

TRAPPED

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Novelization by
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Based on the Screenplay by
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Trapped was originally released online on June 14, 2019. That date marked the thirtieth anniversary of the film's release on the USA Network (June 14, 1989).

ONE

In a darkened mobile home on the outskirts of town, a wheelchair-bound woman sat at a picture window and stared out into the gray dawn. The cold sleet sky that winter morning seemed to reach down and wrap itself around the city, the skyline a brushstroke on the horizon.

The woman just stared. It was all she could do anymore.

He watched her.

On the other end of the home, in a dark overcoat and shrouded in shadow, he stood over a dresser

strewn with old newspaper clippings and photos.

The pictures told a story...

A man on the steps of City Hall surrounded by reporters and photographers, holding an emaciated twelve-year-old girl, her sick limbs pulled unnaturally into her body.

The sign for NTX Industries at the company's chemical plant, a skull and crossbones painted over their corporate logo.

AG Announces Investigation Into Alleged NTX Misconduct. An engineer in a hard hat in front of the plant, talking to reporters.

A dour-faced woman in a wheelchair, pointing angrily at her legs, her family standing around her, grave.

Men—some in white lab coats, others in hard hats—dumping drums of waste into the Chicago River, a skull and crossbones on the side of the drums with writing: DANGER-POISON.

Dead fish washed up on the shore.

Boards across windows in an abandoned neighborhood.

A distinguished gentleman in an expensive suit emerging from the back of a limousine, flanked by reporters. *NTX CEO Jerrold Manley...*

NTX Abandons Controversial Plant. The now-shuttered chemical plant seen through a chain-link fence covered with a NO TRESPASSING sign—acres of empty parking lot, weeds shooting up through the cracks.

Protesters in front of City Hall. A man wielding

a lead pipe brought to the ground by baton-wielding police. CEO Manley protected by private security guards, weapons drawn.

An eight-year-old boy in a hospital gown, using a walker in a physical therapy room.

The same boy—healthy, vibrant—smiling in a school picture atop his obituary.

Solemn pallbearers ushering a coffin down the steps of a church. A mother sobbing hysterically.

NTX Plans Chicago Headquarters. An artist's rendering of a new skyscraper. *Expansive high-rise slated for completion in fall 1986...*

Over the aged clippings, the man lay atop the dresser a large stack of blueprints. He rolled the stack open and scanned them—building schematics for a high-rise—going over details he had long since memorized.

After a while he crossed the messy trailer to his wife. He stroked her hair for a long time. Then he kissed her forehead, tucked the knit blanket around her a bit tighter.

She didn't respond.

He removed her eyeglasses and set them down on a table covered with orange pill bottles and stacks of medical bills. A baseball trophy seemed out of place in the midst of it all, a keepsake from a different time.

On his way out the man passed by another dresser, this one covered with family artifacts and photographs from that different time. There was a house, not a trailer. His wife was not in a

wheelchair. And his son...

One of the pictures was a school portrait. The same picture was back on his dresser, above an obituary column as well as an article from the *Chicago Tribune* dated May 6, 1979: *Victim of Toxic Waste Spill Dies*.

The man's footsteps crunched over frozen gravel after he left the trailer and crossed the lot to his car, a 1972 Chevy Nova, its blue so faded it was almost gray.

The woman gazed sightlessly out into the trailer park. The Nova started up with a loud rattling, a brittle sound to the engine as it pulled out of the lot and disappeared.

Something moved in the woman's mouth, a mouth from which there was no breath. Out of her slightly parted lips emerged a cockroach, testing the air with its antennae.

The bug crawled up across her lifeless face, making a new home in her hair.

TWO

The offices for the Area Central Detective Division were located in the back of the District One stationhouse on South State Street in Chicago.

David Tennon was just happy to be getting out on time at six AM. He left his desk and was slipping on a heavy overcoat and messenger bag over his sports coat, shirt, and tie when the first shift lieutenant, just getting on, called him into his office.

Tennon sighed and wondered if he would still be leaving. He stood at the threshold to Lieutenant Hotchkiss's office. "Lieutenant."

“Dave. Take a seat. I won’t keep you long. Let you get out of here, get some sleep.”

“Amen.” Tennon took a seat in the small office, crammed with files, code and penal law books, police manuals. Hotchkiss was good police for being a supervisor, toeing the line pretty well, keeping the upper brass happy by appearing to drink the Kool-Aid while also keeping the line officers happy by not actually ingesting it.

On top of that he was older, and came up in a time just before Tennon did when the department was pretty much all white. When Tennon came on, he was one of only a handful of black guys, and a lot of old timers felt a certain type of way about that. Not Hotchkiss. From him Tennon never got the vibe of bigot, subtle or otherwise.

“I’ll get right to the point,” Hotchkiss said, taking a sip of coffee from a gas station cup.

“You’ve heard of Julian Maxwell?”

“He was that lawyer who was killed.”

“Yeah. Corporate attorney.”

“I’m familiar.”

“Well, it’s been almost a month and we’re no closer to an arrest. Red ball like that makes the papers. Especially being connected to NTX.”

“NTX?”

“He was their lawyer. I mean, one of many, but he was the top guy.”

“Okay.”

“That’s where you come in. Seven or eight years ago when that whole mess with the chemical plant

happened, Maxwell spearheaded their defense. You remember the protests.”

“They dumped all that toxic waste in the river. People got sick, died.”

Hotchkiss nodded. “And Maxwell got the Feds off their back. Won the case when it went to court. And you, you worked the streets when all that happened, where all that happened. People were...disgruntled.”

“To say the least.”

“You remember those faces. Those names. NTX has been making some headlines again. Their new building downtown. Trying to get back in the city’s good graces. But I’m willing to bet some people are still upset.”

“A fair bet.”

Hotchkiss nodded slowly. “I’d like you to dig up the old files from back then. The arrests made in those protests. Anyone who may have made some threats they actually ended up making good on.”

“Someone who may have taken out their attorney.”

“Exactly.”

“Homicide actually think that’s what happened?”

There was some shift-change noise and bustle from the squad room outside. Hotchkiss glanced at the doorway and got up out of his seat. He crossed the room and closed the door, went and sat back down.

Tennon watched him.

Hotchkiss said, “The press doesn’t know about this, but there was an old newspaper clipping found at the scene. About a decade old. It had Maxwell’s name all over it, how he won the case for NTX.”

Tennon nodded, mulled over that for a moment. He shrugged. “It’s been a long time. I don’t exactly remember everything. And there were others who worked the protests.”

“Not like you,” Hotchkiss said. “You made a name for yourself working the south, the gangs when they were just getting bad. Undercover for a time with the P-stones, if I remember your file right. You have an ear for the streets, always have. That’s why I want you for this. We need all the help we can get, put this case down. I’ll pull you off whatever you’re on, have you work this.”

“Lieutenant—”

“What do you want, Dave?”

“I’m sorry?”

“What do you want. Your career.”

Tennon shrugged, gave it to him honest: “I want first shift. I want to see my kids again. I’ve got about six years left until my twenty, and I’d like to see them grow up.”

Hotchkiss nodded slowly. “You do this for me, there’s an opening. First shift. Homicide. Of course you’d be on call, you know how it works. But I’d make that happen for you. You’ve earned it.”

Tennon looked away and opened his mouth to speak. He ended up just shrugging again. “I mean, I appreciate it, but Homicide could still do this. It’s

not a hard thing, looking into some old files. Anyone else could do it.”

“And Homicide probably did. But you were there. And fresh eyes never hurt.”

Tennon was nodding as he continued to think. “I came up with a guy, Danny Esposito. He retired last year, works security for NTX now. Chief, actually, their new building. I’ll make a call.”

Hotchkiss smiled. He stood up and so did Tennon. “Good man. Start tonight. Keep your regular shift for now. From there, I’ll cover any overtime you need.” He held out his hand and Tennon shook it. “Now go home and get some sleep.”

THREE

Marianne Marshall looked sharp.

That was a feat for January. For any month of a Chicago winter, in truth.

Her outfit for the day was a gray jacket with a white blouse underneath and a gray pencil skirt with stockings. It was mostly covered now by a heavy blue winter coat, and a scarf that hid a pearl necklace.

She did not wear a hat. Much as she would appreciate the warmth, hats did a number to her curly dark brown hair. It was less out of vanity and

more that she did not want to go through the hassle of fixing it.

Topping off the outfit was her favorite pair of heels, the most comfortable ones she had, which of course meant the least uncomfortable.

These days, Marianne liked to stop at Danny's Diner on the south side before heading downtown to work.

She took a stool at the bar, the red cushion ripping open to reveal its yellow stuffing. The same was true of the booths against the wall. She leaned over the yellowed Formica countertop and opened her newspaper.

The spoon was all grease in this establishment. It was extremely small and extremely narrow. And the clientele was mostly black. Marianne was typically the only white person in there when she went. Today she was the only person at the bar. In the back corner booth, a group of old men drank coffee, laughing and telling lies. They were regulars.

The music was a mix of jazz, old school R&B, and Chicago blues, all played on cassettes from a boom box atop a shelf next to the register. Framed portraits of famous black celebrities and historical figures covered every inch of wall.

"There she is." Danny himself emerged from the kitchen in the back. He looked like Black Santa, and was about as jolly. "How's Marianne doing?" He poured her some coffee.

"Not too bad, Danny," Marianne said, grabbing some creamers. "Yourself?"

“Ah, the same. Bones don’t work like they used to. Prostate neither. But I’m here by God’s grace.”

“Amen.” Marianne toasted that and drank. Nothing like diner coffee.

“Be grateful you’re still young,” Danny said.

“Ha,” Marianne said. “I don’t feel it anymore.”

“Nonsense. You’re how old, you mind my asking.”

“Thirty-four.”

“Thirty-four, she says. A baby. Life doesn’t even begin ‘til you’re forty. Bet you didn’t know that.”

“I hope not.”

“It’s true. You best believe ol’ Danny. He’s been around the block a time or two, and knows a thing or two at that.” He refilled Marianne’s coffee. “Pop quiz,” he said, pointing to the boom box.

Marianne didn’t have to think long. “Jimmy Rushing, with Count Basie. ‘Going to Chicago Blues.’”

“There it is. Born the wrong color, Marianne.”

“Appears so.”

“How is that, anyway?”

“What?”

“You’re not like other white people. I mean, you’re white, but not so...” He made a face, bugging his eyes out and moving his hand in a gesture of concern.

Marianne laughed. “Yeah.”

And Danny laughed too, loud, uproarious, contagious.

Marianne said, "My father was a minister. He did a lot of work with the black churches around the city. So I was always around the people, the music, culture."

"All right. Very interesting. And a church girl at that."

"Well. Not so much anymore. It's been awhile."

"You're very interesting, Marianne."

"Not really."

"Very mysterious."

"Ha."

"Just like that van you drive."

"My van is mysterious?"

"That you're a single woman with one, yes. No wedding ring, no kids. That you've mentioned at least."

Marianne looked away with a sheepish smile.

Danny held up his hands. "I apologize. You'll have to forgive this nosy old fool."

"No, it's okay," she said. "I got the van in the divorce. We bought it together for the family we were supposed to have."

"Ah. I'm sorry."

Marianne shrugged.

Danny looked around the bar. "Well, uh, how's about some breakfast for ya today?"

"Not today. I have a granola bar at the office."

"A granola bar?"

"I have to make another stop, the bookstore."

"That's right. If it's not your paper you got with you, it's a book."

Marianne toasted that as well, and Danny disappeared into the back. She scanned over the day's paper, nursing her second cup. Crack flooding neighborhoods. Gang violence in the streets and the housing projects. Folks and People. Black Gangster Disciples. Vice Lords. Latin Kings.

She took her third cup of coffee in a to-go cup and left cash on the bar, smiling as always at the sign over the register: *Helen Waite is our credit manager. If you wish to pay credit, go to hell and wait.*

"Bye, Danny. You be good now."

"I'm always good. And Marianne?"

She stopped at the door. "Yeah?"

He looked like he was about to speak and then stopped. He thought over his words and said, "Don't look so sad all the time, huh?"

Marianne looked at him oddly and didn't say anything. He looked at her like a wise, concerned grandfather. She just gave him a smile and a nod and then left.

She drove her van through a few short cuts in the south side. Short cuts weren't exactly right. But they avoided the expressway. And she liked learning the streets, the city. She had grown up in the suburbs outside Chicago, but since college had lived right in its heart.

She had the radio tuned to NPR as she navigated the neighborhoods and past the abandoned rail yards of Dearborn Park toward the South Loop. She parked outside the hole in the wall bookstore and rang the bell outside. It was a few hours from

opening up for the day, but the owner had called Marianne last night and let her know she'd be up.

Betty and her husband Michael ran the store, and lived in the apartment above. They were getting up in years, on the wrong end of middle age, but lived the kind of quiet, enjoyable life Marianne had always envisioned with her ex. Betty and Michael did everything together, and after all these years were still very much in love. You could see it on them like a second skin. It had been the same with Marianne's parents, and what she thought would one day happen to her, what she assumed she would have now.

"Thanks for opening up for me," Marianne said when Betty let her in, a tiny little woman with a cute black bob cut that went well with her skinny frame.

"No trouble at all, Marianne. I know you'd want them, and I know those long hours you sometimes work when you can't always make it down."

Betty led Marianne through the cozy store with its cramped, packed shelves of used books. At the register, Betty handed Marianne the stack. "Here they are."

Marianne's eyes lit up. "Carroll John Daly..."

"Yes ma'am."

Marianne gently sifted through the cellophane-wrapped vintage issues of *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective* magazines from the twenties and thirties, the colorful covers depicting pulpy noir scenes: P.I.s and femme fatales.

She smiled. "Before Raymond Chandler, before

Hammett even, there was Carroll John Daly and his detective, Race Williams. He did hard-boiled first. God, my grandfather used to have these, read them to me too, if you can believe that. Thank you so much.”

