

# ONE

## OKAVANGO DELTA, BOTSWANA

**I**N THE SLANTING LIGHT OF DAWN I SPOT IT, SUBTLE AS A WATERMARK, pressed into the bare patch of dirt. Were it midday, when the African sun glares down hot and bright, I might have missed it entirely, but in early morning, even the faintest dips and depressions cast shadows, and as I emerge from our tent that lone footprint catches my eye. I crouch down beside it and feel a sudden chill when I realize that only a thin layer of canvas shielded us while we slept.

Richard emerges through the tent flap and gives a happy grunt as he stands and stretches, inhaling the scents of dew-laden grass and wood smoke and breakfast cooking on the campfire. The smells of Africa. This adventure is Richard's dream; it has always been Richard's, not mine. I'm the good-sport girlfriend whose default mode is *Of course I'll do it, darling*. Even when it means twenty-eight hours and three different planes, from London to Johannesburg to Maun and then into the bush, the last plane a rickety crate flown by a hung-over pilot. Even when it means two weeks in a tent, swatting mosquitoes and peeing behind bushes.

Even if it means I could die, which is what I'm thinking as I stare

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down at that footprint, pressed into the dirt barely three feet from where Richard and I were sleeping last night.

“Smell the air, Millie!” Richard crows. “Nowhere else does it smell like this!”

“There was a lion here,” I say.

“I wish I could bottle it and bring it home. What a souvenir that would be. The smell of the bush!”

He isn’t listening to me. He’s too high on Africa, too wrapped up in his great-white-adventurer fantasy where everything is *brilliant* and *fantastic*, even last night’s meal of tinned pork and beans, which he declared the “splendid-est supper ever!”

I repeat, louder: “There was a lion here, Richard. It was right next to our tent. It could have clawed its way in.” I want to alarm him, want him to say, *Oh my God, Millie, this is serious*.

Instead he blithely calls out to the nearest members of our group: “Hey, come take a look! We had a lion here last night!”

First to join us are the two girls from Cape Town, whose tent is pitched beside ours. Sylvia and Vivian have Dutch last names that I can neither spell nor pronounce. They’re both in their twenties, tan and long-legged and blond, and at first I had trouble telling them apart, until Sylvia finally snapped at me in exasperation: “It’s not like we’re twins, Millie! Can’t you see that Vivian has blue eyes and I have green?” As the girls kneel on either side of me to examine the paw print, I notice that they smell different, too. Vivian-with-the-blue-eyes smells like sweet grass, the fresh, unsoured scent of youth. Sylvia smells like the citronella lotion she’s always slathering on to repel the mosquitoes, because *DEET is a poison. You do know that, don’t you?* They flank me like blond-goddess bookends, and I can’t help but see that Richard is once again eyeing Sylvia’s cleavage, which is so blatantly displayed in her low-cut tank top. For a girl so conscientious about coating herself in mosquito repellent, she exposes an alarming amount of bitable skin.

Naturally Elliot is quick to join us, too. He’s never far from the blondes, whom he met only a few weeks ago in Cape Town. He’s

since attached himself to them like a loyal puppy, hoping for a scrap of attention.

“Is that a fresh print?” Elliot asks, sounding worried. At least someone else shares my sense of alarm.

“I didn’t see it here yesterday,” says Richard. “The lion must have come through last night. Imagine stepping out to answer the call of nature and running into *that*.” He yowls and swipes a clawed hand at Elliot, who flinches away. This makes Richard and the blondes laugh, because Elliot is everyone’s comic relief, the anxious American whose pockets bulge with tissues and bug spray, sunscreen and sanitizer, allergy pills, iodine tablets, and every other possible necessity for staying alive.

I don’t join in their laughter. “Someone could have been killed out here,” I point out.

“But this is what happens on a real safari, hey?” says Sylvia brightly. “You’re out in the bush with lions.”

“Doesn’t look like a very big lion,” says Vivian, leaning in to study the print. “Maybe a female, do you think?”

“Male or female, they can both kill you,” says Elliot.

Sylvia gives him a playful slap. “Ooh. Are you scared?”

“No. No, I just assumed that Johnny was exaggerating when he gave us that talk the first day. *Stay in the jeep. Stay in the tent. Or you die.*”

“If you want to play it perfectly safe, Elliot, maybe you should have gone to the zoo instead,” Richard says, and the blondes laugh at his cutting remark. All hail Richard, the alpha male. Just like the heroes he writes about in his novels, he’s the man who takes charge and saves the day. Or thinks he is. Out here in the wild, he’s really just another clueless Londoner, yet he manages to sound like an expert at staying alive. It’s yet another thing that irritates me this morning, on top of the fact I’m hungry, I didn’t sleep well, and now the mosquitoes have found me. Mosquitoes always find me. Whenever I step outside, it’s as if they can hear their dinner bell ring, and already I’m slapping at my neck and face.

Richard calls out to the African tracker, “Clarence, come here! Look what came through camp last night.”

Clarence has been sipping coffee by the campfire with Mr. and Mrs. Matsunaga. Now he ambles toward us, carrying his tin coffee cup, and crouches down to look at the footprint.

“It’s fresh,” says Richard, the new bush expert. “The lion must have come through just last night.”

“Not a lion,” says Clarence. He squints up at us, his ebony face agleam in the morning sun. “Leopard.”

“How can you be so sure? It’s just one paw print.”

Clarence sketches the air above the print. “You see, this is the front paw. The shape is round, like a leopard’s.” He rises and scans the area. “And it is only one animal, so this one hunts alone. Yes, this is a leopard.”

Mr. Matsunaga snaps photos of the print with his giant Nikon, which has a telephoto lens that looks like something you’d launch into space. He and his wife wear identical safari jackets and khaki pants and cotton scarves with wide-brimmed hats. Down to the last detail, they are sartorially matched. In holiday spots around the world you find couples just like them, dressed in the same outlandish prints. It makes you wonder: Do they wake up one morning and think, *Let’s give the world a laugh today?*

As the sun lifts higher, washing out the shadows that so clearly defined the paw print, the others snap photos, racing against the brightening glare. Even Elliot pulls out his pocket camera, but I think it’s simply because everyone else is doing it, and he doesn’t like to be the odd man out.

I’m the only one who doesn’t bother to fetch my camera. Richard is taking enough photos for both of us, and he’s using his Canon, *the same camera National Geographic photographers use!* I move into the shade, but even here, out of the sun, I feel sweat trickle from my armpits. Already the heat is building. Every day in the bush is hot.

“Now you see why I tell you to stay in your tents at night,” Johnny Posthumus says.

Our bush guide has approached so quietly that I didn't realize he'd returned from the river. I turn to see Johnny standing right behind me. Such a grim-sounding name, Posthumus, but he told us it's a common enough surname among Afrikaans settlers, from which he's descended. In his features I see the bloodline of his sturdy Dutch ancestors. He has sun-streaked blond hair, blue eyes, and tree-trunk legs that are deeply tanned in khaki shorts. Mosquitoes don't seem to bother him, nor does the heat, and he wears no hat, slathers on no repellent. Growing up in Africa has toughened his hide, immunized him against its discomforts.

"She came through here just before dawn," Johnny says, and points to a thicket on the periphery of our camp. "Stepped out of those bushes, strolled toward the fire, and looked me over. Gorgeous girl, big and healthy."

I'm astonished by how calm he is. "You actually saw her?"

"I was out here building the fire for breakfast when she showed up."

"What did you do?"

"I did what I've told all of you to do in that situation. I stood tall. Gave her a good view of my face. Prey animals such as zebras and antelope have eyes at the sides of their heads, but a predator's eyes face forward. Always show the cat your face. Let her see where your eyes are, and she'll know you're a predator, too. She'll think twice before attacking." Johnny looks around at the seven clients who are paying him to keep them alive in this remote place. "Remember that, hey? We'll see more big cats as we go deeper into the bush. If you encounter one, stand tall and make yourself look as large as you can. Face them straight-on. And whatever you do, don't run. You'll have a better chance of surviving."

"You were out here, face-to-face with a leopard," says Elliot. "Why didn't you use *that*?" He points to the rifle that's always slung over Johnny's shoulder.

Johnny shakes his head. "I won't shoot a leopard. I won't kill any big cat."

"But isn't that what the gun's for? To protect yourself?"

“There aren’t enough of them left in the world. They own this land, and we’re the intruders here. If a leopard charged me, I don’t think I could kill it. Not even to save my own life.”

“But that doesn’t apply to us, right?” Elliot gives a nervous laugh and looks around at our traveling party. “You’d shoot a leopard to protect *us*, wouldn’t you?”

Johnny answers with an ironic smile. “We’ll see.”

BY NOON WE’RE PACKED up and ready to push deeper into the wild. Johnny drives the truck while Clarence rides in the tracker’s seat, which juts out in front of the bumper. It seems a precarious perch to me, out there with his legs swinging in the open, easy meat for any lion who can snag him. But Johnny assures us that as long as we stay attached to the vehicle, we’re safe, because predators think we’re all part of one huge animal. *But step out of the truck and you’re dinner. Got that, everyone?*

Yes sir. Message received.

There are no roads at all out here, only a faint flattening of the grass where the passage of earlier tires has compacted the poor soil. The damage caused by a single truck can scar the landscape for months, Johnny says, but I cannot imagine many of them make it this far into the Delta. We’re three days’ drive from the bush landing strip where we were dropped off, and we’ve spotted no other vehicles in this wilderness.

Wilderness was not something I actually believed in four months ago, sitting in our London flat, the rain spitting against the windows. When Richard called me over to his computer and showed me the Botswana safari he wanted to book for our holiday, I saw photos of lions and hippos, rhinos and leopards, the same familiar animals you can find in zoos and game parks. That’s what I imagined, a giant game park with comfortable lodges and roads. At a minimum, roads. According to the website, there’d be “bush camping” involved, but I pictured lovely big tents with showers and flush toilets. I didn’t think I’d be paying for the privilege of squatting in the bushes.

Richard doesn't mind roughing it in the least. He's high on Africa, higher than Mount Kilimanjaro, his camera constantly clicking away as we drive. In the seat behind us, Mr. Matsunaga's camera matches Richard's, click for click, but with a longer lens. Richard won't admit it, but he has lens envy, and when we get back to London he'll probably go straight online to price Mr. Matsunaga's gear. This is the way modern men do battle, not with spear and sword, but with credit cards. My platinum beats your gold. Poor Elliot with his unisex Minolta is left in the dust, but I don't think he minds, because once again he's snuggled in the last row with Vivian and Sylvia. I glance back at the three of them and catch a glimpse of Mrs. Matsunaga's resolute face. She's another good sport. I'm sure that shitting in the bushes wasn't her idea of a great holiday, either.

"Lions! Lions!" shouts Richard. "Over there!"

Cameras click faster as we pull so close I can see black flies clinging to the flank of the male lion. Nearby are three females, lolling in the shade of a leadwood tree. Suddenly there's an outburst of Japanese behind me, and I turn to see that Mr. Matsunaga has leaped to his feet. His wife hangs on to the back of his safari jacket, desperate to stop him from leaping out of the truck for a better photo.

"*Sit. Down!*" Johnny booms out in a voice that no one, man or beast, could possibly ignore. "*Now!*"

Instantly Mr. Matsunaga drops back into his seat. Even the lions seem startled, and they all stare at the mechanical monster with eighteen pairs of arms.

"Remember what I told you, Isao?" scolds Johnny. "If you step out of this truck, you're *dead*."

"I get excited. I forget," murmurs Mr. Matsunaga, apologetically bowing his head.

"Look, I'm only trying to keep you safe." Johnny releases a deep breath and says quietly: "I'm sorry for shouting. But last year, a colleague was on a game drive with two clients. Before he could stop them, they both jumped out of the truck to take photos. The lions had them in a flash."

“You mean—they were killed?” says Elliot.

“That’s what lions are programmed to do, Elliot. So please, enjoy the view, but from inside the truck, hey?” Johnny gives a laugh to defuse the tension, but we’re all still cowed, a group of misbehaving children who’ve just been disciplined. The camera clicks are half-hearted now, photos taken to cover our discomfort. We’re all shocked by how hard Johnny came down on Mr. Matsunaga. I stare at Johnny’s back, which looms right in front of me, and the muscles of his neck stick out like thick vines. He starts the engine again. We leave the lions and drive on, to our next campsite.

AT SUNSET, THE LIQUOR comes out. After the five tents are pitched and the campfire is lit, Clarence the tracker opens the aluminum cocktail case that has bounced in the back of the truck all day, and sets out the bottles of gin and whiskey, vodka and Amarula. The last I’ve grown particularly fond of, a sweet cream liqueur made from the African marula tree. It tastes like a thousand boozy calories of coffee and chocolate, like something a child would sneak a sip of when his mother’s back is turned. Clarence winks at me as he hands me my glass, as if I’m the naughty child of the bunch because everyone else sips grown-up drinks like warm gin and tonic or whiskey, neat. This is the part of the day when I think, Yes, it’s good to be in Africa. When the day’s discomforts and the bugs and the tension between me and Richard all dissolve in a pleasant, tipsy haze and I can settle into a camp chair and watch the sun go down. As Clarence prepares a simple evening meal of meat stew and bread and fruit, Johnny strings up the perimeter wire, hung with little bells to alert us should anything wander into camp. I notice Johnny’s silhouette suddenly go still against the sunset’s glow, and he raises his head as if he’s sniffing the air, taking in a thousand scents that I’m not even aware of. He’s like another bush creature, so at home in this wild place that I almost expect him to open his mouth and roar like a lion.

