

Then he pulled Cutter's phone from the desk and turned it on. He looked at it. There were missed messages from Hanna. Who was she?

Shane flipped the newspaper over and read an article a couple of pages deep about a mysterious man who had been dropped off at a hospital outside of D.C.

No picture.

It was Cutter. Shane hadn't dropped him there. He had left him in front of his house. No reason to worry about him. His brains were fried.

But someone had to lift him, take his wallet, and drop him off at some obscure hospital outside the city.

Someone wanted to deliver him to a medical center, but didn't want him to be recognized. Who?

Shane thought back. One more thing bothered him.

Who was the woman that Cutter had spoken to on the phone when Shane escaped from the Potomac River?

Was that Hanna?

Shane opened Cutter's phone. He sifted through the text messages. He searched for anything about Hanna that might help him discover who she was.

That was when Shane's jaw dropped.

This Hanna person had sent Cutter pictures of Shane in her texts, like surveillance. He was going to court in some. Then Shane went on a jog in another.

There was one special one. It was a video file. Shane played it.

He watched as he saw himself break into Townsend Dry's penthouse. It was the surveillance video feed from that memory stick that Townsend had.

Shane had forgotten all about it.

Shane went into the picture files on Cutter's phone. He found a video. He played it.

The video clip played. The background looked like Cutter's house. The drapes were closed. The light in the room was dim.

Candles lit the background.

Then an image of a man entered. He lay down on the bed. He was naked.

Self-inflicted scars were all over his body.

It was Kirk Cutter. But he was not alone. There was someone else in the room. It was a woman.

A beautiful woman entered the scene. She jumped on top of him. She was also naked.

They kissed and embraced.

Shane saw that she too was covered in self-inflicted cuts.

Accomplice! I thought.

Kirk Cutter was not alone. He had a lover, an accomplice. Then Shane saw the wedding rings. They were married. Cutter had remarried.

Hanna Cutter was his wife and accomplice. There were two ID Killers.

And she was out there somewhere. And she had the memory stick that proved that he was in Townsend Dry's apartment the night that Sandy Parks was murdered.

Shane looked through more photos, but he couldn't find one of any faces that he recognized.

Suddenly, Ally blurted out over the intercom. She said, "Shane, the FBI is here to see you."

It's her, Shane thought.

"Send her in," Shane said. He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a retractable knife with a three-inch blade.

The door opened and a slender woman walked in. She wore a pair of jeans and a dark blue blazer.

She had on a white button-down shirt underneath the blazer and a pair of glasses on her face.

Shane could see her eyes. They were amazingly blue. Her ears were disproportionate. One was higher than the other.

That was when he recognized her. Immediately, he knew who she was.

She approached his desk. Then he saw that her left hand was in a cast. It covered her forearm and wrapped around between her index finger and thumb.

"Shane Lasher," she said.

He smiled and said nothing back.

He stood up and they shook hands. They acted like this was their first time meeting.

"Nice to meet you," she said. They released each other's hands.

Shane looked in disbelief at the FBI agent who stood in front of his desk. It was Sandy Parks, only she was not Sandy Parks. She was Hanna Cutter.

The Woodsman had killed someone else. Sandy Parks had vanished.

"So it is you?" Shane said.

"It's me," Hanna said.

"You both killed the Woodsman," Shane said.

"We both worked on it," she said.

Then there was silence between them.

"What happened to your hand?"

"I assume that you have a good knowledge of firearms?" she asked.

"I do," he said.

"Good. Ever heard of a Guardian Pistol?"

Shane shook his head. I began to seep into him. Slowly, I took over.

"The Guardian Pistol is manufactured by the North American Arms Company. It is a discrete weapon and fires a .32 caliber bullet. It's small, but I can kill you with the one that I'm holding underneath this cast," she said.

She paused and then said, "The cast is to prevent it from getting out of my hand."

Shane didn't speak.

"Do you understand?"

"I do. Are you here to kill me?" Shane asked.

"No," she said.

She shifted to the other foot and reached into her purse with her right hand.

She kept her cast pointed at him.

After a moment, she pulled out a small memory stick. She tossed it onto the desk.

"I'm here to trade," she said.

"What do you want?" Shane asked.

"There is the memory stick that proves that you are more than you say you are. It is the original. There are no copies. I swear.

"It also has all of the files that we had created on you."

Shane nodded, but didn't take his eyes off hers.

Then she said, "You killed my husband. But he killed the woman that you loved. I'm willing to let that go."

"Why?"

"Kirk was more than my lover. He was my teacher. We worked together. I watched Townsend Dry. And then I watched you. All for my husband. All for his need to steal identities.

"He was obsessed with you. He wanted to become you. I didn't see a life in that. I also didn't see a way out," she said.

"I couldn't do anything without his permission. Now he's gone. I want to move on. But I can't do that if you're looking for me," she said.

"You helped him to murder people. I have never let anyone go," I said.

She stepped back in horror as she laid her gaze upon the darkness in my eyes.

I saw fear sweep over her.

"But they were all bad. I never killed anyone who was innocent. I didn't kill your woman. That was only Kirk," she said.

I was silent.

I looked down at the crossword. Seventeen across read:

The Answer to Suffering

I picked up the pen and wrote the word:

Forgiveness

Then I said, “It doesn’t fit.”

She leaned in closer and looked at the clue. She mouthed something. Looked like she was counting the number of spaces for the answer. She saw that the word forgiveness has eleven letters, but the answer required only nine.

The she said, “Try remission.”

I wrote the word in. It was right.

I sat back in Shane’s chair. I looked at her.

Then I said, “I’d better never see you again.”

She smiled.

Hanna Cutter looked down at her husband’s phone. I followed her eyes to it.

Then I picked it up and handed it to her.

She grabbed one end of it, but I didn’t let go.

I said, “Don’t add any new cuts to your body. If you do, I will see you again. Understand?”

She nodded.

I released the phone.

She refused to turn her back to me. So she backed away to the door.

I followed her.

She opened it and stepped out into the hall.

To keep up appearances in front of Ally and a few office workers who stood in the hallway, she said, “Thank you for your time. And Mr. Lasher you really should start to get out more. There is more to life than your clients.

“Read the paper. It’s right there on your desk. Look through other sections. I’m sure you’ll find something to do around town. Newspapers are good for more than just the crosswords.”

Then she vanished into the hallway.

Ally stood up, walked to Shane’s door, and closed it for him.

Shane returned to his chair. He folded the newspaper away from the crossword section and returned to the front page.

On the front page the headline read:

ManEater
Eats Man’s Heart Out!

Shane stared at the headline in fascination. And like two old friends, we both began to read the story of a very interesting new killer.

It felt so good to be back to normal.