She paid the woman and left, fantasizing about being home from work already. The bath she would draw, the glasses of wine she would take out, the smooth jazz on her stereo. And the reading she would get done during all of that. She was going to have a *night*.

Most days she didn't like the single life, but there were days like today that the notion of going home and not having to answer to anyone was incredibly exciting. She could turn on the television and watch whatever she damn well pleased. She could eat whatever and whenever she felt like it. She could play her music as loud and as long as she liked.

Those were good days. While they lasted. The trick to being single is to keep busy. Work hard. Work out. Get some hobbies. Pursue your interests. It's when you're idle that you feel lonely, and you wonder if it's ever going to happen to you. And there's a sting that goes with it, a sting that gets worse with time and with each new disappointment life throws your way.

Just the other night she had stared at herself in the mirror a long time after a particularly uneventful evening, and she said aloud the words no strong and successful single woman making it on her own ever

wants to admit: “I’m just so tired of being alone.”

Her marriage wasn’t supposed to have gone how it did. Those were a good couple of years before they weren’t. And while she was certainly bitter over it, she still wanted it again. She was pro-female independence, pro-loving yourself first; she didn’t *need* a man for any kind of validation or feeling of completion—but she wanted one. Beneath her efficient and rational exterior there lived a capacity and desire for romance, for yearning, tremulous love. But she hid it well—and smartly at that. A lot of women she knew wore those feelings right on their sleeve, and fell time and time again for the same type of guys who’d use them and throw them away.

Marianne just wanted love, companionship, someone who cared. And if she wasn’t careful, her time was spent either feeling guilty about that, or walking around like a stock character in a bad made-for-TV movie. Lonely Career Woman Marianne Marshall.

So she lived her life. Tried not to think about it.

She switched the station and turned up the radio a bit as she made the final stretch of her commute into work. Smooth Jazz WNUA, 95.5. A soulful female voice sang out the call letters. Something upbeat and feel-good came on.

The soundtrack worked as she weaved through the traffic into the Loop. Skyscrapers loomed. A harsh sun beat through weak patches in the overcast sky and glimmered off the tall buildings.

The NTX building rose prominent and proud at sixty-five stories high. Marianne drove down the ramp into the six levels of parking garage.

After she parked she took the stairs to the plaza level before the building's main entrance. She navigated carefully over the icy concourse to the plate-glass windows that bore the corporate logo, an elliptical orbit stenciled over the insignia:

NTX INDUSTRIES
Progress Never Stops

She entered. Marianne's heels clicked across the marble floor of the expansive lobby. A paint crew worked on some scaffolding next to the security desk. Business-men and -women streamed toward the elevators and escalators. Palm trees were tactfully situated all around. Marianne had been there for that meeting. They were an aesthetic choice to give the illusion of warmth and blue skies, good for morale and worker productivity, especially during a Chicago winter. Allegedly.

She took the elevator to the Kupper & Dietz offices on the twenty-sixth floor. She walked briskly off the main hall through glass doors with the stenciled initials "KD" repeated in a line across the center.

She gave a nod and smile to the receptionist, who was already fielding calls. "Kupper and Dietz Building Management, good morning." The receptionist meanwhile buzzed Marianne through

another glass door and into the inner offices. “Let me see if she’s in yet. Please hold...”

Marianne could hear Renni’s voice before she even made it down the aisle to the offices, could picture Renni and Sue and the other secretaries with their morning coffees, catching up on all the gossip.

“I keep having this nightmare,” Renni was saying, “where the furnace goes ka-plooey, nobody can get in or out of the building, the phones stop working, and we’re all just stuck here, slowly freezing to death.”

Marianne came up behind her as she headed toward her office.

“Having strange dreams again, Renni?”

Renni Greenberg turned as she saw her friend. Marianne didn’t even have to look at her yet to picture the cascading blonde hair, the long legs, the colorful outfit for the day that always went flawlessly with her very pretty face.

Renni stood up, leaving the other women to themselves as she followed Marianne into her office.

“Yeah,” Renni said, “only it was the same one.”

Marianne was taking off her scarf and coat before she even made it to the coat rack.

“Last night was the third time this week,” Renni said.

“I had a dream last night,” Marianne said, placing her articles on the rack. “Only it was August, and it was the air conditioning that went out. And everybody had to take their clothes off just to survive.”

Renni smiled. "I like your dream better."

"Until Ed Kupper started to take his clothes off..."

"Ugh!"

Marianne laughed. "That's when I woke up."

The intercom on her desk buzzed just as she was settling into her chair. She pushed a button. "Yes?"

The receptionist's voice came through: "Mr. Sloan from the Electrician's Local 553."

"I'm not in yet." She lifted her finger off the box and sighed. "I don't believe it. This building isn't even finished yet and already we're having maintenance problems."

"You see what I mean?" Renni said, noticeably shivering. "What is it about this place?"

Marianne gave her a telling look. She was sure Renni's nerves had less to do with the building and more to do with personal issues. Relationship kind of stuff.

"I think you're just getting cold feet," Marianne said.

"Cold feet? Why would I be getting cold feet? Bob loves me. He adores me."

"You're very lucky," Marianne said, and meant it. For the first time that morning she actually rested her gaze on Renni at length, and saw that her guess was spot on. Renni wore a stylish green jacket over a bright purple button-up number, dangly yellow earrings completing the scheme.

Her friend positively bubbled. Not that Renni was bubbly, but she radiated that twenty-something

light and life. Marianne had a theory that a certain light went out in women once they turned thirty. It had certainly happened to her. The youth gone with time, like effervescence gone flat, as clear as if her palm was flashing red a la *Logan's Run*.

Renni still had some time. But not much.

“Oh!” Renni said. “There’s a man out front, wants to see the fifty-eighth floor.”

Marianne frowned. “Well, where the hell is—”

“Not here. I don’t know. Somebody screwed up the appointment.”

Marianne’s day was starting with or without her. It felt like it was going to be a long one.

FOUR

She had just enough time to wolf down her granola bar and take the last sip of her coffee. She grabbed her coat as she left the office, slipping it on as she approached a distinguished-looking gentleman in the K&D lobby.

“Mr. Danuser? I’m Marianne Marshall.” She extended her hand.

“Yes, hello.” Danuser took her hand. He was in his early fifties maybe, but his tall athletic build and salt-and-pepper coiffed hair gave him a youthful glow. He looked like money, like he played a lot of

golf and tennis and got a lot of sun along the way. When he shook her hand, the grip was confident and firm.

“And you wanted to see the fifty-eighth floor?” Marianne asked.

“Yes. I’m sorry about the mix-up. I know it’s not your job.”

Marianne smiled. “Everything in this building is my job.” She held the door open for him. “Shall we go?”

“Yes, thank you.”

He went out and Marianne followed. “You’ll want to put your coat back on,” she said.

The door closed next to the receptionist as she droned on in that seemingly endless peppy stream of “Kupper and Dietz Building Management, good morning...”

Nestled in a small dark room deep within the building was the telephone switching center, a wall of panels and wires that made up the heart of the communication system. They hummed steadily.

Loud warning stickers covered rows of metal casings that housed the circuit boards: KEEP OUT, AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. Pieces of masking tape were used as homemade labels on other panels: Secondary Low Rise 1, Secondary Low Rise 2...

Someone was in the room.

Wearing a dark overcoat and hidden largely in shadow, his hands covered with thin latex gloves,

the man used butterfly bolts to pry open the front panel of a narrow metal box.

Inside, wrapped around a thick cable were many thinner multi-colored wires.

The man's latex hands then proceeded to wrap a thin strip of plastic explosives around the cable, attaching it all to a small homemade clock detonator. The clock currently read 9:25.

He set it for 9:00 and placed the panel back onto the box.

As Marianne stood in the elevator with Danuser, the doors opened and one of the upstairs suits poked his head in. "Going up?"

He boarded without waiting for an answer, even as Marianne nodded. Six other suits followed. Executive types. Marianne recognized some of them as board members.

She swallowed as the last man entered and they all packed in. The man paused a bit as he took notice of Marianne and Danuser.

It was Jerrold Manley, Chairman and CEO.

He stood next to Marianne. The doors closed and they began to ascend. A few of the suits behind them spoke quietly amongst themselves.

"Hello, Marianne," Jerrold Manley said.

"Morning, Mr. Manley."

A pause.

"Everything going all right?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Nothing we can't handle."

Another pause.

“Good,” Manley said.

Marianne shifted uncomfortably, glancing up at the red numbers on the floor indicator. She exhaled when finally she and Danuser stepped out into the unfinished lobby of the fifty-eighth floor and the suits continued up.

“Was that Jerrold Manley?” Danuser asked, pointing back at the closed elevator doors.

“Mm-hmm.” Marianne led him through some construction material and debris, then through a door-less doorway.

She said, “The lower floors are more finished, you know.”

“Oh, that’s all right. It’s the view I want.”

The expansive fifty-eighth floor was a bare skeleton inside. Only a few walls up. Picture windows with no glass, covered only with sheets of heavy plastic, the corners flapping in the cold Chicago wind. Drywall and lumber sat in neat stacks in between the occasional ladder, crate, or folding chair. Light flooded the place.

Marianne spoke as Danuser walked along the windows. She kept her distance and didn’t dare look out at the sprawling city view. The thought alone gave her vertigo.

“Well,” she said, “this is it. Forty-five hundred square feet of the best views in the city. You share this floor with only one other suite, but it’s the same size.”

“What about above us?”

“All NTX. Seven floors, administrative offices

mostly, some labs.”

“Labs?”

“Research, not production. Then the top two penthouse floors are Mr. Manley’s.”

“He lives here?”

“The building’s very first occupant. He’s been here six months.”

As he nodded, Danuser stepped over to one of the picture windows. He pulled away a corner of plastic sheeting taped to the frame.

“This is terrific,” he said, gazing out over the view of the city. “Have you seen this?”

Marianne couldn’t even look at him, staying her ground safely within the apartment. “I’ve got a pretty good imagination,” she said. “Especially when it comes to heights.”

Danuser looked back at her and smiled. “I bet you’re a real heavy drinker on airplanes.”

“Real heavy.”

Danuser stepped outside of the window onto the balcony and Marianne ignored this completely, looking away as he took a few moments.

When he stepped back inside the apartment: “What about below us?”

They started to walk back slowly toward the lobby, and Marianne got her bearings back. She said, “Luxury condominiums from here to the forty-first floor, like this one but they get a little smaller as you go down. Then forty floors of offices. A bank and a post office on the ground floor. Then the galleria: three floors of shops, restaurants, a grocery store, a

health club, an ice-skating rink. All directly below ground level. And then six levels of parking garage.”

“You’d never have to leave this place,” Danuser said.

Marianne smiled. “That’s sort of the idea.” Together they left back through the lobby.

Neither of them had noticed far back in the apartment the two objects nestled beneath a pallet holding a pile of lumber: an unopened bottle of red wine and a crystal wine glass.

On an underground loading dock in the bowels of the building, six men in green custodial uniforms tossed trash bags one after another onto the garbage truck parked right off the dock. A nearby boom box played a Latino station.

“Come on, baby,” one of them said, launching a bag into the back of the truck, “we’re almost through.”

But then a freight elevator opened up onto the loading platform and two men in white lab coats came out, wheeling a dumpster bearing the ever-present NTX insignia: an orbit around the initials and the logo, Progress Never Stops.

The smell was strong from this dumpster. “Whoo-wee!” a custodian said.

The driver of the garbage truck leaned out his window. “Hey man, what’s that smell?”

“Another dead monkey,” one of the men carting the dumpster said.

The driver scowled, shook his head. “Man, I’m a

disposal technician, not a damn undertaker.”

“Yeah?” another said. “Well, I’m a sanitation engineer.”

“Progress never stops,” another added.

The driver negotiated the forklift on the front of the truck into the dumpster, lifting it into the air. The custodians on the platform all stopped and watched the bags fall into the back of the truck. Two men with baseball caps took them off their heads and placed them over their hearts in mock reverence. Others followed with their hands. One whistled the funeral march.

“Now, now, gentleman,” another said. “Show some class. Like a New Orleans second line.” He launched into song, his voice a deep baritone: ““On a hill far away, stood an old rugged cross...””

Still another gave an enthusiastic one-finger salute, keeping that specific finger raised high as the other men couldn’t stop laughing.

Generators hummed in another darkened control room deep within the building. A man with thick rubber gloves worked a clock timer between two ends of severed wire...

At the same time, an employee leaving for his lunch break got caught at the exit ramp in the parking garage.

Putting his key card in the mechanized slot, the iron mesh gate rose two feet off the ground and then stopped abruptly. He took his card out and inserted it

again, slow. Did it a few more times, rapidly.
Nothing.

Back in the control room, gloved hands worked quickly to reestablish the connection between the wires that were now wrapped around a timer.

On the face of the clock itself, the time read 12:30. But two smaller hands were set for two separate times.

Alarms. Set to go off at 9:00 and 6:00.

The employee at the gate in the parking garage was throwing a fit, waving his arms at a technician who was doing nothing more than working the key card in and out of the feed some more.

“What’s going on here?” the driver snapped. “I should have left fifteen minutes ago!”

A half-dozen cars were behind his, drivers shouting and honking their horns. A group of parking attendants fought with the gate at the end of the ramp, physically trying to push it up, arguing in Spanish and Greek.

The connection complete, those gloved hands nestled the timer with its wires snug in the circuit board...

And suddenly, inexplicably, the gate in the parking garage began to rise on its own.

People cheered.

FIVE

The wall clock in the break room off the kitchen area of the Kupper & Dietz offices read 1:22. Marianne sat with an apple and cheese as Renni returned from the microwave with a plate of beef stroganoff.

Marianne watched the skinny girl as she ate her pasta and cream sauce and red meat without a second thought or a pound to gain. Marianne nibbled at her own food and sipped from one of their glass water bottles.

“So,” Renni said, “Miss Cold Feet, I’ll have you

know, Bob and I have been...broaching the subject lately.”

“What subject is that?”

“Moving in together.”

“Really.”