I turn to Clarence, who’s stirring the pot of bubbling stew. “How long have you worked with Johnny?” I ask.



“With Johnny? First time.”

“You’ve never been his tracker before?”

Clarence briskly shakes pepper into the stew. “My cousin is Johnny’s tracker. But this week Abraham is in his village for a funeral. He asked me to take his place.”

“And what did Abraham say about Johnny?”

Clarence grins, his white teeth gleaming in the twilight. “Oh, my cousin tells many stories about him. Many stories. He thinks Johnny should have been born Shangaan, because he’s just like us. But with a white face.”

“Shangaan? Is that your tribe?”

He nods. “We come from Limpopo Province. In South Africa.”

“Is that the language I hear you two speaking sometimes?”

He gives a guilty laugh. “When we don’t want you to know what we say.”

I imagine that none of it is flattering. I look at the others seated around the campfire. Mr. and Mrs. Matsunaga are diligently reviewing the day’s photos on his camera. Vivian and Sylvia lounge in their low-cut tank tops, oozing pheromones that make poor, awkward Elliot grovel for attention as usual. *Are you gals chilly? Can I get your sweaters? How about another gin and tonic?*

Richard emerges from our tent with a fresh shirt. There’s an empty chair waiting for him beside me, but he walks right past it. He sits down next to Vivian instead, and proceeds to dial up the charm. *How are you enjoying our safari? Do you ever make it to London? I’d be happy to send you and Sylvia autographed copies of Blackjack when it’s published.*

Of course they all now know who he is. Within the first hour of meeting everyone, Richard subtly slipped in the fact that he is thriller writer Richard Renwick, creator of MI5 hero Jackman Tripp. Unfortunately none of them had ever heard of Richard or his hero, which led to a prickly first day on safari. But now he’s back in form, doing what he does best: charming his audience. Laying it on too thick, I think. Far too thick. But if I complain about it later, I

know exactly what he'll say. *It's what writers have to do, Millie. We have to be sociable and bring in new readers.* Funny how Richard never wastes his time being sociable with grandmotherly types, only with young, preferably pretty girls. I remember how he'd turned that same charm on me four years ago, when he'd signed copies of *Kill Option* at the bookshop where I work. When Richard's on his game, he's impossible to resist, and now I see him looking at Vivian in a way he hasn't looked at me in years. He slips a Gauloise between his lips and tilts forward to cup the flame from his sterling-silver lighter, the way his hero Jackman Tripp would, with masculine panache.

The empty chair next to me feels like a black hole, sucking all the joy out of my mood. I'm ready to get up and go back to my tent when suddenly Johnny settles into that chair beside me. He doesn't say anything, just scans the group as if taking our measure. I think he is always taking our measure, and I wonder what he sees when he looks at me. Am I like all the other resigned wives and girlfriends who've been dragged into the bush to humor the safari fantasies of their men?

His gaze rattles me, and I'm compelled to fill the silence. "Do those bells on the perimeter wire actually work?" I ask. "Or are they just there to make us feel safer?"

"They serve as a first alert."

"I didn't hear them last night, when the leopard came into camp."

"I did." He leans forward, tosses more wood on the fire. "We'll probably hear those bells again tonight."

"You think there are more leopards lurking about?"

"Hyenas this time." He points at the darkness looming beyond our firelit circle. "There's about half a dozen of them watching us right now."

"What?" I peer into the night. Only then do I spot the reflected gleam of eyes staring back.

"They're patient. Waiting to see if there's a meal to be scavenged. Walk out there alone, and they'll make *you* their meal." He shrugs. "Which is why you hired me."

"To keep us from ending up as dinner."

“I wouldn’t get paid if I lost too many clients.”

“How many is too many?”

“You’d only be the third.”

“That’s a joke, right?”

He smiles. Though he’s about the same age as Richard, a lifetime in the African sun has etched lines around Johnny’s eyes. He lays a reassuring hand on my arm, which startles me because he’s not a man who offers unnecessary touches. “Yes, it’s a joke. I’ve never lost a client.”

“I find it hard to tell when you’re serious.”

“When I’m serious, you’ll know it.” He turns to Clarence, who’s just said something to him in Shangaan. “Supper’s ready.”

I glance at Richard, to see if he’s noticed Johnny talking to me, Johnny’s hand on my arm. But Richard’s so focused on Vivian that I might as well be invisible.

“IT’S WHAT WRITERS HAVE to do,” Richard predictably says as we lie in our tents that night. “I’m only bringing in new readers.” We speak in whispers, because the canvas is thin, the tents close together. “Besides, I feel a little protective. They’re on their own, just two girls out in the bush. Rather adventurous when they’re only twenty-something, don’t you think? You have to admire them for that.”

“Elliot obviously admires them,” I observe.

“Elliot would admire anything with two X chromosomes.”

“So they’re not exactly on their own. He signed on to the trip to keep them company.”

“And God, that must get tiresome for them. Having him hanging around all the time, making cow eyes.”

“The girls invited him. That’s what Elliot says.”

“Invited him out of pity. He chats them up in some nightclub, hears they’re going on safari. They probably said, *Hey, you should think about coming into the bush, too!* I’m sure they never imagined he’d actually sign on.”

“Why do you always put him down? He seems like a very nice man. And he knows an awful lot about birds.”

Richard snorts. "That's always so attractive in a man."

"What is the matter with you? Why are you so cranky?"

"I could say the same about you. All I do is chat up a young woman and you can't deal with it. At least *those* girls know how to have a good time. They're in the spirit of things."

"I'm trying to enjoy myself, I really am. But I didn't think it would be so rough out here. I expected—"

"Fluffy towels and chocolates on the pillow."

"Give me some credit. I'm here, aren't I?"

"Complaining all the way. This safari was my dream, Millie. Don't ruin it for me."

We're no longer whispering and I'm sure the others can hear us, if they're still awake. I know that Johnny is, because he's on first watch. I imagine him sitting by the campfire, listening to our voices, hearing the rising tension. Surely he's already aware of it. Johnny Posthumus is the kind of man who misses nothing, which is how he survives in this place, where hearing the tinkle of a bell on a wire means the difference between life and death. What useless, shallow people we must seem to him. How many marriages has he watched fall apart, how many self-important men has he seen humbled by Africa? The bush is not merely a holiday destination; it's where you learn how insignificant you truly are.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, and reach out for Richard's hand. "I don't mean to spoil this for you."

Though my fingers close around his, he doesn't return the gesture. His hand feels like a dead thing in my grasp.

"You've put a damper on everything. Look, I know this trip wasn't your idea of a holiday, but for God's sake, enough of the glum face. Look how Sylvia and Vivian are enjoying themselves! Even Mrs. Matsunaga manages to be a good sport."

"Maybe it's all because of these malaria pills I'm taking," I offer weakly. "The doctor said they can make you depressed. He said some people even go insane on them."

“Well, the mefloquine isn’t bothering *me*. The girls are taking it, too, and they’re jolly enough.”

The girls again. Always comparing me with the girls, who are nine years younger than I am, nine years slimmer and fresher. After four years of sharing the same flat, the same loo, how could any woman still seem fresh?

“I should stop taking the pills,” I tell him.

“What, and get malaria? Oh right, that makes sense.”

“What do you want me to do? Richard, tell me what you want me to do.”

“I don’t *know*.” He sighs and turns away from me. His back is like cold concrete, a wall that encases his heart, locking it beyond my reach. After a moment, he says softly: “I don’t know where we’re going, Millie.”

But I know where Richard is going. Away from me. He’s been pulling away from me for months, so subtly, so gradually that until now, I refused to see it. I could chalk it up to: *Oh, we’re both so busy lately*. He’s been scrambling to finish the revisions on *Blackjack*. I’ve been struggling through our annual inventory at the bookshop. All will be better between us when our lives slow down. That’s what I kept telling myself.

Outside our tent, the night is alive with sounds of the Delta. We are camped not far from a river, where earlier we saw hippos. I think I can hear them now, along with the croaks and cries and grunts of countless other creatures.

But inside our tent, there is only silence.

So this is where love comes to die. In a tent, in the bush, in Africa. If we were back in London, I’d be out of bed, dressed and off to my girlfriend’s flat for brandy and sympathy. But here I’m trapped inside canvas, surrounded by things that want to eat me. Sheer claustrophobia makes me desperate to claw my way out of the tent, to run screaming into the night. It must be these malaria pills, wreaking havoc with my brain. I want it to be the pills, because that means it’s not my fault I’m feeling hopeless. I really must stop taking them.

Richard has fallen deeply asleep. How can he do that, just drop off so peacefully when I feel I'm about to shatter? I listen to him breathe in and out, so relaxed, so steady. The sound of him not caring.

He is still deeply asleep when I awake the next morning. As the pale light of dawn seeps through the seams of our tent, I think with dread of the day ahead. Another uneasy drive as we sit side by side, trying to be civil with each other. Another day of slapping mosquitoes and peeing in the bushes. Another evening of watching Richard flirt and feeling another piece of my heart crumble away. This holiday cannot possibly get worse, I think.

And then I hear the sound of a woman shrieking.

# TWO

## BOSTON

IT WAS THE MAILMAN WHO CALLED IT IN. ELEVEN FIFTEEN A.M., SHAKY voice on a cell phone: *I'm on Sanborn Avenue, West Roxbury, oh-two-one-three-two. The dog—I saw the dog in the window . . .* And that's how it came to the attention of Boston PD. A cascade of events that started with an alert mail carrier, one in an army of foot soldiers deployed six days a week in neighborhoods across America. They are the eyes of the nation, sometimes the only eyes that notice which elderly widow has not collected her mail, which old bachelor doesn't answer his doorbell, and which porch has a yellowing pile of newspapers.

The first clue that something was amiss inside the large house on Sanborn Avenue, zip code 02132, was the overstuffed mailbox, something that US postal carrier Luis Muniz first noticed on day number two. Two days' worth of uncollected mail wasn't necessarily a cause for alarm. People go away for the weekend. People forget to request a hold on home delivery.

But on day number three, Muniz started to worry.

On day number four, when Muniz opened the mailbox and found

it still jam-packed with catalogs and magazines and bills, he knew he had to take action.

“So he knocks on the front door,” said Patrolman Gary Root. “Nobody answers. He figures he’ll check with the next-door neighbor, see if she knows what’s going on. Then he looks in the window and spots the dog.”

“That dog over there?” asked Detective Jane Rizzoli, pointing to a friendly-looking golden retriever who was now tied to the mailbox.

“Yeah, that’s him. The tag on his collar says his name’s Bruno. I took him outta the house, before he could do any more . . .” Patrolman Root swallowed. “Damage.”

“And the mail carrier? Where’s he?”

“Took the rest of the day off. Probably getting a stiff drink somewhere. I got his contact info, but he probably can’t tell you much more than what I just told you. He never went inside the house, just called nine one one. I was first on the scene, found the front door unlocked. Walked in and . . .” He shook his head. “Wish I hadn’t.”

“You talk to anyone else?”

“The nice lady next door. She came out when she saw the cruisers parked out here, wanted to know what was going on. All I told her was that her neighbor was dead.”

Jane turned and faced the house where Bruno the friendly retriever had been trapped. It was an older two-story, single-family home with a porch, a two-car garage, and mature trees in front. The garage door was closed, and a black Ford Explorer, registered to the homeowner, was parked in the driveway. This morning, there would have been nothing to distinguish the residence from the other well-kept houses on Sanborn Avenue, nothing that would catch a cop’s eye and make him think: Wait a minute, there’s something wrong here. But now there were two patrol cars parked at the curb, rack lights flashing, which made it obvious to anyone passing by that yes, something was very wrong here. Something that Jane and her partner, Barry Frost, were about to confront. Across the street, a gathering crowd of neighbors stood gaping at the house. Had any of them no-



ticed the occupant hadn't been seen in a few days, hadn't walked his dog or picked up his mail? Now they were probably telling one another: *Yeah, I knew something wasn't right.* Everyone's brilliant in retrospect.

"You want to walk us through the house?" Frost asked Patrolman Root.

"You know what?" said Root. "I'd rather not. I finally got the smell outta my nose, and I don't care for another whiff of it."

Frost swallowed. "Uh . . . that bad?"

"I was in there maybe thirty seconds, tops. My partner didn't last even that long. It's not like there's anything in there I need to point out to you. You can't miss it." He looked at the golden retriever, who responded with a playful bark. "Poor pup, trapped in there with nothing to eat. I know he had no choice, but still . . ."

Jane glanced at Frost, who was staring at the house like a condemned prisoner facing the gallows. "What'd you have for lunch?" she asked him.

"Turkey sandwich. Potato chips."

"Hope you enjoyed it."

"This isn't helping, Rizzoli."

They climbed the porch steps and paused to pull on gloves and shoe covers. "You know," she said, "there's this pill called *Compazine*."

"Yeah?"

"Works pretty good for morning sickness."

"Great. When I get knocked up, I'll give it a try."

They looked at each other and she saw him take a deep breath, just as she was doing. One last gulp of clean air. With a gloved hand she opened the door, and they stepped inside. Frost lifted his arm to cover his nose, blocking the smell that they were far too familiar with. Whether you called it *cadaverine*, or *putrescine*, or any other chemical name, it all came down to the stench of death. But it was not the smell that made Jane and Frost pause just inside the door; it was what they saw hanging on the walls.

Everywhere they looked, eyes stared back at them. A whole gallery of the dead, confronting these new intruders.

“Jesus,” murmured Frost. “Was he some kind of big-game hunter?”

“Well, that is definitely big game,” said Jane, staring up at the mounted head of a rhino and wondering what kind of bullet it took to kill such a creature. Or the Cape buffalo beside it. She moved slowly past the row of trophies, her shoe covers swishing across the wood floor, gazing at animal heads so life-like she almost expected the lion to roar. “Are these even legal? Who the hell shoots a leopard these days?”

“Look. The dog wasn’t the only pet running around in here.”

A variety of reddish-brown paw prints tracked across the wood floor. The larger set would match Bruno, the golden retriever, but there were smaller prints as well, dotted throughout the room. Brown smears on the windowsill marked where Bruno had propped up his front paws to look out at the mail carrier. But it wasn’t merely the sight of a dog that caused Luis Muniz to dial 911; it was what protruded from that dog’s mouth.

A human finger.

She and Frost followed the trail of paw prints, passing beneath the glassy eyes of a zebra and a lion, a hyena and a warthog. This collector did not discriminate by size; even the smallest creatures had their ignominious place on these walls, including four mice posed with tiny china cups, seated around a miniature table. A Mad Hatter’s grotesque tea party.

As they moved through the living room and into a hallway, the stench of putrefaction grew stronger. Though she could not yet see its source, Jane could hear the ominous buzz of its supplicants. A fat fly buzzed a few lazy circles around her head and drifted away through a doorway.

*Always follow the flies. They know where dinner is served.*

The door hung ajar. Just as Jane pushed it wider, something white streaked out and shot past her feet.

“Holy crap!” yelled Frost.

Heart banging, Jane glanced back at the pair of eyes peering out from under the living room sofa. “It’s just a cat.” She gave a relieved laugh. “That explains the smaller paw prints.”

“Wait, you hear that?” said Frost. “I think there’s another cat in there.”

Jane took a breath and stepped through the doorway, into the garage. A gray tabby trotted over to greet her and silkily threaded back and forth between her legs, but Jane ignored it. Her gaze was fixed on what hung from the ceiling hoist. The flies were so thick she could feel their hum in her bones as they swarmed around the ripe feast that had been flayed open for their convenience, exposing meat that now squirmed with maggots.

Frost lurched away, gagging.

The nude man hung upside down, his ankles bound with orange nylon cord. Like a pig carcass hanging in a slaughterhouse, his abdomen had been sliced open, the cavity stripped of all organs. Both arms dangled free, and the hands would have almost touched the floor—if the hands had still been attached. If hunger had not forced Bruno the dog, and maybe the two cats as well, to start gnawing off the flesh of their owner.

“So now we know where that finger came from,” Frost said, his voice muffled behind his sleeve. “Jesus, it’s everyone’s worst nightmare. Getting eaten by your own cat . . .”

For three starving house pets, what now hung from the hoist would certainly look like a feast. The animals had already disarticulated the hands and stripped away so much skin and muscle and cartilage from the face that the white bone of one orbit was exposed, a pearly ridge peeking through shredded flesh. The facial features were gnawed beyond recognition, but the grotesquely swollen genitals left no doubt this was a man—an older one, judging by the silvery pubic hair.

“Hung and dressed like game,” said a voice behind her.

Startled, Jane turned to see Dr. Maura Isles standing in the door-

way. Even at a death scene as grotesque as this one, Maura managed to look elegant, her black hair as sleek as a gleaming helmet, her gray jacket and pants perfectly tailored to her slim waist and hips. She made Jane feel like the sloppy cousin with flyaway hair and scuffed shoes. Maura did not quail from the smell but moved straight to the carcass, heedless of the flies that were dive-bombing her head. “This is disturbing,” she said.

“Disturbing?” Jane snorted. “I was thinking more along the lines of *totally fucked up*.”

The gray tabby abandoned Jane and went to Maura, where it rubbed back and forth against her leg, purring loudly. So much for feline loyalty.

Maura nudged the cat away with her foot, but her attention stayed focused on the body. “Abdominal and thoracic organs missing. The incision looks very decisive, from pubis down to xiphoid. It’s what a hunter would do to a deer or a boar. Hang it, gut it, leave it to age.” She glanced up at the ceiling hoist. “And that looks like something you’d use to hang game. Clearly this house belongs to a hunter.”

“Those look like what a hunter would use, too,” said Frost. He pointed to the garage workbench, where a magnetized rack held a dozen lethal-looking knives. All of them appeared clean, the blades bright and gleaming. Jane stared at the boning knife. Imagined that razor edge slicing through flesh as yielding as butter.

“Odd,” said Maura, focusing on the torso. “These wounds here don’t look like they’re from a knife.” She pointed to three incisions that sliced down the rib cage. “They’re perfectly parallel, like blades mounted together.”

“Looks like a claw mark,” said Frost. “Could the animals have done that?”

“They’re too deep for a cat or dog. These appear to be postmortem, with minimal oozing . . .” She straightened, focusing on the floor. “If he was butchered right here, the blood must have been hosed away. See that drain in the concrete? It’s something a hunter would install if he used this space to hang and age meat.”

“What’s the thing about aging? I never understood the point of hanging meat,” said Frost.

“Postmortem enzymes act as a natural tenderizer, but it’s usually done at temperatures just above freezing. In here it feels like, what, about fifty degrees? Warm enough to get decomp. And maggots. I’m just glad it’s November. It would smell a lot worse in August.” With a pair of tweezers, Maura picked off one of the maggots and studied it as it squirmed in her gloved palm. “These look like third instar stage. Consistent with a time of death about four days ago.”

“All those mounted heads in the living room,” said Jane. “And he ends up hanging, like some dead animal. I’d say we’ve got a theme going here.”

“Is this victim the homeowner? Have you confirmed his identity?”

“Kind of hard to make a visual ID with his hands and face gone. But I’d say the age matches. The homeowner of record is Leon Gott, age sixty-four. Divorced, lived alone.”

“He certainly didn’t die alone,” said Maura, staring into the gaping incision at what was now little more than an empty shell. “Where are they?” she said, and suddenly turned to face Jane. “The killer hung the body here. What did he do with the organs?”

For a moment, the only sound in the garage was the humming of flies as Jane considered every urban legend she’d ever heard about stolen organs. Then she focused on the covered garbage can in the far corner. As she approached it, the stench of putrefaction grew even stronger, and flies swarmed in a hungry cloud. Grimacing, she lifted the edge of the lid. One quick glance was all she could stomach before the smell made her back away, gagging.

“I take it you found them,” said Maura.

“Yeah,” muttered Jane. “At least, the intestines. I’ll leave the full inventory of guts to you.”

“Neat.”

“Oh yeah, it’ll be lots of fun.”

“No, what I mean is, the perp was neat. The incision. The re-

removal of the viscera.” Paper shoe covers crackled as Maura crossed to the trash can. Both Jane and Frost backed away when Maura pried open the lid, but even from the opposite side of the garage they caught the stomach-turning whiff of rotting organs. The odor seemed to excite the gray tabby, who was rubbing against Maura with even more fervor, mewing for attention.

“Got yourself a new friend,” said Jane.

“Normal feline marking behavior. He’s claiming me as his territory,” said Maura as she plunged a gloved hand into the garbage can.

“I know you like to be thorough, Maura,” said Jane. “But how about picking through those in the morgue? Like, in a biohazard room or something?”

“I need to be certain . . .”

“Of what? You can *smell* they’re in there.” To Jane’s disgust, Maura bent over the garbage can and reached even deeper into the pile of entrails. In the morgue, she’d watched Maura slice open torsos and peel off scalps, de-flesh bones and buzz-saw through skulls, performing all these tasks with laser-guided concentration. That same icy focus was on Maura’s face as she dug through the congealed mass in the trash can, heedless of the flies now crawling in her fashionably clipped dark hair. Was there anyone else who could look so elegant while doing something so disgusting?

“Come on, it’s not like you haven’t seen guts before,” said Jane.

Maura didn’t answer as she plunged her hands deeper.

“Okay.” Jane sighed. “You don’t need us for this. Frost and I will check out the rest of the—”

“There’s too much,” Maura muttered.

“Too much what?”

“This isn’t a normal volume of viscera.”

“You’re the one who’s always talking about bacterial gases. Bloating.”

“Bloating doesn’t explain *this*.” Maura straightened, and what she held in her gloved hand made Jane cringe.

“A heart?”

“This is not a normal heart, Jane,” said Maura. “Yes, it has four chambers, but this aortic arch isn’t right. And the great vessels don’t look right, either.”

“Leon Gott was sixty-four,” said Frost. “Maybe he had a bad ticker.”

“That’s the problem. This doesn’t look like a sixty-four-year-old man’s heart.” Maura reached into the garbage pail again. “But *this* one does,” she said, and held out her other hand.

Jane looked back and forth between the two specimens. “Wait. There are *two* hearts in there?”

“And two complete sets of lungs.”

Jane and Frost stared at each other. “Oh shit,” he said.





## THREE

**F**ROST SEARCHED THE DOWNSTAIRS AND SHE TOOK THE UPSTAIRS. WENT room by room, opening closets and drawers, peering under beds. No gutted bodies anywhere, nor any signs of a struggle, but plenty of dust bunnies and cat hair. Mr. Gott—if indeed he was the man hanging in the garage—had been an indifferent housekeeper, and scattered across his dresser were old hardware store receipts, hearing aid batteries, a wallet with three credit cards and forty-eight dollars in cash, and a few stray bullets. Which told her that Mr. Gott was more than a little casual about firearms. She wasn't surprised to open his nightstand drawer and find a fully loaded Glock inside, with a round in the chamber, ready to fire. Just the tool for the paranoid homeowner.

Too bad the gun was upstairs while the homeowner was downstairs, getting his guts ripped out.

In the bathroom cabinet she found the expected array of pills for a man of sixty-four. Aspirin and Advil, Lipitor and Lopressor. And on the countertop was a pair of hearing aids—high-end ones. He hadn't

been wearing them, which meant he might not have heard an intruder.

As she started downstairs, the telephone rang in the living room. By the time she reached it, the answering machine had already kicked in and she heard a man's voice leave a message.

*Hey, Leon, you never got back to me about the trip to Colorado. Let me know if you want to join us. Should be a good time.*

Jane was about to play the message again, to see the caller's phone number, when she noticed that the PLAY button was smeared with what looked like blood. According to the blinking display, there were two recorded messages, and she'd just heard the second one.

With a gloved finger she pressed PLAY.

*November three, nine fifteen A.M.: . . . and if you call immediately, we can lower your credit card rates. Don't miss this opportunity to take advantage of this special offer.*

*November six, two P.M.: Hey, Leon, you never got back to me about the trip to Colorado. Let me know if you want to join us. Should be a good time.*

November 3 was a Monday, today was a Thursday. That first message was still on the machine, unplayed, because at nine on Monday morning, Leon Gott was probably dead.

"Jane?" said Maura. The gray tabby had followed her into the hallway and was weaving figure of eights between her legs.

"There's blood on this answering machine," said Jane, turning to look at her. "Why would the perp touch it? Why would he check the victim's messages?"

"Come see what Frost found in the backyard."

Jane followed her into the kitchen and out the back door. In a fenced yard landscaped only with patchy grass stood an outbuilding with metal siding. Too big to be just a storage shed, the windowless structure looked large enough to hide any number of horrors. As Jane stepped inside, she smelled a chemical odor, alcohol-sharp. Fluorescent bulbs cast the interior in a cold, clinical glare.

Frost stood beside a large worktable, studying a fearsome-looking

tool bolted to it. "I thought at first this was a table saw," he said. "But this blade doesn't look like any saw I've ever come across. And those cabinets over there?" He pointed across the workshop. "Take a look at what's inside them."

Through the glass cabinet doors, Jane saw boxes of latex gloves and an array of frightening-looking instruments laid out on the shelves. Scalpels and knives, probes and pliers and forceps. *Surgeon's tools*. Hanging from wall hooks were rubber aprons, splattered with what looked like bloodstains. With a shudder, she turned and stared at the plywood worktable, its surface scarred with nicks and gouges, and saw a clump of congealed, raw meat.