“At some point. Down the road. Near or distant future. Not sure.”

“Do you *love* Bob?”

Renni played with an egg noodle before eating it. “We’re...comfortable together.”

“Mm-hmm,” Marianne said.

“I’ll tell you what I don’t love,” Renni said, raising her fork. “I don’t love living alone anymore. I don’t love going out on dates with strange men. I’m twenty-eight years old, and I want to get married. A girl gets to be my age, it’s a now or never sort of thing, you know?”

“Thanks a lot.”

“Hey, what are you complaining about? You had your chance and you blew it.”

Marianne raised her eyebrows. “Some chance. I marry a wimp who only wants to share his feelings with me. Then he runs off with a twenty-two-year-old. Freshly hired high school gym teacher with an amazing body. Face like a twelve-year-old.”

Renni held up her hands. “You’re right, you’re right.”

“Thank you.”

A few moments passed as they continued to eat, and Marianne noticed that Renni was staring at her, studying her, looking almost concerned.

“What.”

“You all right?” Renni asked.

“Yeah...”

“You just seemed off, suddenly. I’m sorry if I said something...your ex, I mean...”

“No, you’re fine.”

“Okay. Well, if you’re sure you’re all right.”

Between Danny at the diner and now Renni, Marianne must have been looking some type of way today. She wasn’t sure why. She had always been good at faking it, keeping up a sunny disposition no matter her mood. Not that she even felt like her mood was off. She felt fine. Not great, but fine. Status quo.

She’d have to work on that. Practice a new face in the mirror. Maybe learn to smile a little more. But Renni was a good friend, so to keep her at bay she decided to throw her a bone, open up just a little.

“I’m fine,” Marianne said. “I just wonder sometimes.”

“About what?”

“I’ve worked for Kupper and Dietz twelve years,” she said. “And when they got this building with NTX and I got this job, I thought, you know, I thought it would *feel* different. Like that kind of promotion, that kind of accomplishment, it would mean something.”

“It does mean something. You should be proud.”

“It’s not that. I just thought life would be different somehow. Like that kind of move should

take me out of the hum-drum routine of things, change it up.”

“Didn’t it?”

“It did for a while, I guess. But then, it’s just a whole new kind of hum-drum now.”

“Well,” Renni said, “things settle. A new normal. I think you just need a hobby. Some extracurriculars.”

“I used to want to do things, you know?” Marianne said. “I had dreams. I don’t have a bad life, but I feel like it wasn’t supposed to be like this either. Like it’s supposed to be more than just living to get through another day. Where the most I get excited for is when I know a good show is coming on that night.”

“I take it back. You don’t need a hobby, you need to get laid. Make that your hobby.”

Marianne grimaced. She’d been through this with Renni before. Marianne was brought up not to have sex before marriage, and despite her somewhat of a lapse in faith in recent years, the idea of making love to someone outside of a very committed relationship never sat well with her. Maybe it was too old fashioned a notion in this day and age, but she wasn’t old fashioned out of principle, it was just the way she felt.

So she ignored the comment and went on: “I’m serious. Picture, like, when you’re in eighth grade, right? Five years later you’re a senior in high school. That’s huge. The life changes, the maturing you do, the things you go through and experience for the

first time. All that in five years. And it feels like a lifetime. But picture it now. You can sit in the same job for five years, ten years. Same desk, same people, *same exact* people. Have I learned anything new in that time? How much? What have I done with my life? And how does that happen? How does five years when you're growing up feel so monumental and then when you're older five years can go by and it feels like nothing happened? What, do we just...plateau?"

Renni stared at her a long time. She shook her head. "You have to start coming out with me some nights, Marianne. You don't have a bad life, you've just been given a few tough blows. Your parents, your ex. So you've played it safe. You have to get out there. You're bored. And if you're not careful, you'll become boring."

"Thanks a lot. Once again."

"I try."

"I try too. I mean, I keep busy. I joined a gym to keep in shape, feel good, feel confident. I stick to my workouts, and I like them. I get my hair cut or styled different every few months. I go to museums, study history, go to neighborhood watch meetings."

"Now you sound like an old person. You're busy, but are you having any fun?"

Marianne shrugged. "Sometimes."

"Well, what makes you happy?" Renni asked. "I don't mean accomplishments or achievements or promotions. I don't even mean marriage or kids or a house in the suburbs. What will make you happy?"

See, I've found, personally, happiness is a lot less about getting something big in your life, and more about moments. Sun for once in Chicago, a good book, a song on the radio, something to look forward to. A feeling. What is the feeling you want?"

Marianne thought for just a moment. Then: "Making love in an air-conditioned hotel room to smooth jazz and a city view."

Renni made an amused face. "Hmm. Oddly specific and very quickly answered. Not a hard thing to make happen either."

"But one more caveat," Marianne said. "Being in love. It's probably the sappiest, corniest, most cliché thing in the world. But that's what I want in my life. I don't care where we live, or how the kitchen looks. I just want someone who loves me in return, and who wants to make slow, sweet, cheesy love with me. A lot. I want the smooth jazz life."

"You and your smooth jazz," Renni said. "I like that you have a goal though. But in the meantime, we're gonna go out this weekend. I'll tell Bob we need a ladies night, you and I. We'll get drunk."

Marianne laughed. It wasn't exactly her scene, but it actually did sound like fun, something to look forward to, even if she knew it was just another distraction. Ultimately Renni was right, not in getting laid per se, but in wanting someone. Having fun was great, but it was having fun with a partner in life, sharing those experiences together, creating memories—that was what she wanted. She wanted to grow old with someone.

And of course, she was no angel in her thoughts. She was human after all, and the flesh was the flesh. Good-looking men were aplenty in the big city, and a little fantasy every now and then hurt no one.

God, her parents had made it look so easy, like their perfect marriage happened to everyone. They had been teenage sweethearts who never dated anyone else. At Marianne's current age, they had already been together for twenty years.

She was ready to begrudgingly agree to Renni's invitation before she noticed that her friend was distracted, looking off somewhere over Marianne's shoulder.

"Do you *believe* this?" Renni said.

"What." Marianne turned around.

Through the break room doorway and into the offices was a view of the secretarial desks. A balding man with a substantial paunch stood at one of them, rooting around in the top middle drawer.

"That's my desk," Renni said.

"That's Ed Kupper," Marianne said, watching as he, one of the bosses, took out a small pink and white Binaca-type spray canister and raised it to his mouth.

"I wouldn't do that, Mr. Kupper!" Renni yelled. "It's mace!"

Ed Kupper froze and turned her way. His face reddened. "Oh," he muttered, then quickly returned the canister and walked away.

"Do you *believe* that man?" Renni said.

"It's mace?" Marianne smiled.

Renni lowered her head and laughed.
“It’s...feminine deodorant spray. I didn’t want to have to explain myself.”

“Uh-huh,” Marianne said.

“It came in the mail,” Renni said, stirring her noodles with her head down still. “It was a sample. I must’ve put it in my drawer and forgot about it. I don’t use that stuff.”

Marianne just looked at her.

“At the office?” Renni continued. “What, the mailman’s going to come in one day? I’m going to get turned on? Nobody’s around? I excuse myself for one second, run off to the ladies room and give myself one quick squirt? Give me a break.”

Marianne started to laugh.

“Leave me alone,” Renni said. “I’m trying to eat my lunch here.”

Marianne covered her mouth, tried to hold her laughter at bay.

“Okay,” Renni said, “so it’s mace.”

They both burst out laughing.

SIX

A ringing phone broke David Tennon out of a nice sleep. He reached over to the nightstand with his eyes still closed and thought about pushing the whole damn thing to the floor and ripping the cord out of the wall.

A fuzzy glance at the clock told him it was just past two in the afternoon. His alarm would be going off soon anyway. It wouldn't make sense to try to get back to sleep.

"I'm not coming in early," was how he answered the phone, still laying down on the bed and closing

his eyes again.

“Good morning, Dave. How are you?” It was a second shift sergeant, sounding purposely cheery.

“I’m not coming in early.”

“Now relax. You don’t have to come in early. I’m actually doing you a favor. I got a guy calling here, hounding me to talk to you, saying it’s important, asking me for your home number. Now I could have done that. I could have gotten him off my back by giving him your number. But I wouldn’t want someone giving out my home number, so—”

“Thank you. Who was it?”

“Some highfalutin lawyer in the Justice Department. A Fed.”

“What.”

“That’s what I said, and he wouldn’t tell me what he wanted to talk to you about, so I said I would give you his number, and that I would call you personally right now to get it to you pronto.”

“Very nice for him. Me, you broke out of a nice sleep.”

“Next time I give out your number.”

“Give me his name. I’ll call him if it means I can hang up on you.”

“Name is Harvey McKenna.” He gave Tennon the man’s work number. Tennon reached over lazily and scribbled the number down on a phone message pad. He promptly fell right back on the bed and closed his eyes.

“And call him now,” the sergeant said, “or else he will keep calling here. First shift apparently told

him to go pound salt, and he did not take kindly to that advice, and kept calling. So I said I would help out, do the man a favor. Now you do me a favor, and—”

“Thank you, Sarge. I’ll call him on my own time.”

“He told me to tell you: NTX. That’s all he would say.”

That woke up Tennon a little bit. He opened his eyes and sat up in the bed.

“I don’t know what that means,” the sergeant said, “but you might. So call him.”

“Yeah. Thank you.” He hung up, sighed, and decided he’d get this over with. He spun the dial with Mr. Harvey McKenna Esquire’s number and waited as it rang.

The name sounded familiar. Tennon went through the files in his mind. Justice, lawyer, federal. No one he ever worked with on the job or went to court with, that he could remember. But still—

Tennon reached down to a lower shelf on the nightstand and rooted through some old newspapers. That was it. He saw the name Harvey McKenna and Federal Prosecutor more than once in a few articles about high-profile cases.

A secretary patched Tennon through as he sat up in bed with a heavy sigh, moving the blankets off him and swinging his legs over the side. He wore a white t-shirt and flannel pants. He rubbed his eyes and his face.

McKenna was not a man to be bothered with

pleasantries: “Detective Tennon! I’ve been trying to reach you all day!”

“I work third shift, counselor. I was asleep. Not anymore though. How can I help you?”

“They’ve put you on the Julian Maxwell homicide.”

“Now how do you know that information?”

“It doesn’t matter. We need to meet and talk.”

“I go into work at ten tonight. District One.”

“At that hour my hope is to be in bed and asleep.”

“It is a nice hope to be in bed and asleep.”

Either McKenna missed it entirely or didn’t care. “Can you meet me at five, the old chemical plant?”

“Mr. McKenna—”

“I promise to make it worth your while. And I’ll have coffee.”

“You’re talking about NTX?”

“Yes. This is important. I won’t waste your time.”

Tennon sighed and shrugged as if McKenna could see him. “I’ll be there. This better be good.”

“Thank you.” McKenna hung up.

Tennon stayed sitting on the bed for a while, staring at the phone in his hand and waiting for the energy to get up. Finally he got up and began walking to the bathroom, fantasizing about coffee.

SEVEN

Instrumental adult contemporary played over the speakers of the bustling underground galleria in the NTX building. Soft and inoffensive, with an urban flair of soul and smooth jazz. Mall Muzak. The idea was not to notice it. Marianne only did because it was her kind of music—and because, as facilities manager for the building, she had the privilege and responsibility of picking it out.

Underneath its lulling yet upbeat vibe, she liked it because it sounded like the city. Danny from the diner would cringe at the very idea. It's commercial

jazz, he had once told her. Fake jazz. Elevator music infused with pop and R&B. Sounding like a black version of *The Lawrence Welk Show*. You need something with grit, Marianne, with life. Not schmaltz.

Maybe. But Marianne liked it, and also because its sensual grooves spoke to her deepest romantic longings. She had a growing collection at home of cassettes and CDs: Grover Washington, Jr., Pieces of a Dream, David Sanborn, Gato Barbieri, Spyro Gyra, George Benson, Chuck Mangione.

Every so often she came in to work early to enjoy it, even after listening to it in the car. She'd sit on a bench as the sun rose over the mall's atrium, surrounded by the ficus trees and the center fountain. She could read her book in some peace before the day started.

Just the other morning she had seen an old couple holding hands and walking the mall who looked exactly like her parents, or rather, like her parents would have looked like now if they were still alive.

It was a hallucination gone after a blink. Upon closer look, they really looked nothing like her parents at all outside of the glow of their still-evident love.

But her heart burned for a moment, a double hit of missing her parents and the loneliness of her single life, especially poignant under the sudden mournful wail of a trumpet over the speakers, like a hidden film composer scoring her life.

It wasn't a wild dream by any means, but it was a warm thought, the idea of growing old with someone who would one day walk the mall with her and hold her hand.

Right now she stood in the dark and nearly dead silence of a mall jewelry store's back room. Standing on one side of her was the store's proprietor, Nathan Kappelmann, a perpetually scowling older man in suspenders and rolled up sleeves. On the other side of her was the building's head of security, Dan Esposito, a handsome middle-aged black man in a blue sports coat and tie. Their eyes were on a video monitor playing security footage.

"Okay," Kappelmann said, "now watch."

On the film was a black and white low-resolution image of the jewelry store, a tracking shot that panned slowly across the room and back. The wide angle it swept currently revealed nothing, nothing outside of a closed store with jewelry cases covered up for the night.

"Now here," Kappelmann said. "Here it comes. Out the door, in the mall."

At the front of the store was the automatic gate, down for the night. Outside in the mall, a dark figure in an overcoat suddenly appeared, walking calmly past the store.

"There!" Kappelmann said. "You see? *Who* is that?"

The figure disappeared as the camera began to pan to the back of the store. Kappelmann paused the

image.

“Let it run,” Esposito said.

“That’s all you see of him.”

“Let it run anyway.”

Kappelmann let the camera run as it continued to pan to the back of the store and then back up front.

“This was last night?” Marianne asked.

“Yes, last night.”

“What time?”

“About eleven-thirty. There’s a device on the camera so you know what time it is.”

“I know.” Marianne looked to Esposito.

“Danny?”

“I don’t know.” Esposito shook his head. He looked to Kappelmann. “You could be wrong. Camera could be wrong. It’s just not possible.”

“Not possible? How can you say not possible? Aren’t you seeing it with your own eyes?”

“Wind it back. Let me see it again.”

Kappelmann rewound the tape, stopped it, let it run.

The figure in the overcoat appeared once again, gliding past the store windows and gate, unhurried yet efficient.

Kappelmann paused the tape, freezing the image of the man in silhouette.

“There’s your not possible, Mr. Columbo!”

Esposito sighed. “Who the *hell*...”

He ejected the tape. The three of them walked out of the back room to the store out front.

“What difference does it make who it was?” Kappelmann said. “What matters is that anyone was there at all.”

They stopped in the middle of the store. Around them, high-end clientele and casual customers alike spoke with sales associates and scanned the glass-encased jewelry and the shelves with the handbags and hat boxes.

Marianne said, “It couldn’t have been one of your men, could it have, Danny?”

“No, I’m sure it wasn’t,” Esposito said. “I’ll talk to them, but...”

“Talk, talk,” Kappelmann said.

“You have a safe in the back, right?” Esposito asked him.

“Yes. What is that supposed to prove?”

“And you lock everything up at night?”

“What am I, a schmuck?”

Marianne noticed one of the customers looking their way as Kappelmann raised his voice. A striking woman, looking posh and well-to-do. And younger than Marianne. Every day they got younger.

“Do you have a commercial insurance policy?” Esposito asked.

Kappelmann looked at Marianne. “Look, why am I getting the third degree here?”

More people looked their way as Marianne tried to gesture Kappelmann and Esposito to the front.

“Can we take this outside, please?”

In the wide corridor outside in the mall, a steady flow of shoppers streamed around the three of them

as they exited the store. They stood before a railing overlooking an equally bustling lower floor.

Marianne watched the consumers below for a moment, wondering if in all of their consumption they ever really found what it was they were looking for. She wondered if anyone was actually happy.

Down a ways she saw the water rushing around the impressive fountain in the center court. Underneath the atrium's skylight, the NTX logo floated large in three dimensions, a bronze sculpture of the earth with orbiting letters that read GALLERIA AT NTX. And at the base of the fountain: PROGRESS NEVER STOPS. It was relaxing, watching all that rushing water beneath all that nice natural light.

Kappelmann's grating voice broke her out of her peace. He said, "The rates I pay on the insurance policy are based on the assurance that you people are providing security. I've got a half a million dollars worth of merchandise in my store, and if you can't protect it for me, I've got half a mind to take my business elsewhere."

"Mr. Kappelmann," Marianne said, "you've been a tenant here for...two months?"

"Yes..."

"And in that time you've seen your walk-in trade increase tenfold?"

"Yes. It's a good location, and I'm paying for it. What point are you trying to make?"

"You don't want to move. We don't want you to move. I'm only asking that you give us a little time

to try and figure out what's going on. That's all."

Kappelmann scowled. "That's all. Fine. And in the meantime, what?" He gestured across the hall to a large sporting goods store. "I've got to buy a gun in that armory over there and sleep in here at night?"

"Mr. Kappelmann, please..."

Kappelmann turned away with a huff and walked back into his store.

Marianne and Esposito exchanged glances and walked off together.

They took an elevator down to a sub-basement level and started down a long utility tunnel.

Marianne's heels echoed in the cavernous space.

"Why *were* you giving him the third degree back there?" Marianne asked.

"He doesn't have a half a million dollars worth of merchandise in that store," Esposito said. "Not even close."

"So?"

Esposito shrugged. "It could have been him on that tape."

"What?"

"Could you positively tell otherwise?"

Marianne couldn't.

Esposito went on: "A man robs his own store, claims the insurance, and we come off looking negligent."

"Are you serious?"

"It's happened before. I worked the bunco squad for a time when I was police. Fraud cases. Saw it

plenty of times.” He placed a gentle hand on Marianne’s arm to steer her away from a section of the tiled floor that had been freshly painted red.

“Watch out for the wet paint.”

“Thanks.”

“I don’t know,” Esposito said. “Kappelmann? I just don’t trust him...”

They entered a high-tech security office off the utility tunnel. It was small but far too utilitarian to be cozy. Computers, phones, and video monitors thrummed with life.

A black and white cat with a red collar and a bit of a limp to its right back leg walked around a row of keyboards atop a desk to greet Esposito. He picked it up in his arms.

“This is Felix. Felix, meet Marianne.”

Marianne smiled. “Where did he come from?”

“We found him last week in the northeast stairwell between the forty-third and forty-fourth floor at two in the morning.” He set Felix down on the floor. The cat went to a corner and nursed a bowl of milk.

“How did he get in?” Marianne asked.

“We don’t know. Probably wandered in during the day. But the point is, we found him. Between eight o’clock at night when the main system automatically kicks in, and eight the next morning when it shuts off again, nothing moves without us knowing about it. That’s why the cleaning crews have to be out by eight, so as not to create a lot of

confusion.”

As he talked, Marianne watched the video and computer monitors, checking out the black and white camera angles throughout the building, the diagrams and system controls.

“We’ve got cameras covering every square inch of space,” Esposito said. “We’ve got motion sensors, weight detectors imbedded in the floors, under the carpets. Hell, you know the system. It’s the very best, most advanced that money can buy.”

“At least up to the fifty-eighth floor,” Marianne said.

“Sure,” Esposito said. “From fifty-nine up, if NTX wants to be outside the system, that’s their business. But nobody’s going to get up that far to bother them, because they won’t get past us. Not unless they can fly.”

“Is it possible,” Marianne said, “that last night the system...glitched? Shut down temporarily?”

“No. Not without us knowing about it.”

Marianne nodded. “Who’s on duty tonight?”

“I’m going to stay. It’ll be me and McGrady.”

Marianne nodded. “I’d like a copy of that tape when you get a chance.”

“Of course.”

Marianne turned to leave but stopped in the doorway. “Danny? If it wasn’t Kappelmann on the tape, hypothetically, if it was someone else, then what?”

Esposito shook his head and shrugged. “Then I doubt we’re ever going to know who it was. Or why.

TRAPPED

Or how.”

EIGHT

When Marianne was called up to Jerrold Manley's office later that afternoon, her mind was on the jewel thief. Somehow Manley must have heard about it.

She wasn't sure how though. Esposito would have kept his mouth shut, spoke to no one but his men. And Marianne had only mentioned it to Renni. That left Kappelmann. And he wasn't above going over their heads. Maybe he didn't think she and Esposito took him seriously. And now she was going to get a tongue lashing, and not the good kind.

She wondered why her, if Esposito was head of security, for it was a security issue. Or maybe he had been talked to already. She also wondered why this couldn't have been done over the phone.

But she found it hard to believe that Manley would care about security issues in the mall. That was a Kupper & Dietz problem, and she was face of their firm for this building. If anyone should have been worried, it was her.

She got off the elevator and listened to her heels echo across the marble floor as she approached the receptionist's desk outside of Manley's office. She passed a luxurious waiting area where two businessmen sat and conversed.

Receptionist hardly suited the image of the gorgeous young woman sitting behind the desk. Executive secretary seemed more like it. She had a look that said sophistication, that said well-educated, that said money.

Marianne had heard that Manley liked to surround himself with attractive women. He took young business majors under his wing as interns and prepped them for high-paying positions in the company. But he chose qualified women, no mistake.

Say what one would about the man, he knew what having an image meant. There was no ulterior motive when it came to hiring these women. Marianne knew that any possible thought of impropriety on Manley's part was overshadowed by the threat of scandal and/or lawsuit. He chose

women that would never go for any funny stuff. It was all business. Strong, attractive, educated women were very good for business. Very good for public perception.

Marianne liked to think of herself as checking a few of those boxes off when it came to her own role in the building. Kupper & Dietz, of course, was responsible for her hiring, but Manley would not have signed off on a facilities manager with whom he was not comfortable. So she hoped she was in line with his image for the company. Even if all these other women were younger than her. Prettier and perkier too. The kind her husband left her for. For all her education and career accomplishments, Marianne couldn't help but feel threatened.

Something happened to her when she hit thirty and that light, real or perceived, went off. Every day she looked in the mirror and every day she looked more haggard. Whatever could have caused it—the death of her parents, the divorce, simple aging—she didn't like it.

It was a young person's world in general. A very young person's world. Just watch the television commercials and listen to the popular music, see to whom the advertisers and promoters are all catering. Marianne simply had to come to terms with it.

Still, she remembered high school and college, the hope that was there. Back then, things only ever looked up. When you're young you believe the lies your parents and guidance counselors tell you. That you'll flourish, accomplish great things, leave a

great legacy. And maybe that's true for a few people. But not for most of us.

One day Marianne woke up feeling like the world had passed her by. Like until then she had been keeping pace with it, ahead of it at times even. But then one day it broke full sprint ahead of her and she could never catch up, like she had missed some memo. And she realized that this is what happens to old people. You realize your day is gone and so you try to turn the tables, get stuck in your ways, treat your day like it was the greatest day there ever was, your generation the last great one before it all went to shambles. That becomes your pride, while meanwhile life keeps moving on in front of you, never looking back.

It was a depressing thought. By all rights, Marianne was a very successful woman. But still she couldn't shake this feeling like she was just leftovers. That she had reached the zenith of her life and there was no more. Her time had passed to make a mark on the world, if it ever was going to happen.

The woman at the desk in front of her, she still had time. She was young and smart and pretty and she knew it. She was also not friendly.

Marianne gave her name. The woman barely looked at her as she picked up a phone. "Marianne Marshall," she said. She hung up the receiver and went back to studying something on her computer terminal, never once looking at Marianne. "He will see you now."

A tall man in a gray suit appeared outside of a

door further down the wide, expansive hallway. He held out his arm in a gesture for her to come to him. Marianne raised her eyebrows at the secretary and clicked away.

The tall man was one of Manley's private bodyguards. He moved stiffly and did not smile. He merely held out his hand to bid her enter.

Marianne nodded as she crossed the threshold. He held the door and closed it behind her.

Light poured through floor-to-ceiling windows into the massive office. There was a conference table in the center, and still room to spare.

Jerrold Manley sat at his desk at the far end of the room, scribbling something on a legal pad. Marianne had the feeling of walking through a museum as she approached him, not helped by the presence of a sculpture in a glass case that she passed along the way, or the minimalist art all evenly spaced along the walls.

The view of the city was tempered by the glare of the late day sun gleaming off the edges of the other buildings. Over the cityscape with its spires and towers, dusk moved in to claim the sky.

Marianne stopped about fifteen feet before Manley's desk. He didn't look up from his pad. Against the dying sun coming through the picture window he was in sharp silhouette. She could make out wire-rimmed glasses and some hair and that was pretty much it.

"You've never been in here before, have you?" Manley asked. He didn't look up from the desk.

“No, sir.”

There was a long pause.

Manley spoke slow, his patented even-tempered way of speaking; for all its calmness it was incredibly intimidating, made all the worse when he still didn't look at her.

“You got off on the fifty-eighth floor with some gentleman this morning. What was that all about?”

That was what this was? Marianne let her confusion pass. She said, “He was a prospective buyer. I was showing him one of the condominiums.”

Manley raised his eyes from the desk and looked at her for the first time. “That,” he said, “is not your job, I believe.”

Marianne shifted her gaze momentarily. “The agents had missed the appointment,” she said. “I was just trying to be...helpful.”

Manley stared at her awhile. “I want you to understand something about the fifty-eighth floor,” he said. “Something the other agents have been made aware of.”

Marianne waited.

“All buyers of any of the condominiums are to be thoroughly checked out,” Manley said. “I don't mean just financially.”

Marianne began to nod slowly.

“The fifty-eighth floor is directly beneath us,” Manley said. “No one is to be shown those two properties without being investigated in advance.”

Another slow nod. “Okay.”

Manley continued to watch her. "What do you know about industrial espionage?" he said.

Marianne shrugged. "Nothing, really."

"More of it goes on than is talked about," Manley said. "Every company has to guard against it. We also spend a lot of money on our public image. It's a kind of armor. Against the press. Against the public." He paused, and then spoke emphatically: "What goes on up here, what we do, is nobody's business...but my own."

Marianne let the words settle. Then she nodded. "I understand."

"I want you to employ a new real estate agency, effective immediately."

Marianne saw her evening plans getting pushed back, fading away even. She was going to be here awhile. "Yes, sir."

Manley arose from his desk and walked out a small door next to him. Marianne stood there, waiting for him to return.

A sudden sound in the quiet jolted her. A loud electronic humming. Automatic shades begin to slide down all of the windows, slowly immersing the room in darkness.

A tremor pulsed beneath her skin. She felt a child-like terror as if she had been forgotten, about to be trapped in the dark with no way out.

But then the door back out into the hallway opened. The man in the gray suit stood there. He held out his arm. The talk was over. She left.

NINE

The abandoned NTX chemical plant sat in a large decrepit lot on the south side not far from the Chicago River.

David Tennon could smell the river in the air, mixed with the grime and grit of over a century's worth of industry, a subtle sort of toxic fume that permeated the city like a second skin.

He stared out the window of his personal vehicle that was parked in the lot, squinting against the setting sun to see the miles of warehouses that populated this part of the south.

Most were abandoned. Tennon imagined the history here, the dreams. Once upon a time these places teemed with immigrants and black people. Tennon thought about his people migrating up from the south, Chicago a beacon of promise for jobs, working the rail yards, the meatpacking and steel plants all over the south side.

Then those jobs left but the black people didn't. And that was when Tennon worked the streets. Same during the months of protests after the toxic waste spill in the late seventies. He didn't like to think about that time any more than he already had to for this case. He was a few years on the job back then, and like so much with police work, the protests had meant long hours, odd shifts, forced overtime. So many of those early years, trying to make a name for himself on the street, put a few notches on his belt making arrests and doing undercover work, had come at the price of his family. He had missed a good chunk of his kids' early years in the name of his career. That was time he could never get back.