"Okay," Jane murmured. "Now I'm freaking out."

"This is like a serial killer's workshop," said Frost. "And this table is where he sliced and diced the bodies."

In the corner was a fifty-gallon white barrel mounted to an electrical motor. "What the hell is that thing for?"

Frost shook his head. "It looks big enough to hold . . ."

She crossed to the barrel. Paused as she spotted red droplets on the floor. A smear of it streaked the hatch door. "There's blood all around here."

"What's inside the barrel?" said Maura.

Jane gave the fastening bolt a hard pull. "And behind door number two is . . ." She peered into the open hatch. "Sawdust."

"That's all?"

Jane reached into the barrel and sifted through the flakes, stirring up a cloud of wood dust. "Just sawdust."

"So we're still missing the second victim," said Frost.

Maura went to the nightmarish tool that Frost had earlier thought was a table saw. As she examined the blade, the cat was at her heels again, rubbing against her pant legs, refusing to leave her alone. "Did you get a good look at this thing, Detective Frost?"

"I got as close as I wanted to get."

"Notice how this circular blade has a cutting edge that's bent sideways? Obviously this isn't meant for slicing."

Jane joined her at the table and gingerly touched the blade edge. “This thing looks like it’d rip you to shreds.”

“And that’s probably what it’s for. I think it’s called a flesher. It’s used not to cut but to grind away flesh.”

“They *make* a machine like that?”

Maura crossed to a closet and opened the door. Inside was a row of what looked like paint cans. Maura reached for one large container and turned it around to read the contents. “Bondo.”

“An automotive product?” said Jane, glimpsing the image of a car on the label.

“The label says it’s filler, for car body work. To repair dings and scratches.” Maura set the can of Bondo back on the shelf. She couldn’t shake the gray cat, who followed her as she went to the cabinet and peered through glass doors at the knives and probes, laid out like a surgeon’s tool kit. “I think I know what this room was used for.” She turned to Jane. “You know that second set of viscera in the trash can? I don’t believe they’re human.”

“LEON GOTT WAS NOT a nice man. And I’m trying to be charitable,” said Nora Bazarian as she wiped a mustache of creamed carrots from her one-year-old son’s mouth. In her faded jeans and clinging T-shirt, with her blond hair pulled back in a girlish ponytail, she looked more like a teenager than a thirty-three-year-old mother of two. She had a mother’s skill at multitasking, efficiently feeding spoonfuls of carrots into her son’s open mouth between loading the dishwasher, checking on a cake in the oven, and answering Jane’s questions. No wonder the woman had a teenager’s waistline; she didn’t sit still for five seconds.

“You know what he yelled at my six-year-old?” said Nora. “*Get off my lawn*. I used to think that was just a caricature of cranky old men, but Leon actually said that to my son. All because Timmy wandered next door to pet his dog.” Nora closed the dishwasher with a bang. “Bruno has better manners than his owner did.”

“How long did you know Mr. Gott?” asked Jane.

“We moved into this house six years ago, just after Timmy was born. We thought this was the perfect neighborhood for kids. You can see how well kept the yards are, for the most part, and there are other young families on this street, with kids Timmy’s age.” With balletic grace she pivoted to the coffeepot and refilled Jane’s cup. “A few days after we moved in, I brought Leon a plate of brownies, just to say hello. He didn’t even say thanks, just told me he didn’t eat sweets, and handed them right back. Then he complained that my new baby was crying too much, and why couldn’t I keep him quiet at night? Can you believe that?” She sat down and spooned more carrots into her son’s mouth. “To top it off, there were all those dead animals hanging on his wall.”

“So you’ve been inside his house.”

“Only once. He sounded so proud when he told me he’d shot most of them himself. What kind of a person kills animals just to decorate his walls?” She wiped a carrot dribble from the baby’s chin. “That’s when I decided we’d just stay away from him. Right, Sam?” she cooed. “Just stay away from that mean man.”

“When did you last see Mr. Gott?”

“I talked to Officer Root about all this. I last saw Leon over the weekend.”

“Which day?”

“Sunday morning. I saw him in his driveway. He was carrying groceries into his house.”

“Did you see anyone visit him that day?”

“I was gone for most of Sunday. My husband’s in California this week, so I took the kids down to my mom’s house in Falmouth. We didn’t get home till late that night.”

“What time?”

“Around nine thirty, ten.”

“And that night, did you hear anything unusual next door? Shouts, loud voices?”

Nora set down the spoon and frowned at her. The baby gave a

hungry squawk, but Nora ignored him; her attention was entirely focused on Jane. “I thought—when Officer Root told me they found Leon hanging in his garage—I assumed it was a suicide.”

“I’m afraid it’s a homicide.”

“You’re certain? Absolutely?”

*Oh yes. Absolutely.* “Mrs. Bazarian, if you could think back to Sunday night—”

“My husband isn’t coming home until Monday, and I’m alone here with the kids. Are we safe?”

“Tell me about Sunday night.”

“Are my children *safe*?”

It was the first question any mother would ask. Jane thought about her own three-year-old daughter, Regina. Thought about how she would feel in Nora Bazarian’s position, with two young children, living so close to a place of violence. Would she prefer reassurance, or the truth, which was that Jane didn’t know the answer. She couldn’t promise that anyone was ever safe.

“Until we know more,” said Jane, “it would be a good idea to take precautions.”

“What *do* you know?”

“We believe it happened sometime Sunday night.”

“He’s been dead all this time,” Nora murmured. “Right next door, and I had no idea.”

“You didn’t see or hear anything unusual Sunday night?”

“You can see for yourself, he has a tall fence all around his yard, so we never knew what was going on there. Except when he was making that god-awful racket in his backyard workshop.”

“What kind of noise?”

“This horrible whine, like a power saw. To think he had the nerve to complain about a crying baby!”

Jane remembered seeing Gott’s hearing aids on the bathroom counter. If he’d been working with noisy machinery Sunday night, he’d certainly leave out those hearing aids. It was yet one more reason he would not have heard an intruder.

“You said you got home late Sunday night. Were Mr. Gott’s lights on?”

Nora didn’t even need to think about it. “Yes, they were,” she said. “I remember being annoyed because the light on his backyard shed shines directly into my bedroom. But when I went to bed, around ten thirty, the light was finally off.”

“What about the dog? Was he barking?”

“Oh, Bruno. He’s *always* barking, that’s the problem. He probably barks at houseflies.”

Of which there were now plenty, thought Jane. Bruno was barking at that moment, in fact. Not in alarm, but with doggy excitement about the many strangers in his front yard.

Nora turned toward the sound. “What’s going to happen to him?”

“I don’t know. I guess we’ll have to find someone to take him. And the cats as well.”

“I’m not crazy about cats, but I wouldn’t mind keeping the dog here. Bruno knows us, and he’s always been friendly with my boys. I’d feel safer, having a dog here.”

She might not feel the same way if she knew Bruno was even now digesting morsels of his dead owner’s flesh.

“Do you know if Mr. Gott had any next of kin?” asked Jane.

“He had a son, but he died some years ago, on a foreign trip. His ex-wife’s dead, too, and I’ve never seen any woman there.” Nora shook her head. “It’s an awful thing to think about. Dead for four days and no one even notices. That’s how unconnected he seemed to be.”

Through the kitchen window, Jane caught a glimpse of Maura, who’d just emerged from Gott’s house and now stood on the sidewalk, checking messages on her cell phone. Like Gott, Maura lived alone, and even now she seemed an isolated figure, standing off by herself. Left to her solitary nature, might Maura one day evolve into another Leon Gott?

The morgue van had arrived, and the first TV crews were scrambling into position outside the police tape. But tonight, after all these

cops and criminalists and reporters departed, the crime scene tape would remain, marking the home where a killer had visited. And here, right next door, was a mother alone with her two children.

“It wasn’t just random, was it?” said Nora. “Was it someone he knew? What do you think you’re dealing with?”

*A monster* was what Jane thought as she slipped her pen and notebook into her purse and stood up. “I notice you have a security system, ma’am,” she said. “Use it.”



## FOUR

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**M**AURA CARRIED THE CARDBOARD BOX FROM HER CAR INTO THE house and set it down on the kitchen floor. The gray tabby was mewling pitifully, begging to be released, but Maura kept him contained in the box as she hunted in her pantry for a cat-appropriate meal. She'd had no chance to stop at the grocery store for cat food, had impulsively taken on the tabby because no one else would, and the only alternative was the animal shelter.

And because the cat, by practically grafting himself to her leg, had clearly adopted *her*.

In the pantry Maura found a bag of dry dog food, left over from Julian's last visit with his dog, Bear. Would a cat eat dog food? She wasn't sure. She reached for a can of sardines instead.

The tabby's cries turned frantic as Maura opened the can, releasing its fishy fragrance. She emptied the sardines into a bowl and opened the cardboard box. The cat shot out and attacked the fish so ravenously that the bowl skittered across the kitchen tiles.

"Guess sardines taste better than human, huh?" She stroked the tabby's back, and his tail arched up in pleasure. She had never owned

a cat. She'd never had the time or the inclination to adopt any pet, unless she counted the brief and ultimately tragic experience with the Siamese fighting fish. She wasn't certain she wanted this pet, either, but here he was, purring like an outboard motor as his tongue licked the china bowl—the same bowl she used for her breakfast cereal. That was a disturbing thing to consider. Man-eating cat. Cross-contamination. She thought of all the diseases that felines were known to harbor: Cat scratch fever. *Toxoplasma gondii*. Feline leukemia. Rabies and roundworms and salmonella. Cats were veritable cesspools of infection, and one was now eating out of her cereal bowl.

The tabby lapped up the last fragment of sardine and looked up at Maura with crystal-green eyes, his gaze so intent that he seemed to be reading her mind, recognizing a kindred spirit. This is how crazy cat ladies are created, she thought. They look into an animal's eyes and think they see a soul looking back. And what did this cat see when he looked at Maura? The human with the can opener.

"If only you could talk," she said. "If only you could tell us what you saw."

But this tabby was keeping his secrets. He allowed her to give him a few more strokes, then he sauntered away into a corner, where he proceeded to wash himself. So much for feline affection. It was *Feed me, now leave me alone*. Maybe he truly was the perfect pet for her, both of them loners, unsuited for long-term companionship.

Since he was ignoring her, she ignored him and attended to her own dinner. She slid a leftover casserole of eggplant Parmesan into the oven, poured a glass of Pinot Noir, and sat down at her laptop to upload the photos from the Gott crime scene. On screen she saw once again the gutted body, the face stripped to bone, the blowfly larvae gorged on flesh, and she remembered all too vividly the smells of that house, the hum of the flies. It would not be a pleasant autopsy tomorrow. Slowly she clicked through the images, searching for details that she might have overlooked while at the scene, where the presence of cops and criminalists was a noisy distraction. She saw

nothing that was inconsistent with her postmortem interval estimate of four to five days. The extensive injuries to the face, neck, and upper limbs could be attributed to scavenger damage. And that means *you*, she thought, glancing at the tabby, who was serenely licking his paws. What was his name? She had no idea, but she couldn't just keep calling him Cat.

The next photo was of the mound of viscera inside the trash can, a congealed mass that she would need to soak and peel apart before she could adequately examine the individual organs. It would be the most repellent part of the autopsy, because it was in the viscera where putrefaction started, where bacteria thrived and multiplied. She clicked through the next few images, then stopped, focusing on yet another view of the viscera in the trash can. The lighting was different in this image because the flash had not gone off, and in the slanting light, new curves and fissures were revealed on the surface.

The doorbell rang.

She wasn't expecting visitors. Certainly she didn't expect to find Jane Rizzoli standing on her front porch.

"Thought you might need this," said Jane, holding out a shopping bag.

"Need what?"

"Kitty litter, and a box of Friskies. Frost feels guilty that you're the one who got stuck with the cat, so I told him I'd drop this off. Has he torn up your furniture yet?"

"Demolished a can of sardines, that's about it. Come in, you can see for yourself how he's doing."

"Probably a lot better than the other one."

"Gott's white cat? What did you do with it?"

"No one can catch it. It's still hiding somewhere in that house."

"I hope you gave it some fresh food and water."

"Frost has taken charge, of course. Claims he can't stand cats, but you should've seen him down on his hands and knees, begging kitty, *pretty please!* to come out from under the bed. He'll go back tomorrow and change the litter box."

"I think he could really use a pet. He's got to be pretty lonely these days."

"Is that why *you* took one home?"

"Of course not. I took him home because . . ." Maura sighed. "I have no idea why. Because he wouldn't leave me alone."

"Yeah, he knows a patsy when he sees one," Jane said with a laugh as she followed Maura to the kitchen. "There's the lady who'll feed me cream and pâté."

In the kitchen Maura stared in dismay at the tabby, who was on top of the kitchen table, his front paws planted on her laptop keyboard. "Shoo," she snapped. "Get off!"