His wife had almost left him back then. More than once.

Tennon looked at his watch, willing himself to stop re-opening old wounds. It was a few minutes to five. He wondered what this was all about and if he could mark it down as overtime when he got into work tonight.

A fancy black BMW rolled into the lot. Tennon shook his head. The vehicle pulled even with his passenger side.

Tennon leaned over and rolled down his passenger window while Harvey McKenna rolled down his driver's.

McKenna called over. "Detective!"

Tennon called back: "I can tell you never drove a patrol car. Pull around my other side so we can actually talk."

"Oh, yes, yes, of course."

McKenna maneuvered around so that both the cars' driver's sides were facing each other. Tennon finally got a good look at the man as they shook hands, McKenna's gold Rolex gleaming on his wrist beneath fancy cufflinks.

He was young, early to mid-thirties, very handsome, and even sitting down Tennon could tell he was tall. He wore a perfectly tailored suit which included a vest. His parted blonde hair was coiffed like a good ol' boy with not a strand out of place. And his smile flashed perfect teeth that matched an eager and firm handshake.

"Harvey McKenna, Harvey McKenna, nice to meet you. I appreciate this, Detective, I really do." He sounded like your best friend who only wanted to help you, but if Tennon had to guess, it masked a sense of self-importance and entitlement. McKenna was persistent, and used to getting what he wanted, where he wanted.

Which prompted Tennon's first question: "Why here, Mr. McKenna? I have two sons, both of whom do the occasional after-school activity, which in this instance included today. It was not fun driving to

pick them up, then back home, then out here. But I do it because my wife does a lot already and hates my job enough as it is, plus third shift allows for it.”

McKenna lifted a coffee mug that had a heat sleeve with a label for an expensive downtown café. “I’m sorry,” he said, though Tennon could tell he didn’t much care. “Peace offering. It’s good coffee, I promise. Cream and sugar in there.”

Tennon started at him, then slowly reached for the coffee and took it. He took a sip. It very good indeed.

“Why here?” Tennon repeated.

McKenna popped a piece of gum. He chewed loudly. “Setting. History. Theatricality.”

“Seriously?”

“Indulge me.”

McKenna seemed to be a man that was used to people indulging him. “Plus,” he said. “I didn’t want people seeing us all over town.”

“All over town.” Tennon scoffed. “What’s with the cloak and dagger?”

“I’ll get right into it. They put you on Julian Maxwell because we, meaning the Feds, have been breathing down the department’s neck with this one. Homicide has come up empty and we’re itching to take it on. But of course to save face, you guys don’t want to give it up without a fair shake, look incompetent. I keep an eye on interdepartmental memos, found they put you on it.”

“Okay.”

“We have an interest in it because we were

looking into Maxwell before he got killed. You know he got NTX off years back for their whole thing?”

“I do.”

“Well, Maxwell was one cog in the big NTX machine that we’ve been probing. Him, Chairman Manley, other board members. We want to hit NTX hard. Maxwell was a big part of that, and his death was unfortunate for us.”

“C.I.?”

McKenna nodded slow and tried to look hard. “We were about to turn him. We have some evidence on cases he fixed for NTX, including the chemical dump back here all those years ago. Tampering with witnesses, coaching experts, shredding documents, those kinds of things. He was looking at criminal charges in addition to being disbarred.”

“You can still smear NTX with all that information.”

“Of course we could. But no one else’s name is on it. Their lawyers could prove that it was all Maxwell. The best kind of patsy is a dead one.”

“So,” Tennon said, “you’re thinking someone high-up at NTX took him out.”

McKenna nodded slow again.

Tennon shrugged. “My bosses think it’s someone from back in the day. The protests. Revenge kill.”

“Possible, of course,” McKenna said. “But I don’t know. It’s convenient timing.”

“You think they knew Maxwell was going to talk?”

“There was no indication of it, but yes, I think somehow they found out.”

“And...put out a hit on him?”

“Yes.”

“All due respect, Mr. McKenna, it sounds like conspiracy theory to me. NTX isn't the mob, they're middle-aged businessmen. Shady, perhaps, but only ethically. They're shrewd, not violent.”

“You're forgetting what happened at some of those protests. The beatings. NTX is not above violence.”

“Sure. But murder? Execution?”

McKenna shrugged again. “I'm thinking it was someone with the means, someone who would do the board's dirty work. NTX has its own private security, always has, some of them the chairman's personal bodyguards. Of course they contracted out separate building security for their new headquarters, but as far as the company itself, they've always had their own men. And if you look at these men's files? A lot are ex-military. Black Ops types. Dishonorable discharge types. So all I'm saying is...it's a possibility.”

Tennon nodded. “I hear you.”

McKenna looked both ways furtively in the large empty lot. Either he was being dramatic or actually believed people could be listening in. He reached into his passenger seat and pulled out a thick file, handed it over to Tennon.

“Information about their private security guys. Some are young, fresh-faced new hires. But others have been there awhile. Loyal.”

“What do you want me to do with this?”

“See if it helps. If there actually is an angle there. And maybe, after all of this, I’d like your help.”

“How’s that?”

“The multi-agency task force that I’m heading to bring down NTX. Maxwell’s death was a disappointment. I’ve read your file. Your history is impressive. We could ask the department to borrow you for a time. And in the meantime, if you wouldn’t mind staying in touch, I’d appreciate it. I realize this isn’t something your department would love. And it not’s something mine would love either if it got out I was doing this, so please, discretion.”

“All right, Mr. Cloak and Dagger. I’ll see what I can do. I start tonight.”

“Thank you.”

They shook hands. McKenna drove off without another word.

Tennon stayed sitting in that lot for a few more minutes. Thinking. Drinking his coffee. McKenna had heart. A chip on his shoulder, something to prove, a name to make—but heart. Not unlike Tennon when he was starting out. So maybe there was something there. Or maybe it was just noise.

Tennon stared out the window at the chemical plant. The sun had moved behind the buildings. It cast a pleasant radiance that was easy on the eyes. It

filtered through the fractured windows of the abandoned warehouses and cast long shadows over the vacant lots.

He stared at it awhile as if in a trance, and then rushed home to salvage the rest of his night.

The setting sun set the city on fire, a steel jungle awash in an orange and purple glow that blossomed like a hothouse flower before it withered, like a fleeting passion, into inevitable night. The artificial lights came on to take their place, a glittering cityscape, alive.

The cleaning crews in the NTX building finished vacuuming the hallways and packed up their carts, rolling them onto the elevators and calling it a night.

By 8:00 almost everyone had left the building.

But there were a few left.

TEN

Night and the city.

At only twenty-six stories, it wasn't too bad if you didn't look down. You look out at this level and it's just the other buildings.

The picture window was at Marianne's side now as she leaned back in her chair, feet up on the desk, shoes off. She had no lights on. Only the soft hue of the city lights filtered in.

From the speaker phone on her desk, John Dietz said, "You work too hard and you worry too much."

"You didn't see him, John."

"I know Jerrold. He always acts like that. Relax. You're doing a fine job. And go home, Marianne. I'm going to call back in five minutes, and if you're still there, I'm going to make you fly out here and join me."

"You just said the magic word."

"What's that?"

"Fly."

"Huh? Oh, right. Airplanes."

"Good night, John."

"Good night, Marianne."

She ended the call, took a breath, and hefted herself up from the chair. She slipped her shoes on, gathered her things from the coat rack, and left.

"Let's get out of here," she told Renni outside at the secretarial desks. Her friend was typing away at something.

"How's Mr. Dietz?" Renni asked, still typing.

"Oh, he's in heaven. He shot a ninety-four today."

"He likes you."

"He's married."

"Married men are the best kind. They're that much more attractive when they're off the market."

Unlike Ed Kupper, the socially awkward and frankly unappealing partner in the firm, John Dietz was indeed an attractive man, and almost fifteen years Marianne's senior. But in the twelve years she'd known him, John had always kept it professional. He was a very nice man, and never made her feel uncomfortable. Sometimes she did get

a vibe that he was attracted to her—that apparently Renni sensed as well—but he was her boss, and more importantly, someone’s husband. Plus he spoke of his wife often, and very fondly. There were times though, holiday parties and otherwise, when she wondered what he would do if she actually was interested in making a move and did. Her father used to tell her never to trust a man who brings up his wife too much, because it usually means he’s trying to remind himself he’s married.

Marianne reached down and turned off Renni’s typewriter. “Come on.”

“Okay, twist my arm.” Renni got up and began gathering her own things.

Marianne used the phone at her desk to give Esposito a quick call. She eyed the time on the wall clock: 8:27.

“Danny? It’s Marianne. Renni and I are leaving now.”

As Renni grabbed her belongings, Marianne noticed her top desk drawer was still open, the Binaca-like spray canister inside that Ed Kupper had gotten his hands on earlier.

“Oh really?” She looked at Renni, who was over by the door now. “He said we’re the last ones out of here, as usual. Okay. Good night, Danny.” She hung up, closed Renni’s top drawer, and left.

They rode the elevator down.

“So,” Renni said, “you got any plans for tonight?”

Marianne thought of her sad plans as she slipped into her winter coat. Smooth jazz, a glass of Cab, some new reading material. She shook her head.

“Nope. You?”

“I’ll call Bob. We’ll probably go out for a bite.” Renni looked at her. “Want to join us?”

Marianne wondered if she looked as sad as she felt. She faked consideration. “Mmm, no thanks.”

There was a brief pause. Renni said, “You sure?”

Marianne laughed softly. “Yeah.”

“Okay...”

The elevator opened on one of the parking garage levels. Renni’s level. She stood at the threshold and turned to Marianne. “You sure you’re okay?”

Marianne gave her best confused look. “I’m fine.”

Maybe Renni wasn’t convinced. As she was stepping out, she impulsively stepped back and gave her friend a kiss on the cheek. “Well, I’ll see you in the morning then, huh?”

“Sure.” Marianne smiled shyly, felt her face growing hot.

Renni left and the doors closed. Marianne took a deep breath, rode two more floors down. She rubbed her face and ran her hands through her hair. She wondered if loneliness was an aura, if everyone could see it. She was beginning to regret opening up to Renni as much as she had at lunch. It wasn’t worth it if she was going to be treated like she had to

be talked off a ledge at every turn.

The doors opened and she stepped heavily into the deserted parking garage. Her van was the only one on this level, far across the way. Her heels clicked loudly across the concrete floor.

Finally she reached her van. Unlocked it, got in, started it up.

In her office upstairs, the phone started ringing.

She tore out of the space and toward the ramp. She took it up, passed through an empty level, and took another ramp up to the next floor.

When she was about to turn up on the ramp again, she suddenly slowed.

Renni's car was still there.

But Renni wasn't in it.

Marianne looked out her windshield and the side windows. Renni wasn't around at all.

She pulled around and alongside Renni's car, a little red Toyota. She stopped the van and got out, leaving it running. She looked around some more.

Still nothing—

There was another car on this level.

It was far out and looked abandoned, hidden mostly in shadow. A faded blue, nearly gray, Chevy Nova.

Marianne kept looking at it until she reached the driver's side of Renni's car. She tried the door. It opened. She ducked inside. The keys were in the ignition.

Marianne ducked back out. She looked around again. "Renni?"

Louder: "Renni?"

Her voice echoed, with no response.

Marianne went back to her van, turned it off, and closed the door. She made her way toward the elevator bank. One was blocked off with a sawhorse that read OUT OF ORDER. Marianne grabbed the other one and rode it back up to the office. There was an inexplicable sense of dread in the pit of her stomach. A bad feeling she couldn't shake.

Renni gone...keys still in the ignition...

And that other car in the garage.

Who else was here? Danny had said they were the only ones left to leave.

She sighed with relief when she saw her friend through the glass doors of the K&D lobby. But still there was that residual dread she couldn't shake.

She just wanted to get out of this building.

"Renni?" Marianne said. She pulled open the glass doors and entered.

Renni was on the phone, leaning against the reception desk. She turned to Marianne, frowning. "Car won't start. I'm calling triple A, they got me on hold."

Marianne took the phone. "Don't be silly." She punched up another line and dialed security.

"Danny? It's Marianne again. Yes, we're back in the office. Oh, you know? Renni's car won't start. I'm driving her home. We'll deal with it in the morning. Yep. Okay. Bye."

TRAPPED

She hung up, looked over at Renni.

“It’s way out of your way,” Renni said.

Marianne shrugged. “I’m a friend. Let’s just get out of here.”

They left the lobby and Marianne locked up behind her.

ELEVEN

David Tennon's regular shift started at ten PM, with a briefing by the shift sergeant that began fifteen minutes earlier and for which he received overtime daily. If he left no later than 9:15 he could navigate the city traffic and make it to the office on time.

Today he got there before nine to get an early start on his special assignment. On top of that, the man he needed to speak to on the phone could be leaving work at any minute.

Settling into his desk at the stationhouse,

Tennon called direct to the security office at the NTX building downtown. He recognized Esposito's voice.

"Danny? Dave Tennon."

"Dave! What's going on?"

"Same old. How're the big bucks over there, workin' the Loop?"

"Gravy," Esposito said. "Got a spot for you to join me. They love retired cops. You can work your shift, never have to worry about getting stuck, paperwork to catch up on."

"I've heard there're jobs like that out there."

"You still working Central?"

"Yeah. Actually why I called you. That lawyer who got killed, who worked over there with you, with NTX at least, Julian Maxwell?"

"Oh yeah. CEO paid a couple visits to my office direct after that happened. Make sure our systems T's were crossed and I's dotted."

"And they are?"

Esposito scoffed. "Man—"

"Had to ask."

"You're not the only one asking today."

"How's that?"

"Some nonsense. I don't know. Possible jewel thief. Possible store owner in the mall looking for a quick payday."

"Hmm."

"Why? What's up, you working that Maxwell case?"

"Sort of. It's going cold and they want fresh

eyes, someone who worked the south during the protests.”

“The chemical plant?”

“Yeah.”

“Ah. See if Maxwell’s killer was part of something back then?”

“Right.”

“That was a bad time to be a cop in the south.”

“Yeah. I wanted to call you, see if you might have any concerns over at that new building. Someone from back then, still upset. Anyone you’ve had to deal with.”

There was silence on the other line for a moment as Esposito thought. “No. It’s been quiet since that time.”

“How about your jewel thief?”

“What about him?”

“Anything there maybe?”

“All we have is a camera showing a man walking by the store in the middle of the night. Can’t make out anything about him on the tape.”

“How about sending an old friend a copy of said tape?”

“Copies for everyone today. I got you. But I really don’t think...someone with a grudge against NTX wandering the halls of our building at night? What’s he looking to do?”

“I don’t know,” Tennon said. “How’d he get in?”

“That’s the mystery right now.”

“So maybe those T’s and I’s...”

“That tape’s going to cost you a couple of beers, smart ass.”

Tennon laughed. “I’m always thirsty.”

“You know where to find me,” Esposito said.

“I do. Oh, and Danny?”

“Yeah.”

“Just between you and me. Say it wasn’t someone with a grudge against NTX that took out Maxwell. Say it *was* NTX.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Say it was something personal.”

“If you’re asking did I know of anyone in the company with a personal grudge against Maxwell, I did not.”

“Okay. Last hypothetical. Say if there was something personal, would you have any reason to believe that Jerrold Manley’s private security guys were guns-for-hire?”

“Whoa, whoa.”

“I’m only asking as devil’s advocate.”

“Now I know most of those men personally, Dave, and they’re good guys.”

“Just asking.”

“You know something I don’t?”

“Nothing. Just had to go there. No hard feelings.”

“Of course not. In all seriousness though, Dave, I can’t imagine it. There’s some hard guys up there, but...”

“I hear you. You take care, Danny.”

“You too, brother. I’m a hold you to that drink.”

He was hanging up anyway, but Tennon swore as he went to place the phone down that the line on the other end was suddenly and abruptly cut off.

Marianne's van was on its way up the ramp toward the exit when the clock timer in the control room hit 9:00.

The homemade bomb detonated behind the narrow panel, a small explosion knocking out the entire circuit board.

Smoke seeped out the sides of the metal box, slowly dissipating in the darkness.

TWELVE

Marianne stopped before the gate on the exit ramp and rolled her window down. She stuck her arm out and placed her key card in the feed.

The gate did not move.

She tried it again. And again. Tried to finagle it. She tapped it against the reader itself that bore the sign *Thank You For Parking At NTX Industries—Where Progress Never Stops*. She tried it once more. No dice.

“What the hell?”

Marianne sighed, leaving her card in the slot as

she shifted into reverse and backed the van toward the nearest bank of elevators.

She and Renni got out. Renni headed for the elevator. Marianne took her arm. "This way."

They passed the elevators to a red security phone before a fire door. Marianne picked it up. She waited.

"Danny?"

There was no dial tone. It was supposed to buzz right through to security, but this time there was no answer.

"Danny?"

She hung up, exhaled. The urge to get out of this building was only growing. It went beyond just the desire to go home. Right now she specifically wanted to leave this place. Something felt off. Something felt *wrong*.

"Phone's broken," she said. "We'll have to go down there."

"So maybe I'll just stay here tonight and order in," Renni said. "You like pizza?"

"Funny."

Marianne pushed through the fire door to a corridor in between flights of stairs. When they emerged out of a narrow tunnel they were on the galleria levels.

The mall was dead. Afterhours, the piped-in Muzak had an ethereal effect. It washed over the dark, gated-up stores and vacant corridors, a fever dream under all that neon, a stark contrast to the peppy sound that accompanied the hustle and bustle

consumerism of the day. But the escalators did stay running. And so did the fountains.

“These things go all night?” Renni asked.

“Convenient, isn’t it?”

“The music too?” Renni shook her head.

Marianne didn’t tell her she was responsible for that.

“This place is weird, you know?” Renni said. “I think it’s karma.”

Marianne’s attempt at a smile dropped when she saw something over one of the railings to a lower level of the mall.

“Don’t look now,” she said quietly, “but I think I see our jewel thief.”

Renni swung her head around. “Where?”

“There.” She indicated the level below them over the railing ahead. A man in a dark overcoat was walking down the hall, his back to them.

“Are you serious?” Renni whispered.

“Yes.” Marianne was trying to keep a calm demeanor, but the pit of dread in her stomach was growing tentacles that spawned to the reaches of her flesh, raising the hair on her skin.

The gate not working, the phones not working...

And now this man in the dark overcoat. Walking the mall afterhours.

Security.

She just needed security.

“Are we in trouble?” Renni asked.

“I don’t think so.”

“Where the hell is security?”

“I don’t know.”

Marianne took Renni's arm as they ducked into another narrow corridor between stores. They were quiet as they walked quickly to the back elevators and rode one down to the subbasement.

They emerged out into the long utility tunnel where the security room was and started walking.

"Now I know it's karma," Renni said. "I mean, don't you remember all those NTX jokes about seven or eight years ago?"

"What jokes?" Marianne said softly, distracted—for far down the hall was the man in the dark overcoat.

He had just left the security room and turned in the opposite direction, walking quickly down the hall away from them.

Marianne felt her pulse quicken. How the hell did he get down here so fast? What the hell was going on?

Renni hadn't noticed the man. She kept talking: "Like how many NTX victims does it take to change a light bulb? Don't bother because they'll be blind before you can get out the ladder?"

"Don't step in the paint." Marianne's focus was still on the man growing smaller down the hall as she steered Renni away from the square of wet red paint.

"I mean, don't you remember," Renni said, "that whole megillah about the chemical plant, and all the toxic waste leaking out everywhere—"

Renni noticed the man now.

"What the...? Wasn't he just...?"

“Just keep moving,” Marianne said. “We’re almost there.”

And she quickly pushed them into the security office as she noticed the man stop at the far end of the hall. Had he noticed them? Would he turn around?

Her eyes swept the office. It was empty. No guards.

“This is cute,” Renni said.

Marianne sighed. “Where the hell are they?” She hoped the frustration in her voice masked the fear she was feeling, and the deeper dread that was now building—

The man in the dark overcoat had been in this room.

And now the guards were gone.

Renni sighed and plopped down onto a swivel chair before one of the consoles. “I don’t know. I just want to go home.”

Marianne took another chair and tried to think. Just because the guards were gone now didn’t mean the man in the dark overcoat had anything to do with it. They could have been gone already, looking for him.

“We might have passed them,” she said. “They could be up in the mall now.”

“So what do we do?” Renni asked.

“We wait for them to come back.”

Renni nodded, took a moment. “What time is it?”

Marianne’s gaze found the wall clock. 9:10.

“After nine...” Her voice drifted with her gaze as her eyes rested on the console in front of her.

“Renni?”

“What.”

“The monitors are off.”

“What!” Renni spun and noticed it for the first time. Not one computer was on, not one security monitor. The screens were black. The system was off.

Marianne hunched over several of the keyboards on several of the consoles and started frantically typing. “They’re blank—they’re shut down—”

Nothing worked when she typed or pressed the start-up buttons. “Get on the phone,” she told Renni.

Renni grabbed a phone. “Who do I call?”

“911.”

Marianne reached the end of a row of consoles. Still nothing.

“The phone’s dead,” Renni told her, punching buttons.

“Try another line.”

“I’m...trying them all!” She was punching lines. None of them lit up.

“Try another phone!”

She was freaking Renni out now, but Marianne couldn’t take it anymore. That tremulous fear inside was breaking out, the fear that she had so hoped was uncalled for, the fear that was erasing all hope for a rational explanation to this even when at every turn she was being thrown the irrational.

Gate down, phones down, man in the mall, man in the security office, guards gone, security monitors off—

We never quite lose it, the fear of the monster under our bed or in the closet. But fear is good. Fear is a warning. As we get older and develop processes of logical thinking, we call it maturity. We're conditioned by the commonplace and the routine, and the head fools us into believing that we have put aside the childish things of our past, that there are no monsters left, that there never were.

But our baser instincts are there to tell us different, the reptilian brain that lets our bodies know something is off. It's there to prickle the hair on our skin, heighten our awareness of what's around us, shout signals to our mind that it is time to fight, to scream, to run.

It was shouting at Marianne now.

All her rational mind needed to see was the proof, stone-cold proof that could not be explained away, that would allow her worst fears to be realized beyond a doubt.

As Renni reached for another phone Marianne heard a sudden whine.

A cat's meow.

"Felix?"

Renni continued working away at different lines on different phones as Marianne followed the sound of another meow below her.

"I'm not getting anything," Renni said.

Marianne found Felix hiding in the corner under

the desk—cowering, in fact. He meowed some more.

“No good,” Renni said. “The whole system’s out.”

Marianne reached for the cat and pulled him out gently. Her hand touched something wet on his fur. She stared at it.

Her hand trembled.

Blood.

Back at the cat.

He didn’t seem hurt.

Not Felix’s blood...

And the guards gone...

Marianne looked at where she found Felix, pushing a swivel chair out of the way as he jumped from her arms.

On the floor—a splotch of blood.

Her eyes grew large.

Proof.

Proof now.

“Renni.” She shot up. “We have to get out of here. Now!”

Renni stared at her blankly for a moment, the phone receiver still in her hand. But it must have all been showing on Marianne’s face, for Renni jumped up and shot for the door.

Marianne grabbed her arm, picturing the man in the dark overcoat waiting for them out in the hall. “Not that way!” She pulled Renni to a back door. They ran out.

THIRTEEN

“Marianne, what the hell is going on?”

They were riding the elevator back up to the twenty-sixth floor.

“I don’t know. Let me think.”

“You’re scaring me half to death.”

The doors opened and they stepped out into the lobby before the K&D offices.

“I’m holding the elevator here,” Marianne said. She reached back inside and pulled the emergency stop button. The doors stayed open. “I’ve got to think.”

“Why couldn’t we wait there for security?”
Renni asked.

Marianne didn’t look at her when she answered.
“I don’t think they were coming back.”

“Why not? Where were they?”

“I don’t think they were anywhere.”

“What does that mean?”

Marianne’s eyes moved. She tapped her hands together nervously. When she went to hold Renni’s trembling hand, it was as much for her own benefit.

“Let’s just...get out of here.” It was all she could think to say as she kept trying to think.

“How?” Renni asked, trying to think herself.
“The electronic gate doesn’t work. The night guards have all taken a hike. All the other exits are controlled by the security system.”

Marianne nodded. “And now the phones don’t seem to be working either.”

Renni shook her head and exhaled, referencing her dream of the previous night: “I feel the temperature starting to drop.”

Marianne turned to give her friend a reassuring smile when the elevator doors behind Renni opened—

A dark figure lunged out.

The man in the dark overcoat.

There was a knife—a blur of movement as things happened too fast—

The man grabbed Renni. She screamed.
Marianne fell back into the elevator hard, her arm swiping all the buttons on her way down.

“Renni!”

The doors began to close.

“Marianne! Oh my God! Help me!”

Marianne flew up to put herself in the threshold, try and stop the doors—

“Oh God! No! Please! Marianne!”

The doors finished closing. Something pounded on it from the outside. Marianne lurched forward—the DOOR OPEN button—pressed it—the doors began to—

A baseball bat swung through the opening and collided with Marianne’s face.

“Marianne!”

She went down, grabbing the side of her face where the bat had glanced off her cheek.

She felt blood.

The doors were still opening—

Marianne strived, pulled the emergency button, the doors stopped—

The bat whipped frantically through the gap, searching for her—

She dove to a back corner, out of striking range.

The bat was ripped back out of the elevator—

And the man in the dark overcoat appeared in the gap, reaching through, trying to wedge himself in—couldn’t—

Marianne saw him only briefly before he busted his arm through. His dark coat, a white button-up underneath that was unbuttoned at the top. Balding, fifties maybe, a thick mustache—and a scar above his right eye. His coarse unshaven face twisted into a

menacing scowl as he grunted, trying to break in—

His arm reached wildly for the control buttons on the side of the car, almost on them—

Marianne dove forward and attacked the arm, scratching it, biting it, pulling it away—

The man howled and ripped his arm back—it reappeared—there was the knife—

He slashed it madly through the air, the blade barely missing Marianne's face as she fell back to the corner of the car.

She thought there would be more, but just as suddenly Renni's screams returned.

"Help me, Marianne! No! No! He's killing me! He's killing me...!"

Marianne thought she could even hear the sound of a blade tearing repeatedly into flesh. Renni's screams turned into incoherent sobs.

Marianne released the emergency stop button, the doors closing as hot tears poured down her face, her own body racking with sobs.

She shrieked and fell back once more as she heard the bat return, pounding once against the doors before they could fully close, then once more as they did...

...and the elevator began to rise.

Marianne lay crying in the corner, letting her wails be as loud as she could make them, anything to drown out Renni's fading screams as the car began its ascent...

FOURTEEN

It was on a remarkably pleasant day of bright blue skies and soft warm sun in May of her twenty-second year when the car in which Marianne Marshall rode in the backseat collided with a tractor trailer on the Eisenhower Expressway and flipped three times.

Her parents were in the front.

After the initial impact, her memory was hazy. She remembered noise, very loud noise, and huge shards of glass and loose objects seeming to fly

against gravity as the car somersaulted, her parents jerking against the straps of their seatbelts.

It all happened before her mind could even register it, too fast to process the chain of events that followed. She had time only to feel a deep primitive terror as suddenly the right-side-up world she had come to appreciate was gone. Physics were defied. She was helpless.

Somewhere in all that she hit her head. She woke up in the hospital that night with a minor concussion and a few scrapes and was told that her parents were dead, killed almost instantly after, according to the police, the trucker switched lanes without looking.

It had been a week after her graduation from college.