The cat yawned and rolled onto his side.

Maura scooped him up and dropped him onto the floor. "And *stay* off."

"You know, he can't really hurt your computer," said Jane.

"It's not the computer, it's the table. I eat at that table." Maura grabbed a sponge, squirted it with spray cleaner, and began wiping the tabletop.

"I think you might have missed a microbe there."

"Not funny. Think of where that cat's been. What his feet have been walking through in the past four days. Would you want to eat at that table?"

"He's probably cleaner than my three-year-old."

"No disagreement there. Children are like fomites."

"What?"

"Spreading infections everywhere they go." Maura gave the table one last vigorous swipe and threw the sponge in the trash can.

"I'll remember that when I get home. *Come to Mommy, my sweet little fomite.*" Jane opened the bag of kitty litter and poured it into the plastic litter box she'd also brought. "Where do you want to put this?"

"I was hoping I could just let him out and he'd do his business in the yard."

"Let him out and he might not come back." Jane clapped litter

dust from her hands and straightened. “Or maybe that’s a good thing?”

“I don’t know what I was thinking, bringing him home. Just because he attached himself to me. It’s not as if I wanted a cat.”

“You just said Frost needed a pet. Why not you?”

“Frost just got divorced. He’s not used to being alone.”

“And you are.”

“I have been for years, and I don’t think that’s going to change anytime soon.” Maura looked around at the spotless countertops, the scrubbed sink. “Unless some miracle man suddenly appears.”

“Hey, that’s what you should call him,” said Jane, pointing to the cat. “Miracle Man.”

“That is *not* going to be his name.” The kitchen timer beeped, and Maura opened the oven to check on the casserole.

“Smells good.”

“It’s eggplant Parmesan. I couldn’t stomach the thought of eating meat tonight. Are you hungry? There’s enough here for two of us.”

“I’m going to my mom’s for dinner. Gabriel’s still in DC, and Mom can’t stand the thought of me and Regina by ourselves.” Jane paused. “Maybe you want to join us, just for the company?”

“It’s nice of you to ask, but my dinner’s already heated up.”

“Not necessarily tonight, but in general. Anytime you need a family to hang out with.”

Maura gave her a long look. “Are you adopting me?”

Jane pulled out a chair and sat down at the kitchen table. “Look, I feel we still need to clear the air between us. We haven’t talked much since the Teddy Clock case, and I know the last few months have been tough on you. I should have asked you to dinner a long time ago.”

“I should have invited you, too. We’ve both been busy, that’s all.”

“You know, it really worried me, Maura, when you said you were thinking about leaving Boston.”

“Why would it worry you?”

“After all we’ve been through together, how can you just walk away? We’ve lived through things no one else could possibly understand. Like *that*.” Jane pointed to Maura’s computer, where the photo of entrails was still on screen. “Tell me, who else am I gonna talk to about guts in a trash can? It’s not something that normal people would do.”

“Meaning, I’m not normal.”

“You don’t honestly think that I am, do you?” Jane laughed. “We’re both sick and twisted. That’s the only explanation for why we’re in this business. And why we make such a good team.”

It was something Maura could not have predicted when she’d first met Jane.

She’d earlier heard of Jane’s reputation, muttered by the male cops: *Bitch. Ballbuster. Always on the rag*. The woman who strode onto the crime scene that day had certainly been blunt, focused, and relentless. She was also one of the best detectives Maura had ever encountered.

“You once told me you didn’t have anything keeping you here in Boston,” said Jane. “I’m just reminding you it’s not true. You and I, we’ve got a history together.”

“Right.” Maura snorted. “Of getting into trouble.”

“And getting ourselves out of it, together. What’s waiting for you in San Francisco?”

“I did get an offer from an old colleague there. A teaching position at UC.”

“What about Julian? You’re the closest thing to a mother that boy has. You go off to California, he’ll feel like you’re abandoning him here.”

“I hardly get a chance to see him as it is. Julian’s seventeen, and he’ll be applying for college. Who knows where he’ll end up, and there are some fine schools in California. I can’t hitch my life to a boy who’s just starting his own.”

“This job offer in San Francisco. Does it pay better? Is that it?”

“That’s not why I’d take it.”

“It’s about running away, isn’t it? Getting the hell out of Dodge.” Jane paused. “Does *he* know you might leave Boston?”

*He.* Abruptly Maura turned away and refilled her wineglass. Driven to drink, just by the mention of Daniel Brophy. “I haven’t spoken to Daniel in months.”

“But you see him.”

“Of course. When I walk onto a crime scene, I never know if he’ll be there. Comforting the family, praying for the victim. We move in the same circles, Jane. The circle of the dead.” She took a deep sip of wine. “It would be a relief to escape it.”

“So going to California is all about avoiding him.”

“And temptation,” Maura said softly.

“To go back to him?” Jane shook her head. “You made your decision. Stick with it and move on. That’s what I would do.”

And that’s what made them so different from each other. Jane was quick to act, and always certain about what needed to be done. She wasted no sleep second-guessing herself. But uncertainty was what kept Maura awake at night, mulling over choices, considering their consequences. If only life were like a mathematical formula, with just one answer.

Jane stood up. “Think about what I said, okay? It’d be way too much work for me to break in another ME. So I’m counting on you to stay.” She touched Maura’s arm and added quietly: “I’m asking you to stay.” Then, in typical Jane Rizzoli fashion, she brusquely turned to leave. “See you tomorrow.”

“Autopsy’s in the morning,” said Maura as they walked to the front door.

“I’d rather skip it. I’ve seen more than enough maggots, thank you.”

“Surprises might turn up. You wouldn’t want to miss it.”

“The only surprise,” Jane said as she stepped outside, “will be if Frost shows up.”

Maura locked the door and returned to the kitchen, where the eggplant casserole had cooled. She slid it back into the oven to re-

heat. The cat had once again jumped onto the table and draped himself over the laptop keyboard, as if to say: *No more work tonight*. Maura snatched him up and dropped him to the floor. Someone had to exert authority in this house, and it most certainly was not going to be a cat. He'd reawakened the screen, which was now lit with the last image she'd been studying. It was the photo of the viscera, the undulated surface emphasized by shadows cast in the slanting light. She was about to close the laptop when she focused on the liver. Frowning, she zoomed in and stared at the surface curves and fissures. It was not just a trick of the light. Nor was it distortion caused by bacterial swelling.

*This liver has six lobes.*

She reached for the phone.



# FIVE

## BOTSWANA

“**W**HERE IS HE?” SYLVIA IS SCREAMING. “*WHERE’S THE REST OF HIM?*”

She and Vivian stand a few dozen yards away, under the trees. They are staring down at the ground, at something hidden from my view by knee-high grass. I step over the camp’s perimeter wire, where the bells still hang, bells that gave no warning clang in the night. Instead it is Sylvia who has given the alarm, her shrieks pulling us out of our tents in various states of undress. Mr. Matsunaga is still zipping up his trousers as he lurches out through his tent flap. Elliot doesn’t even bother to pull on pants, but stumbles out into the cold dawn wearing only boxer shorts and sandals. I’ve managed to snatch up one of Richard’s shirts and I pull it over my nightdress as I wade into the grass, my boots still untied, a trapped pebble biting into my bare sole. I spot a bloody shred of khaki, tangled like a snake around the branch of a bush. Another few steps closer, and I see more ripped cloth, and a clump of what looks like black wool. I take another few steps, and I see what the girls are staring at. Now I know why Sylvia is screaming.

Vivian turns and throws up into the bushes.

I am too numb to move. Even as Sylvia whimpers and hyperventilates beside me, I am studying the various bones scattered in that flattened area of grass, feeling strangely remote, as if I am inhabiting someone else's body. A scientist's, perhaps. An anatomist, who looks at bones and feels compelled to fit them together, to announce: *This is the right fibula and that is the ulna and that is from the fifth right toe. Yes, definitely the right toe.* Although in truth I can identify almost nothing of what I'm looking at, because there is so little left, and it is all in pieces. All I can be sure of is that there is a rib, because it looks like ribs that I have eaten, slathered in sauce. But this is not a pork rib, oh no, this gnawed and splintered bone is human, and it belonged to someone I knew, someone I spoke to not nine hours ago.

"Oh Jesus," groans Elliot. "What happened? What the fuck happened?"

Johnny's voice booms out: "Get back. Everyone *get back.*"

I turn to see Johnny pushing into our circle. We are all here now—Vivian and Sylvia, Elliot and Richard, the Matsunagas. Only one person is missing, but not really, because here is his rib and a clump of Clarence's hair. The smell of death is in the air, the smell of fear and fresh meat and Africa.

Johnny crouches down over the bones and for a moment does not speak. No one does. Even the birds are quiet, rattled by this human disturbance, and all I hear is the grass rustling in the wind and the faint rush of the river.

"Did any of you see anything last night? Hear anything?" Johnny asks. He looks up, and I notice that his shirt is unbuttoned, his face unshaven. His eyes lock on mine. All I can do is shake my head.

"Anyone?" Johnny scans our faces.

"I slept like a rock," says Elliot. "I didn't hear—"

"We didn't, either," says Richard. Answering, in his usual annoying way, for both of us.

"Who found him?"

Vivian's answer comes out barely a whisper. "We did. Sylvia and I. We both had to use the toilet. It was already getting light, and we

thought it would be safe to come out. Clarence usually has the fire started by now, and . . ." She stops, looking sick that she has said his name. *Clarence*.

Johnny rises to his feet. I am standing closest to him, and I take in every detail, from his sleep-fluffed hair to the thickly knotted scar on his abdomen, a scar I'm seeing for the first time. He has no interest in us now, because we can't tell him anything. Instead his attention is focused on the ground, on the scattered remnants of the kill. He glances first toward the camp perimeter, where the wire is strung. "The bells didn't ring," he says. "I would have heard it. Clarence would have heard it."

"So it—whatever it was—didn't come into camp?" Richard says.

Johnny ignores him. He begins to pace an ever-expanding circle, impatiently pushing aside anyone who stands in his path. There is no bare earth, only grass, and no footprints or animal tracks to offer any clues. "He took over watch at two A.M., and I went straight to sleep. The fire's almost dead, so no wood's been added for hours. Why would he leave it? Why would he step out of the perimeter?" He glances around. "And where's the rifle?"

"The rifle is there," says Mr. Matsunaga, and he points toward the ring of stones where the campfire has now gone out. "I saw it, lying on the ground."

"He just *left* it there?" says Richard. "He walks away from the fire and wanders into the dark without his gun? Why would Clarence do that?"

"He wouldn't" is Johnny's quietly chilling answer. He is circling again, scanning the grass. Finding scraps of cloth, a shoe, but little else. He moves farther away, toward the river. Suddenly he drops to his knees, and over the grass I can just see the top of his blond head. His stillness makes us all uneasy. No one is eager to find out what he's now staring at; we have already seen more than enough. But his silence calls to me with a gravitational force that pulls me toward him.

He looks up at me. "Hyenas."

"How do you know they did it?"

He points to grayish clumps on the ground. "That's spotted hyena scat. You see the animal hair, the bits of bone mixed in?"

"Oh God. It's not his, is it?"

"No, this scat is a few days old. But we know hyenas are here." He points to a tattered piece of bloody fabric. "And they found him."

"But I thought hyenas were only scavengers."

"I can't prove they took him down. But I think it's clear they fed on him."

"There's so little of him left," I murmur, looking at the fragments of cloth. "It's as if he just . . . disappeared."

"Scavengers waste nothing, leave nothing behind. They probably dragged the rest of him to their den. I don't understand why Clarence died without making a sound. Why I didn't hear the kill." Johnny stays crouched over those gray lumps of scat, but his eyes are scanning the area, seeing things that I'm not even aware of. His stillness unnerves me; he is like no other man I've met, so in tune with his environment that he seems a part of it, as rooted to this land as the trees and the gently waving grasses. He is not at all like Richard, whose eternal dissatisfaction with life keeps him searching the Internet for a better flat, a better holiday spot, maybe even a better girlfriend. Richard doesn't know what he wants or where he belongs, the way Johnny does. Johnny, whose prolonged silence makes me want to rush into the gap with some inane comment, as if it is my duty to keep up the conversation. But the discomfort is solely my own, not Johnny's.

He says, quietly: "We need to gather up everything we can find."

"You mean . . . Clarence?"

"For his family. They'll want it for the funeral. Something tangible, something for them to mourn over."

I look down in horror at the bloody scrap of clothing. I don't want to touch it; I certainly don't want to pick up those scattered bits of bone and hair. But I nod and say, "I'll help you. We can use one of the burlap sacks in the truck."

He rises and looks at me. "You're not like the others."

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t even want to be here, do you? In the bush.”

I hug myself. “No. This was Richard’s idea of a holiday.”

“And your idea of a holiday?”

“Hot showers. Flush toilets, maybe a massage. But here I am, always the good sport.”

“You are a good sport, Millie. You know that, don’t you?” He looks into the distance and says, so softly that I almost miss it: “Better than he deserves.”

I wonder if he intended for me to hear that. Or maybe he’s been in the bush so long that he regularly talks aloud to himself out here, because no one is usually around to hear him.

I try to read his face, but he bends down to pick up something. When he rises again, he has it in his hand.

A bone.

“YOU ALL UNDERSTAND, THIS expedition is at an end,” says Johnny. “I need everyone to pitch in so we can break camp by noon and be on our way.”

“On our way where?” says Richard. “The plane isn’t due back at the airstrip for another week.”

Johnny has gathered us around the cold campfire, to tell us what happens next. I look at the other members of our safari, tourists who signed up for a wildlife adventure and got more than they bargained for. A real kill, a dead man. Not exactly the jolly thrills you see on television nature programs. Instead there is a sad burlap sack containing pitifully few bones and shreds of clothing and torn pieces of scalp, all the mortal remains we could find of our tracker Clarence. The rest of him, Johnny says, is lost forever. This is how it is in the bush, where every creature that’s born will ultimately be eaten, digested, and recycled into scat, into soil, into grass. Grazed upon and reborn as yet another animal. It seems beautiful in principle, but when you come face-to-face with the hard reality, that bag of Clarence’s bones, you understand that the circle of life is also a circle of

death. We are here to eat and be eaten, and we are nothing but meat. Eight of us left now, meat on the bone, surrounded by carnivores.

"If we drive back to the landing strip now," says Richard, "we'll just have to sit there and wait days for the plane. How is that better than continuing the trip as planned?"

"I'm not taking you any deeper into the bush," says Johnny.

"What about using the radio?" Vivian asks. "You could call the pilot to pick us up early."

Johnny shakes his head. "We're beyond radio range here. There's no way to contact him until we get back to the airstrip, and that's a three-day drive to the west. Which is why we'll head east instead. Two days' hard drive, no stops for sightseeing, and we'll reach one of the game lodges. They have a telephone, and there's a road out. I'll arrange to have you driven back to Maun."

"Why?" asks Richard. "I hate to sound callous, but there's not a thing we can do for Clarence now. I don't see the point of rushing back."

"You'll get a refund, Mr. Renwick."

"It's not the money. It's just that Millie and I came all this way from London. Elliot had to come from Boston. Not to mention how far the Matsunagas had to fly."

"Jesus, Richard," Elliot cuts in. "The man's *dead*."

"I know, but we're already here. We might as well carry on."

"I can't do that," says Johnny.

"Why not?"

"I can't guarantee your safety, much less your comfort. I can't stay alert twenty-four hours a day. It takes two of us to stand watch overnight and to keep the fire burning. To break camp and set it up again. Clarence didn't just cook your meals; he was another set of eyes and ears. I need a second man when I'm hauling around people who don't know a rifle from a walking stick."

"So teach *me*. I'll help you stand watch." Richard looks around at the rest of us, as if to confirm that he's the only one who's man enough for the task.

Mr. Matsunaga says, "I know how to shoot. I can take watch, too."

We all look at the Japanese banker, whose only shooting skills we've witnessed so far have been with his mile-long telephoto lens.

Richard can't suppress a disbelieving laugh. "You do mean *real* guns, Isao?"

"I belong to the Tokyo shooting club," says Mr. Matsunaga, unruffled by Richard's snide tone. He points to his wife and adds, to our astonishment, "Keiko, she belongs, too."

"I'm glad that lets me off the hook," says Elliot. "'Cause I don't even want to touch the damn thing."

"So you see, we have enough hands on deck," Richard says to Johnny. "We can take turns on watch and keep the fire going all night. This is what a real safari's all about, isn't it? Rising to the occasion. Proving our mettle."

Oh yes, Richard the expert, who spends his year sitting so heroically at his computer, spinning testosterone-fueled fantasies. Now those fantasies have come true, and he can play the hero of his own thriller. Best of all, he has an audience that includes two gorgeous blondes, who are the ones he's really playing to, because I'm past the point of being impressed by him, and he knows it.

"A pretty speech, but it changes nothing. Pack up your things, we're headed east." Johnny walks away to take down his tent.

"Thank God he's ending this," says Elliot.

"He has to." Richard snorts. "Now that he's bloody well botched it."

"You can't blame him for what happened to Clarence."

"Who's ultimately responsible? He hired a tracker he's never worked with before." Richard turns to me. "That's what Clarence told you. Said he'd never worked with Johnny until this trip."

"But they had connections," I point out. "And Clarence worked as a tracker before. Johnny wouldn't have hired him if he wasn't experienced."

"That's what you'd *think*, but look what happened. Our so-called experienced tracker puts down his rifle and walks into a pack of hyenas. Does that sound like someone who knew what he was doing?"

“What’s the point of all this, Richard?” Elliot asks wearily.

“The point is, we can’t trust his judgment. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Well, I think Johnny’s right. We can’t just *carry on*, as you put it. A dead man kind of ruins the mood, you know?” Elliot turns toward his tent. “It’s time to get out of here and go home.”

*Home.* As I stuff clothes and toiletries into my duffel bag, I think about London and gray skies and cappuccino. In ten days, Africa will seem like a golden-hued dream, a place of heat and glaring sunlight, life and death in all its vivid colors. Yesterday I wanted nothing more than to be back home in our flat, in the land of hot showers. But now that we’re leaving the bush, I feel it holding on to me, its tendrils winding around my ankles, threatening to root me to this soil. I zip up my knapsack, which contains the “essentials,” all the things I thought I absolutely needed to survive in the wild: PowerBars and toilet paper, pre-moistened hand wipes and sunscreen, tampons and my mobile. How different the word *essential* seems when you’re beyond the reach of any phone tower.

By the time Richard and I have packed up our tent, Johnny has already loaded up the truck with his own gear as well as the cooking equipment and camp chairs. We’ve all been amazingly quick, even Elliot, who struggled to dismantle his tent and needed Vivian and Sylvia to help him fold it. Clarence’s death hangs over us, stifling idle chatter, making us focus on our tasks. When I load our tent into the back of the truck, I notice the burlap bag with Clarence’s remains tucked beside Johnny’s backpack. It unnerves me to see it stowed there, with the rest of our gear. *Tents, check. Stove, check. Dead man, check.*

I climb into the truck and sit down beside Richard. Clarence’s empty seat is in view, a stark reminder that he’s gone, his bones scattered, flesh digested. Johnny is the last one to climb into the truck, and as his door slams shut I look around at our now cleared campsite, thinking: Soon there’ll be no trace that we were ever here. We’ll have moved on, but Clarence never will.



Suddenly Johnny swears and climbs out of the driver's seat. Something is wrong.

He stalks to the front and lifts the truck bonnet to inspect the engine. Moments tick by. His head is hidden by the raised bonnet, so we can't see his face, but his silence alarms me. He offers no reassuring *It's just a loose wire* or *Yes, I see the problem*.

"Now what?" mutters Richard. He, too, climbs out of the truck, although I don't know what advice he can possibly offer. Beyond reading the petrol gauge, he knows nothing about cars. I hear him offering suggestions. Battery? Spark plugs? Loose connection? Johnny answers in barely audible monosyllables, which only alarms me more, because I've learned that the more dire the situation, the quieter Johnny becomes.

It is hot in the open truck, almost noon, with the sun beating down. The rest of us climb out and move into the shade of the trees. I see Johnny's head pop up as he orders: "Don't wander too far!" Not that anyone intends to; we've seen what can happen when you do. Mr. Matsunaga and Elliot join Richard at the truck, to offer their advice, because of course all men, even men who never get their hands greasy, understand machinery. Or think they do.

We women wait in the shade, swatting away bugs, continually searching for any telltale trembling in the grass, which could be our only warning that a predator approaches. Even in the shade, it is hot, and I settle onto the ground. Through the branches above I see vultures circling, watching us. They are strangely beautiful, black wings sketching lazy loops in the sky as they wait to feast. *On what?*

Richard stalks toward us, muttering: "Well, *this* is a brilliant development. Bloody thing won't start. Won't even turn over."

I sit up straight. "It was fine yesterday."

"Everything was fine yesterday." Richard huffs out a breath. "We're stranded."

The blondes give simultaneous gasps of alarm. "We *can't* be stranded," blurts Sylvia. "I'm due back at work next Thursday!"

“Me, too!” says Vivian.

Mrs. Matsunaga shakes her head in disbelief. “How can this be? It is not possible!”

As their voices blend into a chorus of rising agitation, I can’t help noticing that the vultures overhead are tracing tighter and tighter circles, as if homing in on our distress.

“Listen. All of you, *listen*,” Johnny commands.

We turn to look at him.

“This is not the time to panic,” he says. “There’s absolutely no reason to. We’re next to the river, so we have plenty of water. We have shelter. We have ammunition and a ready supply of game for food.”

Elliot gives a laugh that’s thin with fear. “So . . . what? We hang around out here and go all Stone Age?”

“The plane is scheduled to meet you at the landing strip in a week. When we don’t show up as expected, there’ll be a search. They’ll find us soon enough. It’s what you all signed up for, isn’t it? An authentic experience in the bush?” He regards us one by one, taking our measure, deciding if we’re up to the challenge. Searching for which one of us will crumble, which one he can count on. “I’ll keep working on the truck. Maybe I can fix it, maybe I can’t.”

“Do you even know what’s wrong with it?” Elliot asks.

Johnny pins him with a hard glare. “It’s never broken down before. I can’t explain it.” He scans our circle, as if searching for the answer in our faces. “In the meantime, we need to pitch camp again. Get out the tents. This is where we stay.”

# SIX

## BOSTON

**P**SYCHOLOGISTS CALL IT RESISTANCE WHEN A PATIENT FAILS TO TURN UP on time because he doesn't really want to address his problems. It also explained why Jane was late walking out her front door that morning; she *really* didn't want to view Leon Gott's autopsy. She took her time dressing her daughter in the same Red Sox T-shirt and grass-stained overalls that Regina had insisted on wearing for the past five days. They lingered too long over their breakfast of Lucky Charms and toast, which made them twenty minutes late walking out the apartment door. Add a traffic-choked drive to Revere, where Jane's mother lived, and by the time she pulled up outside Angela's house, Jane was a full half hour behind schedule.

Her mother's house seemed smaller every year, as though it were shrinking with age. Walking up to the front door with Regina in tow, Jane saw that the porch needed fresh paint, the gutters were clogged with autumn leaves, and the perennials in front still needed to be clipped back for the winter. She'd have to get on the phone with her brothers and see if they could all pitch in for a weekend, because Angela obviously needed the help.

She could also use a good night's sleep, thought Jane when Angela opened the front door. Jane was startled by how tired her mother looked. Everything about her seemed worn down, from her faded blouse to her baggy jeans. When Angela bent down to pick up Regina, Jane spotted gray roots on her mother's scalp, a startling sight because Angela was meticulous about her hairdresser appointments. Was this the same woman who'd shown up at a restaurant just last summer wearing red lipstick and spike heels?

"Here's my little pumpkin," Angela cooed as she carried Regina into the house. "Nonna's so glad to see you. Let's go shopping today, why don't we? Aren't you tired of these dirty overalls? We'll buy you something new and pretty."

"Don't *like* pretty!"

"A dress, what do you think? A fancy princess dress."

"Don't *like* princess."

"But every girl wants to be a princess!"

"I think she'd rather be the frog," said Jane.

"Oh for heaven's sake, she's just like you." Angela sighed in frustration. "You wouldn't let me put you in a dress, either."

"Not everyone's a princess, Ma."

"Or ends up with Prince Charming," muttered Angela as she walked away carrying her granddaughter.

Jane followed her into the kitchen. "What's going on?"

"I'm going to make some more coffee. You want some?"

"Ma, I can see that something's going on."

"You've gotta go to work." Angela set Regina in her high chair. "Go, catch some bad guys."

"Is it too much work for you, babysitting? You know you don't have to do it. She's old enough for day care now."

"My granddaughter in day care? Not gonna happen."

"Gabriel and I have been talking about it. You've already done so much for us, and we think you deserve a break. Enjoy your life."

"*She* is the one thing I look forward to every day," said Angela,

pointing to her granddaughter. “The one thing that keeps my mind off . . .”

“Dad?”

Angela turned away and began filling the coffee reservoir with water.

“Ever since he came back,” said Jane, “I haven’t seen you look happy. Not one single day.”

“It’s gotten so complicated, having to make a choice. I’m getting pulled back and forth, stretched like taffy. I wish someone would just tell me what to do, so I wouldn’t have to choose between them.”

“You’re the one who has to make the choice. Dad or Korsak. I think you should choose the man who makes you happy.”

Angela turned a tormented face to hers. “How can I be happy if I spend the rest of my life feeling guilty? Having your brothers tell me that I *chose* to break up the family?”

“You didn’t choose to walk out. Dad did.”

“And now he’s back and he wants us all to be together again.”

“You have a right to move on.”

“When both my sons are insisting I give your father another chance? Father Donnelly says it’s what a good wife *should* do.”