She had already moved off campus to her own apartment and was working as a secretary for Kupper & Dietz at their home office. Even though she could support herself by that point, the landlord had insisted on her father co-signing the lease agreement. A woman living on her own, with no husband and no roommate, completely self-sufficient, was still a relatively new thing in the mid-seventies. Few believed it that she was making her own money.

And now suddenly she was wholly, utterly on her own. She remembered the feeling settling in her bones: loneliness like a sudden cold, unforgiving, merciless. The warmth her parents had wrapped her in since birth was gone.

Marianne had been an only child, and she had no living grandparents. Her parents had wanted a big family but complications from Marianne's birth resulted in her mother needing a hysterectomy. It was a guilt she carried through a good portion of her childhood, like she had stolen something from her parents by being born. They did not feel that way and told her so, and she did honestly believe that was true, but nonetheless she had always put pressure on herself as young as she could remember to be a model daughter. She owed them that much.

Her parents devoted time to church and missionary causes they otherwise wouldn't have been able to do with more kids, and recognized that God just had other plans for their lives. It was their calling. Her parents had a come-what-may Lord-willing grace to everything they did, rolling with the punches of life, seeing everything that came their way as an opportunity for growth. If there was any bitterness they harbored about anything, Marianne never saw it.

She tried to keep that same spirit after they passed, but she couldn't. She was very much bitter and it only kept building. There was no specific crisis of faith moment where she decided to hell with believing, no back-sliding or Curse-God-and-die episode—it was just a very gradual falling away, like a marriage gone sour. You acknowledge that the other person still exists, maybe you even make him coffee and breakfast, fold and iron his clothes. But when you look at him it's with resentment. There's

no kissing to be had, no love to be made—not with any feeling anyway, and certainly without any passion.

For a while she even kept praying and going to church. Then it became slowly less and less until not at all. She could never embrace an atheistic or even agnostic stance—it was all too deep in her bones—but God became less the warm and comforting father of her youth who had big plans for her life, and instead a cold distant old man who liked to play cosmic roulette with her happiness.

Her surviving of the car crash had originally given her a new lease on life, a feeling of purpose that she had come so close to death and made it out alive. But it didn't last long.

When she got married, she thought things were looking up. She was actually very happy again for a brief time, and even went back to church with her new beau. Hindsight is twenty-twenty, but her ex-husband had been what she would call Christian-lite. And Marianne had been so focused on what they were supposed to do, what was expected of them as a couple, that she never noticed he had one foot outside the door their whole marriage. And then one day suddenly it was both feet, a gorgeous girl waiting at the doorstep to whisk him so willingly away.

Just like that he was gone, and all their plans with him. It was a strange feeling, like a dream you wake up from but feel an incredible need to return to because there was so much unfinished business, so

much left unsaid. Her husband gone, her parents gone—all ripped away just as her life seemed to be moving along at a steady, even pace, harming no one, minding its own business.

There's a particular poignancy to the good times in life when the end comes so swiftly and cruelly, be it violent death or adultery or whatever other sick game God in his sense of humor cooks up as a bet with the devil. There's an extra sting to think back on childhood memories aglow with familial love and togetherness, or the early days of a marriage abound with passion and promises. It's a nostalgia that hurts too much to dwell on. A song from that time, a restaurant, a television show, a cologne—any reminder is nearly unbearable.

There's something comfortable about romanticizing the past as if it truly was a better time. The world's gone mad now, but oh, how good we had it back in the day, how safe and warm we were.

It's an illusion. Marianne knew this. She had grown up in the tumult of nuclear proliferation, civil rights, Watergate, Vietnam and the great threat of communism. She was eleven years old when Kennedy was assassinated.

But there was something about that feeling of being someone's child, of family and home and hearth. You were cared for, you were okay. Even if the world was spinning out of control around you.

But one day suddenly you're thrust into it. You're on your own and you have to keep ahead of that spinning world, sprint when it speeds up and

jump the hurdles that seem to come out of nowhere—or else you lose your footing.

A part of Marianne still likes to believe her childhood home is right there as it used to be, her parents alive and waiting for her to come back for the holidays or the summers. Another part of her even believes that one day her ex-husband will show up at her door, laughing like it had all been a bad joke.

It's bad enough when it's gradual. A store that closes, a friend that moves away, the end of a summer break. You can rationalize that though, even with the depressing knowledge that you'll never get it back. But when it's just taken from you with no warning, in a blink, it's like you've been cheated, like you weren't even given a chance. At least with gradual change there's the illusion of choice, the illusion of closure.

One must find a way to move on.

There were two moments in her life when Marianne remembers being truly shell-shocked. One was lying on the hospital bed learning of the death of her parents, and the other was listening to her husband admit in the same breath that he had been cheating on her and was also leaving.

Both times it was a pain that felt like it would never end, followed by a numbness it seemed would last even longer.

Two moments.

This was the third.

FIFTEEN

At some point she stopped crying and just lay there numb, sprawled out recumbent in the corner of the elevator, Renni's cries still echoing in her head.

She stared without seeing as the elevator stopped on each floor, all the buttons she had hit during the attack. The doors would open, close, and then the car would move up to the next floor. A rhythmic whoosh, close, whoosh, close.

Finally it stopped.

It was the absence of the lulling noise that woke her out of it. Her eyes flicked briefly around the car,

rested on the floor indicator. She had reached the top: 65.

The lit-up buttons all went dark. The doors closed.

The elevator began to descend.

64...63...62...61...

She had to get up, had to stop it. Marianne lurched forward with some effort, hit 60, too late, hit several frantically...

59...58...

She stood up and the doors spilled open onto the fifty-eighth floor lobby.

Marianne stepped out heavily.

She stood there until she heard the doors close behind her. Then she turned around, wondering if she did the right thing. She heard the elevator continue its descent.

When she walked, she did so as if she was in a trance, dream-like.

This was a nightmare. Just a nightmare she was bound to wake up from at any minute. She would tell Renni about it in the morning.

She moved slowly across the lobby and opened a door. The cold hit her fast. She walked into the expansive unfinished dual suite of apartments where she had been only some hours ago. Playing the real estate agent.

You got off on the fifty-eighth floor with some gentleman this morning.

Mr. Manley.

The penthouse.

She would have to get to him. He could help her. Her steps felt at once light and heavy. For she felt nothing in her movements, yet it took strength to walk. Her head throbbed. She could feel her pulse in her bloody cheek.

She pressed on.

Darkness.

The muted city lights were all that illuminated the unfinished floor. The Chicago night filtered through the bare windows, plastic sheeting flapping violently in the wind.

Marianne could make out the dark piles of construction material. Drywall, lumber, bundles of plastic.

Everywhere there were shadows and hidden spaces.

She stepped through the skeletal framing of a future wall into another room. She stopped.

She heard something.

A ticking.

And ahead of her...

A light. A red light.

A large stack of lumber at the far end of the room seemed to glow red, a light source somewhere behind it.

Marianne scanned the room, the only noise above the ticking being the continuously flapping plastic, the tape coming loose at the corners of the sheeting.

She stepped slowly around the pile of lumber.

On the floor sat a portable space heater. The

electric coils glowed, a deep red.

But it had been turned off, the coils growing gradually dimmer, the ticking sound that of the unit cooling down.

It had been recently turned off. Very recently.

Marianne hunched over. She saw the disconnected plug next to a heavy orange extension cord. And on a small fold-up tray table nearby was an open bottle of red wine, a half-empty crystal wine glass, and a half-eaten sandwich. A folding chair sat next to the table.

Marianne stood back up, scanning the room again, shaking her head...

He couldn't have gotten up here so fast.

Yet all night he had moved impossibly quick. First from the mall to the security office, and now from the twenty-sixth floor to the fifty-eighth, time enough in there to settle down for a sandwich and a drink.

She looked above her, noticing the dark spaces and gaps in the unfinished ceiling tile. And she looked to her side, to a closet door, slightly ajar...

She kept her eyes on the door as she started to back up, edge closer to her exit, get the hell out of there...

She inched backwards over the wall framing to the first room. Her foot hit something and it toppled. She chanced a quick glance back and saw that it had been a bucket with a two by four on it. It clattered loudly as it hit the floor.

Marianne skipped a breath and locked her gaze

back on the closet door, waiting for the inevitable killer to burst forth...

He didn't.

And she remembered the dark shadows in the suite behind her, all the places to hide—

She took another quick look behind her, all that emptiness.

But no one came for her out of the darkness.

Not yet.

Back at the closet.

Still nothing—

And then he came.

From above.

The man in the dark overcoat descended from an open gap in the ceiling and landed square on his feet behind her. He was only a blur for less than a second before he grabbed her by the head and throat.

Marianne shrieked and squirmed but he had her. She waited for the knife, for the blade to shove its way through her back or into her throat.

She waited for death.

He hissed in her ear: "Who are you?"

She was so scared and so confused as to why she wasn't dead yet that all she could think to do was beg. "Please don't kill me!"

"Who—are you." He tightened his grip.

"I'm...I'm...Marianne...Marshall..." Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"What are you doing here?" He jostled her roughly.

With a whimper, she managed to blurt it out:

“Trying to hide from you!”

Suddenly she was free. And flying. He pushed her back into the unfinished second room. She landed hard against a stack of lumber. She let herself slide to the floor, and sat in a pitiful heap.

The man was there above her quick. “What are you talking about?” he snapped, crouching down before her. “Why are you hiding?”

Marianne’s head lolled around until her eyes rested on the man’s face. She hadn’t registered the question, possibly because this man was not the man who had killed Renni.

His black overcoat was similar, but that was it. This man was younger, somewhere in his thirties, with a full head of dark hair, and a hard face and hard eyes that made him, if not boyishly handsome, not unattractive.

“Who are you hiding from?” He grabbed her shoulders and shook her. “Who else is here?”

Marianne couldn’t help it. She let loose with the waterworks and lowered her head.

The man sighed. He gave her a moment, then gently took her chin in his hand, slowly lifting her face toward his. He saw the blood across her cheek, touched it lightly.

“Talk to me,” he said softly. He removed a tissue from his coat pocket, dabbed gently at the blood and tears on her face.

Marianne swallowed and took a few breaths. “The guards are dead,” she said. “My friend...is dead. The building is shut down. We’re trapped.”

“Dead?” the man said. “Where?”

“The twenty-sixth floor...”

His eyes wandered for a moment, and then he stood up, turned toward the doorway.

“Where are you going?” Marianne asked. She couldn’t handle being left by herself here, not after the tease of hope at suddenly finding out she wasn’t alone in all of this.

“You stay here,” he said. “I’ll be back.”

He was already halfway across the giant suite.

“Wait!” Marianne gathered her strength and got to her feet, started after him. “There’s a man in the penthouse who can help us!”

The man opened the door out to the lobby and shut it behind him.

“We’ve got to warn him!” Marianne said. She fell against the door and pulled at the knob. It wouldn’t budge. “Please don’t leave me!” She tried it again to no avail, hearing the sound of the elevator door opening and closing out in the lobby.

She groaned, pulling away from the door. She looked around. There had to be some other way out.

The wind whistled through the ripped corners of the plastic sheeting. The city heights seemed to reach in and taunt her. All that open space out there, all that city, and here she was with no way out.

SIXTEEN

The man stepped out of the elevator on the twenty-sixth floor and saw the large puddle of blood.

He reached inside the elevator to hold the doors. Looked back outside. Steaks of blood covered the walls, as well as the elevator next to his. There were large dents in the door.

What there wasn't, was a body.

Marianne sat on the folding chair before the tray table behind the stacks of lumber. She stared at the wine and the sandwich, feeling absolutely no hunger

or thirst at all, feeling quite sick at even the thought.

Renni's dying screams continued to ring in her head, a haunting song on repeat that she felt would never end.

She thought about Renni's boyfriend, Bob. Maybe he would get worried when she didn't call, and more worried when she didn't pick up at home.

Or maybe not. Maybe she didn't call every night, nor did he. They were still relatively new, talking about moving in together but still appreciating their own places, their own space, getting serious but also feeling each other out.

But it was a possibility. There was some hope that maybe Bob would show up looking for Renni and bring help, or that he would try to call the office and find that the phones did not work. A slim hope, but something.

Marianne thought about this other man, living up here, hiding. And then she remembered the security footage from Kappelmann's jewelry store. If this guy went up to the fifty-eighth floor during the day when the building was busy, of course he could have gone undetected by security sometime after nine p.m. when he left.

This guy right here was their jewel thief. He was the man she saw in the mall while the killer was downstairs in the security room.

Marianne rubbed her hands together, taking some residual warmth from the unplugged space heater. The ticking had stopped. All there was now was the persistent flapping of the window plastic.

Until another sound came from out in the lobby.
The elevator doors opened. The guy was back.
Marianne stood up, looking over the stack of
lumber to the far door that led to the lobby. A very
thin sliver of light showed underneath the door.

She heard the elevator doors close.

Marianne waited.

She waited a long time.

He wasn't coming back in.

But she heard footsteps. Slow, methodical.
Someone moving around outside in the lobby.
Someone unfamiliar with the floor, someone
searching...

A shadow played beneath the crack in the door.

One foot.

Then two.

Marianne could see the doorknob turning, even
from this distance. It turned slow. Whoever was on
the other side of that door was purposefully trying
not to make noise.

This was not the jewel thief.

And then the horrific thought: what if he and the
killer were working together?

She looked around. She had to hide somewhere
fast. And make not a sound doing it.

She looked over at the slightly ajar closet door.
Then back at the table with the wine and the
sandwich, the space heater on the floor which had
lost its red glow...

The door to the lobby—the knob turning the
other way now—slow—

Before the door flew open she was gone.

The killer burst in.

He waited at the threshold a long moment before stepping in further. The bloody knife was in his hand. He twirled it slowly by the handle.

The blade gleamed in the soft city light that hit it. It was a double-edged, wave-bladed dagger.

The silhouette of his dark overcoat played in the night-light of the windows as he glided into the unfinished floor: his large frame, knife at his side, grip tightening on the handle that he continued to turn slowly...