Oh great, thought Jane. Catholic guilt was the most powerful guilt of all.

Jane’s cell phone rang. She glanced down and saw it was Maura calling; she let it go to voice mail.

“And poor Vince,” said Angela. “I feel guilty about him, too. All the wedding plans we made.”

“It could still happen.”

“I don’t see how, not now.” Angela sagged back against the kitchen counter as the coffeemaker gurgled and hissed behind her. “Last night I finally told him. Janie, it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my whole life.” And it showed on her face. The puffy eyes, the drooping mouth—was this the new and future Angela Rizzoli, sainted wife and mother?

There are already too many martyrs in the world, thought Jane. The idea that her mother would willingly join those legions made her angry.

“Ma, if this decision makes you miserable, you need to remember that it’s *your* decision. You’re choosing *not* to be happy. No one can make you do that.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because it’s true. You’re the one in control, and you have to take the wheel.” Her phone pinged with a text message, and she saw it was Maura again. STARTING AUTOPSY. RU COMING?

“Go on, go to work.” Angela waved her away. “You don’t need to bother yourself with this.”

“I want you to be happy, Ma.” Jane turned to leave, then looked back at Angela. “But you have to want it, too.”

It was a relief for Jane to step outside, take a breath of fresh cold air, and purge the gloom of the house from her lungs. But she couldn’t shake off her annoyance at her dad, at her brothers, at Father Donnelly, at every man who presumed to tell a woman what her duty was.

When her phone rang again, she answered with an irritated: “Rizzoli!”

“Uh, it’s me,” said Frost.

“Yeah, I’m on my way to the morgue. I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“You’re not there already?”

“I got held up at my mom’s. Why aren’t *you* there?”

“I thought it might be more efficient if I, uh, followed up on a few other things.”

“Instead of barfing into a sink all morning. Good choice.”

“I’m still waiting for the phone carrier to release Gott’s call log. Meantime, here’s something interesting I pulled off Google. Back in May, Gott was featured in *Hub Magazine*. Title of the article was: ‘The Trophy Master: An Interview with Boston’s Master Taxidermist.’”

“Yeah, I saw a framed copy of that interview hanging in his house.

It's all about his hunting adventures. Shooting elephants in Africa, elk in Montana."

"Well, you should read the online comments about that article. They're posted on the magazine's website. Apparently, he got the lettuce eaters—that's what Gott called the anti-hunting crowd—all pissed off. Here's one comment, posted by Anonymous: 'Leon Gott should be hung and gutted, like the fucking animal he is.'"

"*Hung and gutted?* That sounds like a threat," she said.

"Yeah. And maybe someone delivered."

WHEN JANE SAW WHAT was displayed on the morgue table, she almost turned and walked right back out again. Even the sharp odor of formalin could not mask the stench of the viscera splayed across the steel table. Maura wore no respiratory hood, only her usual mask and plastic face guard. She was so focused on the intellectual puzzle posed by the entrails that she seemed immune to the smell. Standing beside her was a tall man with silvery eyebrows whom Jane did not recognize, and like Maura he was eagerly probing the array of viscera.

"Let's start with the large bowel here," he said, gloved hands sliding across the intestine. "We have cecum, ascending colon, transverse, descending colon . . ."

"But there's no sigmoid colon," said Maura.

"Right. The rectum is here, but there's no sigmoid. That's our first clue."

"And it's unlike the other specimen, which does have a sigmoid colon."

The man gave a delighted chuckle. "I'm certainly glad you called me to see this. It's not often I come across something this fascinating. I could dine out for months on this story."

"Wouldn't wanna be part of *that* dinner conversation," said Jane. "I guess this is what they mean by *reading the entrails*."

Maura turned. "Jane, we're just comparing the two sets of viscera. This is Professor Guy Gibbeson. And this is Detective Rizzoli, homicide."

Professor Gibbeson gave Jane a disinterested nod and dropped his gaze back to the intestines, which he obviously found far more fascinating.

“Professor of what subject?” asked Jane, still standing back from the table. From the smell.

“Comparative anatomy. Harvard,” he said without looking at her, his attention fixed on the bowel. “This second set of intestines, the one with the sigmoid colon, belongs to the victim, I presume?” he asked Maura.

“It appears so. The incised edges match up, but we’d need DNA to confirm it.”

“Now, turning our attention to the lungs, I can point out some pretty definitive clues.”

“Clues to what?” said Jane.

“To who owned this first set of lungs.” He picked up one pair of lungs, held them for a moment. Set them down and lifted the second set. “Similar sizes, so I’m guessing similar body masses.”

“According to the victim’s driver’s license, he was five foot eight and a hundred forty pounds.”

“Well, these would be his,” Gibbeson said, looking at the lungs he was holding. He put them down, picked up the other pair. “These are the lungs that really interest me.”

“What’s so interesting about them?” said Jane.

“Take a look, Detective. Oh, you’ll have to come much closer to see it.”

Suppressing a gag, Jane approached the butcher’s array of offal laid across the table. Detached from their owners, all sets of viscera looked alike to Jane, consisting of the same interchangeable parts that she, too, possessed. She remembered a poster of “The Visible Woman” hanging in her high school health class, revealing the organs in their anatomical positions. Ugly or beautiful, every woman is merely a package of organs encased in a shell of flesh and bone.

“Can you see the difference?” asked Gibbeson. He pointed to the first set of lungs. “That left lung has an upper lobe and a lower lobe.



The right lung has both upper and lower lobes, plus a middle lobe. Which makes how many lobes in all?”

“Five,” said Jane.

“That’s normal human anatomy. Two lungs, five lobes. Now look at this second pair found in the same garbage pail. They’re of similar size and weight, but with an essential difference. You see it?”

Jane frowned. “It has more lobes.”

“Two extra lobes, to be exact. The right lung has four, the left has three. This is not an anatomical anomaly.” He paused. “Which means it’s not human.”

“That’s why I called Professor Gibbeson,” said Maura. “To help me identify which species we’re dealing with.”

“A large one,” said Gibbeson. “Human-sized, I’d say, judging by the heart and lungs. Now let’s see if we can find any answers in the liver.” He moved to the far end of the table, where the two livers were displayed side by side. “Specimen one has left and right lobes. Quadrate and caudate lobes . . .”

“That one’s human,” said Maura.

“But this other specimen . . .” Gibbeson picked up the second liver and flipped it over to examine the reverse side. “It has six lobes.”

Maura looked at Jane. “Again, not human.”

“So we’ve got two sets of guts,” said Jane. “One belonging to the victim, we assume. The other belonging to . . . what? A deer? A pig?”

“Neither,” said Gibbeson. “Based on the lack of sigmoid colon, the seven-lobed lungs, the six-lobed liver, I believe this viscera comes from a member of the family Felidae.”

“Which is?”

“The cat family.”

Jane looked at the liver. “That’d be one damn big kitty.”

“It’s an extensive family, Detective. It includes lions, tigers, cougars, leopards, and cheetahs.”

“But we didn’t find any carcass like that at the scene.”

“Did you check the freezer?” asked Gibbeson. “Find any meat you can’t identify?”

Jane gave an appalled laugh. “We didn’t find any tiger steaks. Who’d want to eat one, anyway?”

“There’s definitely a market for exotic meats. The more unusual the better. People pay for the experience of dining on just about anything, from rattlesnake to bear. The question is, where did this animal come from? Was it hunted illegally? And how on earth did it end up gutted in a house in Boston?”

“He was a taxidermist,” said Jane, turning to look at Leon Gott’s body, which lay on an adjacent table. Maura had already wielded her scalpel and bone saw, and in the bucket nearby Gott’s brain was steeping in a bath of preservative. “He’s probably gutted hundreds, maybe thousands of animals. Probably never imagined he’d end up just like them.”

“Actually, taxidermists process the body in a completely different way,” said Maura. “I did some research on the subject last night and learned that large-animal taxidermists prefer not to gut the animal before skinning, because body fluids can spoil the pelt. They make their first incision along the spine, and peel the skin away from the carcass in one piece. So evisceration would have occurred after the pelt was removed.”

“Fascinating,” said Gibbeson. “I didn’t know that.”

“That’s Dr. Isles for you. Full of all sorts of fun facts,” said Jane. She nodded to Gott’s corpse. “Speaking of facts, do you have a cause of death?”

“I believe I do,” said Maura, stripping off blood-smeared gloves. “The extensive scavenger damage to his face and neck obscured the antemortem injuries. But his X rays gave us some answers.” She went to the computer screen and clicked through a series of X-ray images. “I saw no foreign objects, nothing to indicate the use of a firearm. But I did find this.” She pointed to the skull radiograph. “It’s very subtle, which is why I didn’t detect it on palpation. It’s a linear fracture of the right parietal bone. His scalp and hair may have cushioned the blow enough so that we don’t see any concave deformation, but just the presence of a fracture tells us there was significant force involved.”

“So it’s not from falling.”

“The side of the head is an odd location for a fracture caused by a fall. Your shoulder would cushion you as you hit the ground, or you’d reach out to catch yourself. No, I’m inclined to think this was from a blow to the head. It was hard enough to stun him and take him down.”

“Hard enough to kill him?”

“No. While there is a small amount of subdural blood inside the cranium, it wouldn’t have been fatal. It also tells us that after the blow, his heart was still beating. For a few minutes, at least, he was alive.”

Jane looked at the body, now merely an empty vessel robbed of its internal machinery. “Jesus. Don’t tell me he was alive when the killer started gutting him.”

“I don’t believe evisceration was the cause of death, either.” Maura clicked past the skull films, and two new images appeared on the monitor. “This was.”

The bones of Gott’s neck glowed on the screen, views of his vertebrae both head-on and from the side.

“There are fractures and displacement of the superior horns of the thyroid cartilage as well as the hyoid bone. There’s massive disruption of the larynx.” Maura paused. “His throat was crushed, most likely while he was lying supine. A hard blow, maybe from the weight of a shoe, straight to the thyroid cartilage. It ruptured his larynx and epiglottis, lacerated major vessels. It all became clear when I did the neck dissection. Mr. Gott died of aspiration, choking on his own blood. The lack of arterial splatter on the walls indicates the evisceration was done postmortem.”

Jane was silent, her gaze fixed on the screen. How much easier it was to focus on a coldly clinical X ray than to confront what was lying on the table. X rays conveniently stripped away skin and flesh, leaving only bloodless architecture, the posts and beams of a human body. She thought of what it took to slam your heel down on a man’s neck. And what did the killer feel when that throat cracked under his

shoe, and he watched consciousness fade from Gott's eyes? Rage? Power? Satisfaction?

"One more thing," said Maura, clicking to a new X-ray image, this one of the chest. With all the other damage done to the body, it was startling how normal the bony structures appeared, ribs and sternum exactly where they should be. But the cavity was weirdly empty, missing its usual foggy shadows of hearts and lungs. "This," said Maura.

Jane moved closer. "Those faint scratches on the ribs?"

"Yes. I pointed it out on the body yesterday. Three parallel lacerations. They go so deep, they actually penetrated to bone. Now look at this." Maura clicked to another X ray, and the facial bones appeared, sunken orbits and shadowy sinuses.

Jane frowned. "Those three scratches again."

"Both sides of the face, penetrating to bone. Three parallel nicks. Because of the soft-tissue damage by the owner's pets, I couldn't see them. Until I looked at these X rays."

"What kind of tool would do that?"

"I don't know. I didn't see anything in his workshop that would make these marks."

"You said yesterday it looked like it was done postmortem."

"Yes."

"So what's the point of these lacerations if it's not to kill or to inflict pain?"

Maura thought about it. "Ritual," she said.

For a moment there was only silence in the room. Jane thought of other crime scenes, other rituals. She thought of the scars she would always carry on her hands, souvenirs of a killer who'd had rituals of his own, and she felt those scars ache again.

The buzz of the intercom almost made her jump.

"Dr. Isles?" said Maura's secretary. "Phone call for you from a Dr. Mikovitz. He says you left a message this morning with one of his colleagues."

"Oh, of course." Maura picked up the phone. "This is Dr. Isles."

Jane turned her gaze back to the X ray, to those three parallel nicks on the cheekbones. She tried to imagine what could have left such a mark. It was a tool that neither she nor Maura had encountered before.

Maura hung up and turned to Dr. Gibbeson. "You were absolutely right," she said. "That was the Suffolk Zoo. Kovo's carcass was delivered to Leon Gott on Sunday."

"Hold on," said Jane. "What the hell is Kovo?"

Maura pointed to the unidentified set of entrails on the morgue table. "That's Kovo. A snow leopard."



## SEVEN

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“KOVO WAS ONE OF OUR MOST POPULAR EXHIBITS. HE WAS WITH US nearly eighteen years, so we were all heartbroken when he had to be euthanized.” Dr. Mikovitz spoke in the hushed voice of a grieving family member, and judging by the many photos displayed on the walls of his office, the animals in the Suffolk Zoo were indeed like family to him. With his wiry red hair and wisp of a goatee, Dr. Mikovitz looked like a zoo denizen himself, perhaps some exotic species of monkey with wise dark eyes that now regarded Jane and Frost across his desk. “We haven’t yet issued any press release about it, so I was startled when Dr. Isles inquired whether we’d had any recent losses in our large-cat collection. How on earth did she know?”

“Dr. Isles is good at sniffing out all sorts of obscure information,” said Jane.

“Yes, well, she certainly caught us by surprise. It’s something of a, well, sensitive matter.”

“The death of a zoo animal? Why?”

“Because he had to be euthanized. That always gets negative reactions. And Kovo was a very rare animal.”

“What day was this done?”

“It was Sunday morning. Our veterinarian Dr. Oberlin came in to administer the lethal injection. Kovo’s kidneys had been failing for some time and he’d lost a great deal of weight. Dr. Rhodes pulled him off exhibit a month ago, to spare him the stress of being in public. We hoped we could pull him through this illness, but Dr. Oberlin and Dr. Rhodes finally agreed that it was time to do it. Much as it grieved them both.”

“Dr. Rhodes is another veterinarian?”

“No, Alan is an expert on large-cat behavior. He knew Kovo better than anyone else did. He’s the one who delivered Kovo to the taxidermist.” Dr. Mikovitz glanced up at a knock on his door. “Ah, here’s Alan now.”

The title *Large-Cat Expert* conjured up images of a rugged outdoorsman in safari clothes. The man who walked into the office was indeed wearing a khaki uniform with dusty trousers and stray burrs clinging to his fleece jacket, as if he’d just come off a hiking trail, but there was nothing particularly rugged about Rhodes’s pleasantly open face. In his late thirties, with springy dark hair, he had the block-shaped head of Frankenstein’s monster, but a friendly version.

“Sorry I’m late,” said Rhodes, clapping dust from his pant legs. “We had an incident at the lion enclosure.”

“Nothing serious, I hope?” said Dr. Mikovitz.

“No fault of the cats. It’s the damn kids. Some teenager thought he’d prove his manhood, so he climbed the outer fence and fell into the moat. I had to go in and drag him out.”

“Oh my God. Are we going to have any liability issues?”

“I doubt it. He was never in any real danger, and I think he found it so humiliating he’ll never tell a soul.” Rhodes gave a pained smile to Jane and Frost. “Just another fun day with idiot humans. My lions, at least, have more than an ounce of common sense.”

“This is Detective Rizzoli, Detective Frost,” said Mikovitz.

Rhodes extended a callused hand to them. “I’m Dr. Alan Rhodes.



I'm a wildlife biologist specializing in felid behavior. All cats, large and small." He glanced at Mikovitz. "So have they found Kovo?"

"I don't know, Alan. They just arrived, and we haven't gotten to that subject yet."

"Well, we need to know." Rhodes turned back to Jane and Frost. "Animal pelts deteriorate quite rapidly after death. If it isn't immediately harvested and processed, it loses its value."

"How valuable is a snow leopard pelt?" asked Frost.

"Considering how few of the animals there are in the world?" Rhodes shook his head. "I'd say priceless."

"And that's why you wanted the animal stuffed."

"*Stuffed* is rather an inelegant term," said Mikovitz. "We wanted Kovo preserved in all his beauty."

"And that's why you brought him to Leon Gott."

"For skinning and mounting. Mr. Gott is—was—one of the best taxidermists in the country."

"Did you know him personally?" asked Jane.

"Only by reputation."

Jane looked at the large-cat expert. "And you, Dr. Rhodes?"

"I met him for the first time when Debra and I delivered Kovo to his house," said Rhodes. "I was shocked this morning when I heard about his murder. I mean, we'd just seen him alive on Sunday."

"Tell me about that day. What you saw, what you heard at his house."

Rhodes glanced at Mikovitz, as if to confirm he should answer their questions.

"Go ahead, Alan," said Mikovitz. "It's a murder investigation, after all."

"Okay." Rhodes took a breath. "On Sunday morning, Greg—Dr. Oberlin, our veterinarian—euthanized Kovo. According to the agreement, we had to deliver the carcass immediately to the taxidermist. Kovo weighed over a hundred pounds, so one of our zookeepers, Debra Lopez, assisted me. It was a pretty sad drive. I worked with

that cat for twelve years, and we had a bond, the two of us. Which sounds insane, because you can't really trust a leopard. Even a supposedly tame one can kill you, and Kovo was certainly large enough to bring down a man. But I never felt threatened by him. I never sensed any aggression in him at all. It's almost as if he understood I was his friend."

"What time did you arrive at Mr. Gott's house on Sunday?"

"Around ten A.M., I guess. Debra and I brought him straight there, because the carcass needs to be skinned as soon as possible."

"Did you talk much with Mr. Gott?"

"We stayed awhile. He was really excited about working on a snow leopard. It's such a rare animal, he'd never handled one before."

"Did he seem at all worried about anything?"

"No. Just euphoric about the opportunity. We carried Kovo into his garage, then he brought us into the house to show us the animals he's mounted over the years." Rhodes shook his head. "I know he was proud of his work, but I found it sad. All those beautiful creatures killed just to be trophies. But then, I'm a biologist."

"I'm not a biologist," said Frost. "But I found it pretty sad, too."

"That's their culture. Most taxidermists are also hunters, and they don't understand why anyone would object to it. Debra and I tried to be polite about it. We left his house around eleven, and that was it. I don't know what else I can tell you." He looked back and forth at Jane and Frost. "So what about the pelt? I'm anxious to know whether you found it, because it's worth a hell of a lot to—"

"Alan," said Mikovitz.

The two men glanced at each other, and both fell silent. For a few seconds, no one said anything, a pause so significant that it might as well have come with a blinking alert: *Something is wrong. There's something they're trying to hide.*

"This pelt is worth a hell of a lot to whom?" said Jane.

Mikovitz answered, too glibly: "Everyone. These animals are extremely rare."

“How rare, exactly?”

“Kovo was a snow leopard,” said Rhodes. “*Panthera uncia*, from the mountainous regions of Central Asia. Their fur is thicker and paler than an African leopard’s, and there are fewer than five thousand left in the world. They’re like phantoms, solitary and hard to spot, and they’re getting more and more rare by the day. It’s illegal to import their skins. It’s even illegal to sell a pelt, new or old, across state lines. You can’t buy or sell them on the open market. That’s why we’re anxious to know. Did you find Kovo’s?”

Instead of answering his question, Jane asked another. “You mentioned something earlier, Dr. Rhodes. About an agreement.”

“What?”

“You said you delivered Kovo to the taxidermist as part of *the agreement*. What agreement are you talking about?”

Rhodes and Mikovitz both avoided her eyes.

“Gentlemen, this is a homicide case,” Jane said. “We’re going to find this out anyway, and you *really* don’t want to get on my bad side.”

“Tell them,” said Rhodes. “They need to know.”

“If this gets out, Alan, the publicity will kill us.”

“Tell them.”

“All right, all right.” Mikovitz gave Jane an unhappy look. “Last month, we got an offer we couldn’t refuse, from a prospective donor. He knew that Kovo was ill, and would most likely be euthanized. In exchange for the animal’s fresh, intact carcass, he would make a substantial donation to the Suffolk Zoo.”

“How substantial a donation?”

“Five million dollars.”

Jane stared at him. “Is a snow leopard really worth that much?”

“To this particular donor, it is. It’s a win-win proposition. Kovo was doomed anyway. We get a big influx of cash to stay afloat, and the donor gets a rare prize for his trophy room. His only stipulation was that it be kept quiet. And he specified Leon Gott as his taxidermist, because Gott is one of the best. And I believe they’re already ac-

quainted.” Mikovitz sighed. “Anyway, that’s why I was reluctant to mention it. The arrangement is sensitive. It could put our institution in a bad light.”

“Because you’re selling rare animals to the highest bidder?”

“I was against this deal from the start,” Rhodes said to Mikovitz. “I told you it would come back to bite us in the ass. Now we’re going to get a shitload of publicity.”

“Look, if we can keep it quiet, we can salvage this. I just need to know that the pelt is safe. That it’s properly handled and cared for.”

“I’m sorry to tell you this, Dr. Mikovitz,” said Frost, “but we found no pelt.”

“What?”

“There was no leopard pelt in Gott’s residence.”

“You mean—it was *stolen*?”

“We don’t know. It’s just not there.”

Mikovitz slumped back in his chair, stunned. “Oh God. It’s all fallen apart. Now we’ll have to return his money.”

“Who is your donor?” asked Jane.

“This information can’t get out. The public can’t know about it.”

“Who is he?”

It was Rhodes who answered, with undisguised scorn in his voice. “Jerry O’Brien.”

Jane and Frost glanced at each other in surprise. “You mean *the* Jerry O’Brien? The guy on the radio?” asked Frost.

“Boston’s own Big Mouth O’Brien. How do you think our animal-loving patrons are going to feel when they hear we cut a deal with the shock jock? The guy who brags about his hunting trips to Africa? About the fun he has blasting elephants to smithereens? His whole persona is about glorifying blood sport.” Rhodes gave a snort of disgust. “If only those poor animals could shoot back.”

“Sometimes, Alan, we have to make a deal with the devil,” said Mikovitz.

“Well, the deal’s off now, since we have nothing to offer him.”

Mikovitz groaned. “This is a disaster.”

“Didn’t I predict that?”

“Easy for you to stay above it all! You have only your damn cats to worry about. I’m charged with the survival of this institution.”

“Yeah, that’s the advantage of working with cats. I *know* I can’t trust them. And they don’t try to convince me otherwise.” Rhodes glanced down at his ringing cell phone. Almost simultaneously the office door flew open and the secretary burst into the room.

“Dr. Rhodes! They need you there *now*.”

“What is it?”

“There’s been an accident at the leopard enclosure. One of the keepers—they need the rifle!”

“No. *No.*” Rhodes sprang from his chair and pushed past her, out of the office.

It took only an instant for Jane to decide. She jumped up and followed him. By the time she made it down the stairs and out of the building, Rhodes was already far ahead of her, racing past startled zoo visitors. Jane had to sprint to keep up. As she rounded a curve in the path, she came up against a dense wall of people standing outside the leopard enclosure.

“Oh my God,” someone gasped. “Is she *dead*?”

Jane shoved her way through the crowd until she reached the railing. At first all she saw through the cage bars was the camouflaging habitat of greenery and fake boulders. Then, almost hidden among the branches, something moved. It was a tail, twitching atop a rocky ledge.

Jane moved sideways, trying to get a better view of the animal. Only as she reached the very edge of the enclosure did she see the blood: a ribbon of it, bright and glistening, streaming down the boulder. Dangling from the rocky shelf above was a human arm. A woman’s arm. Crouched over its kill, the leopard stared straight at Jane, as if daring her to steal its prize.

Jane raised her weapon and paused, her finger on the trigger. Was the victim in her line of fire? She could not see past the lip of the ledge, could not tell if the woman was even alive.

“Don’t shoot!” she heard Dr. Rhodes yell from the rear of the cage. “I’m going to lure him into the night room!”

“There’s no time, Rhodes. We need to get her out of there!”

“I don’t want him killed.”

“What about *her*?”

Rhodes banged on the bars. “Rafiki, meat! Come on, come into the night cage!”

Fuck this, thought Jane, and once again she raised her weapon. The animal was in plain view, a straight shot to the head. There was a chance the bullet might hit the woman as well, but if they didn’t get her out of there soon, she was dead anyway. With both hands steady on the grip, Jane slowly squeezed the trigger. Before she could fire, the crack of a rifle startled her.

The leopard dropped and tumbled off the ledge, into the bushes.

Seconds later a blond man dressed in a zoo uniform darted across the cage, toward the boulders. “Debbie?” he called out. “*Debbie!*”

Jane glanced around for a way into the cage and spotted a side path labeled STAFF ONLY. She followed it around to the rear of the enclosure, where the door into the cage hung ajar.

She stepped inside and saw a congealed pool of red beside a bucket and fallen rake. Blood smeared the concrete pathway in an ominous trail of drag marks, punctuated by paw prints. The trail led toward the artificial boulders at the rear of the cage.

At the base of those boulders, Rhodes and the blond man crouched over the woman’s body, which they’d pulled down from the rock ledge.

“Breathe, Debbie,” the blond man pleaded. “Please, *breathe.*”

“I’m not getting a pulse,” said Rhodes.

“Where’s the ambulance?” The blond man looked around in panic. “We need an ambulance!”

“It’s coming. But Greg, I don’t think there’s anything . . .”

The blond man planted both palms on the woman’s chest and began pumping in quick, desperate bursts to restart the heart. “Help me, Alan. Do mouth-to-mouth. We need to do this together!”

“I think we’re too late,” said Rhodes. He placed a hand on the blond man’s shoulder. “Greg.”

“Fuck off, Alan! I’ll do this myself!” He placed his mouth against the woman’s, forced air past pale lips, and began pumping again. Already, the woman’s eyes were clouding over.

Rhodes looked up at Jane and shook his head.