He navigated the piles of construction materials, walking toward the stack of lumber at the far end of the suite that only a minute ago had glowed red.

He stepped around it to the other side.

A small table lay on its side—and nothing more. Behind him was the closet door.

It was closed.

He turned and walked quickly toward it, grabbed the knob and tore it open—

Marianne wasn't there.

She was hanging off the edge of the building.

Her white-knuckled hands gripped the ledge of the window that she hung beneath, her body flush against the side of the building.

Her eyes were shut tight. The high-altitude wind howled, beating at her clothes and her hair. She tightened her grip, her palms and fingers still

popping beads of sweat in the bitter cold.

When the wind died down she could hear the late-night traffic of the city some five-hundred feet below.

She took a breath and tried not to think of exactly where she was right now.

But she was going to have to. Eventually she was going to have to climb back in. And with each second that passed she was losing strength.

She had to see if it was safe.

Marianne opened her eyes and tried to focus. She looked off to the side, just as another gust of wind came tearing around the building and beat down on her, swiping a tear horizontally across her face.

She saw the plastic-sheeted windows further down.

There.

A shadow.

The killer.

He was walking away, slow, scanning the room as he left.

Marianne swallowed, and in the briefest of accidental looks down, saw it all.

The city. The towers that surrounded her. The red and white dots that moved along the streets below. Could hear it too. The horns and engines. Distant sirens. The cry of seagulls lapping water over Lake Michigan.

She shut her eyes again and breathed, allowed herself two breaths before she began to pull herself

up.

She couldn't do it. She couldn't pull herself back in.

And her fingers were slipping...

She inched those fingers down a couple of inches, finding a new grip on a fresh piece of ledge. She had seen something else in the time her eyes were open. She opened them again.

Roughly twenty feet away was metal scaffolding that ran about ten floor lengths down the side of the building.

It was her only chance.

Oh God. Oh Jesus, please.

She started inching further along the ledge, her arm muscles burning, the tendons in her fingers ready to pop.

Her fingers hit bits of dirt and broken glass and nails along the way. Her skin tore. She started to bleed.

She opened her eyes again. She was close, almost there...

She swung one of her legs out. If she could just hook on to a piece of the scaffolding and pull herself over...

She swung her leg out again, and finally lost purchase with one of her arms. Her hand flew off the ledge. Four fingers on one hand were all that held her.

Just for a moment. She used the momentum of her leg swinging to get her grip back. She stayed there for a few seconds, breathing heavy, then kept

moving. She was just about—

The plastic sheeting tore open in front of her. A hand plunged through and grabbed her wrist—

Marianne screamed.

The killer towered above her, his face contorted in an ugly snarl as his other hand raised the knife—

She let herself drop.

Before the fear, before the sinking dread of inevitable death, there was a feeling of completely giving herself over, of letting herself go, of being truly free for the first time in her life.

Just for a second. Then it was only terror, as she rode the night in free-fall, the city a swirl of lights—

Her foot caught the edge of the metal piping on the scaffold. Her body swung into it in a wild arc, breaking the fall for just a moment—

She reached out wildly, bursting through more levels of scaffolding on her way down.

She hit one pipe hard in her midsection. It knocked the wind right out of her.

But it saved her life.

She was no longer falling.

She didn't take the time she wanted to catch her breath and thank precious Jesus. Her head shot right up to the window where the killer was—

He was gone.

Marianne wasn't going to wait for him. She dragged herself along the pipe, climbing the scaffolding toward whatever lower level of the building she landed on.

SEVENTEEN

The man Marianne knew as the jewel thief dodged the patch of wet paint in the subbasement and made his way down the long utility tunnel.

He opened the door to the security office.

Empty. The monitors blank.

He looked at the wall clock: 11:45.

He crossed the room, found one door that was another exit, and one that led to a small inner office. He crossed that room to a closet door, opened it.

The guards were in the closet.

And they were dead.

They hung by the collars of their suit jackets on coat hooks, their heads caved in, faces covered in blood.

He reached inside the guards' jackets and found their IDs. Esposito and McGrady. He also found their shoulder holsters. He removed the pistols, opened the chambers, and spun them.

No bullets.

He heard the meow of a cat as he searched the closet and the office for boxes of ammunition. There were none.

He frowned, grabbed the radios off the guards, and left.

Solid ground never felt so good to Marianne. She felt an odd high, a surreal and sudden lack of fear that showed in her poise and movements.

She thought about her life up until this night. She thought about all the books she ever read. The heroes in those books. Private eyes, gunslingers.

The world of those books had been her fantasy and escape for years. Ever since she was young. Something to make the most out of her remarkably uneventful life. For outside of her parents' sudden death and her husband leaving her, her life had always progressed as normally as one would come to expect. And even those things that had happened—a fatal car accident, infidelity, divorce—they were not unheard of, in fact did happen to a lot of people.

But this—this craziness tonight. Renni was dead. And now she was being hunted. It was not the

kind of thing that happened to her, a boring building manager with no social life, no husband, no family.

You hear the clichés all your life. Live every day as if it's your last, because you just might step outside and get hit by a bus. Sure it's possible, and Marianne knew that better than most. But chances are you'll be fine. Most likely you won't get hit by a bus, and every day will be the same as the one before it.

Yet these things happened. People did get hit by buses. She watched the news. She read the papers. It could happen to anyone.

She just had to survive. She had to be strong.

She didn't know when it was that she had become so boring, when she decided to always play it safe. Probably after her parents' death.

Because the Marianne Marshall of days old, youthful and energetic—she had been such a romantic, doe eyes wide with hopes and dreams.

Years ago she thought she could have it all, the dream job, the dream guy, dream family. She thought one day it would just happen, the way it happened for her parents.

But life happened, as it always did.

So really she should have known better. Really she shouldn't have been complaining about her humdrum life because she had brought it upon herself, got so scared when those big life events shook up the natural order of things that she fell hard into the comfort of routine and habit. Of safety. Because maybe then she could fool herself into believing

nothing bad would ever happen again.

But God, she used to have such dreams...

Marianne opened a fire door slowly and peered carefully around the corner of the stairwell to the lobby of the twenty-sixth floor. She saw the glass doors to the K&D offices.

She strode over to them and found them locked.

She remembered she had locked them on her way out with Renni. The second time.

Her keys, her purse—somewhere along the way she had lost them.

Marianne sighed, looked around, and grabbed the standing metal ashtray at the end of the elevator bank.

She got a running start and then hurled it into the glass doors.

The can burst through, leaving the perfect shape of itself in the glass, the rest of the door frosted and fractured but remarkably still upright.

Marianne grabbed the handle. With a couple of shakes, the rest of the glass fell and the doorway was open.

She walked straight to the key cubby on the wall and rifled through the sets inside. She found the one marked PH and pocketed it. She stopped quickly by the bathroom to wash her hands, the cut fingers, giving her battered face only a cursory glance. She saw that her gray jacket was torn at the shoulder.

On her way out she stopped briefly at Renni's desk. She tried the phone again, punching different lines. Still nothing. She glanced at the wall clock:

TRAPPED

12:20. She set the receiver back down as her eyes rested on the top desk drawer.

She pulled it open and saw the Binaca-like canister.

Marianne grabbed it and left.

EIGHTEEN

She tried not to stare at the puddle of blood in the lobby.

Renni's body was gone, but the streaks of blood, the spray and the spatter, were all over the walls and elevator doors. She thought about the jewel thief working with the killer, and wondered if he had left to hide the body.

Marianne hesitated, then pushed the button pointing up. The dented elevator doors opened immediately. She took a breath and stepped in.

Her purse was in the corner beneath the control

buttons. She quickly picked it up and checked her belongings. The thought came to her that the killer may have been in this elevator. He could have rooted through her wallet, found her license...

She checked it. It was still there.

She breathed easy for only a moment before she realized he still could have seen it, could have written down her address or even memorized it.

She couldn't think about that right now. She had to keep moving.

Marianne took the key out of her pocket and put it in a panel above all the floor buttons. She turned it and was on her way up.

After 65, the floor indicator reached PH and the elevator stopped. The doors opened. Marianne stepped out into the penthouse.

The living quarters of NTX CEO Jerrold Manley.

The elevators had opened on the expansive living room. It was dark. Only the city lights made their way in, sweeping views of the high Chicago night outside floor-to-ceiling windows. It was an ultra-modern loft apartment, very little in the way of personal touch. All was clean and impeccably organized.

She took a step over the hardwood floor to the spotless white rug that covered most of the room. It swallowed her footfalls, kept her quiet.

"Mr. Manley?" she whispered.

He was probably asleep. And she wouldn't get too far looking around for him down here. She

crossed the room to the stairs and slowly made her way up.

There was a hallway upstairs, doors on one side. She stayed on the carpet that lined the hall as she crept her way down. All of the doors were closed. She opened each of them just a hair and looked in.

One door was wide open. It was at the very end of the hall. She stood in the doorway and peered in. It was a large study, lined with books, a large mahogany desk, wingback chairs.

Someone was moving at the desk.

A large figure sat hunched over in the plush leather chair, rustling papers.

Marianne exhaled in relief. Jerrold Manley. Working late. Burning the proverbial midnight oil—even though...even though it was completely dark...

“Mr. Manley...”

Marianne stepped softly into the room. The figure at the desk was ripping papers now.

She stopped.

And all that relief flooded right back out of her.

For the figure at the desk was not Jerrold Manley.

In fact it took her a moment to register just what she was looking at, and another moment to accept it. The figure’s movements were so unnatural, that not only was she certain it was not Mr. Manley, she also became suddenly aware that it was not human.

It was a baboon.

Confusion overrode the fear at first, a cognitive dissonance at the completely ridiculous presence of

such an animal here. In the city. In Mr. Manley's office.

But then the fear came back just as quick. She stared at the baboon, paralyzed in equal parts terror and fascination. It just sat in the chair, a massive female with bright red and blue striping on its face.

Then Marianne noticed that a portion of its head was missing, a gleaming metal cube attached to its skull.

And then she understood. It was one of the lab animals from downstairs.

But how the hell did it get up here?

It hadn't noticed Marianne yet. She stayed dead still as suddenly it jumped atop the desk with a growl, tearing pages out of a datebook.

Marianne eyed an adjacent doorway, could make out the shape of a bed inside.

The baboon saw her.

It emitted a low, snarling growl, baring its teeth.

She inched slowly toward the bedroom, no sudden movements. She reached the dark doorway, stepped in slowly.

Her foot hit something on the floor and she tripped.

The baboon squealed atop the desk as she fell back to the floor of the bedroom.

She stared into the lifeless face of Jerrold Manley.

Marianne quickly rolled off the corpse, holding in a scream. The baboon was howling, going wild atop the desk but basically staying put. It returned its

focus to the datebook.

Marianne looked back at Manley's body. His nightshirt was soaked in blood. Wet, fresh.

She recognized the wave-bladed knife of the killer that had been buried in Manley's chest, nearly up to the hilt. A blood-soaked newspaper clipping, still largely readable, was pinned to his chest along with the blade.

It was a picture of Manley surrounded by lawyers and reporters, a subtle yet smug smile on his face. And underneath:

NTX NOT GUILTY

Federal Judge Exonerates Chemical Company

Marianne's eyes moved, thinking, barely processing this before she heard the laughter.

Dark, low laughter—coming from right next to her.

She barely moved when she looked up it was so close. She was frozen, her blood cold.

But there was no one.

It happened again. A sinister snickering, mad.

Even the baboon heard it. Marianne saw it look up from the desk. And that was when her eyes found the intercom beside the doorway. A slotted metal plate over a speaker, a toggle switch below—set in the 'on' position.

There was a distant rustling of movement from somewhere. Not from the baboon.

The killer was still in the penthouse.

She had to move. Marianne grabbed the handle of the knife in Manley's chest. It was stuck. She reeled back as she heard the sickly wet sound it made in his flesh. But she put it out of her mind and gave it some serious elbow grease, prying it loose from his chest.

She stood silently to her feet, tracing quickly back through the study past the distracted baboon, and out into the hallway. She glided down, heels on the carpet.

At the foot of the stairs, she stopped.

The living room stretched out in its entirety below, the elevator doors open.

The killer—he knew she was here. He would be waiting below.

She could run for it, skip steps, sprint across the living room, catch the elevator—plus she had the knife now—

Unless—unless he was on the elevator—

And even if he wasn't, those doors would take time to close. He could easily jump out of some hiding place, charge his way in and kill her.

Marianne just stood there, thinking.

And suddenly the elevator doors slid shut.

She decided to stay upstairs, backing away down the hallway, crossing into another smaller one at the end. She crept down it, listening. Where the hell was he?

At a closed door she stopped, opening it gently. It was an extra bedroom. She ducked inside, feeling the wall beside the doorway for the intercom. She

found it, flipped the toggle switch, and listened...

Nothing. A static silence.

She flipped it off and softly closed the door, continuing quietly down the hallway. She reached the back stairs and took them. They led to the kitchen. Granite countertops with lots of space. Under-mounted sink. Butcher-block island in the center with a hanging rack above for pots and pans. There was the low hum of the fridge, the sudden soft crackle of the freezer making ice.

Marianne moved quietly over the hardwood floor with stone inlay. The killer could be hiding around the corner somewhere in the living room, still waiting for her to come down the other stairs. If he heard her in here...

There was a fire door on the opposite wall. She held the knife poised as she slowly turned the knob, squeezing out the door and closing it behind her, extremely gentle.

The bright lights were a harsh contrast to the darkened apartment. Same with the windowless building stairwell, so sterile after leaving a fully furnished home.

There were no steps going up. She was already at the topmost level. She avoided looking down the center to see sixty-five flights worth of steps and railings. The heights were child's play compared to what she'd already been through, but still.

She took the stairs.

Her heels clicked loudly on the concrete steps, creating an awful echo. She stopped, took them off,

and continued, moving fast and quiet down several flights.

But then suddenly she slowed...and stopped.

She heard something.

Footsteps.

Distant, but moving fast.

The killer—

She looked back up the flights. He must have heard her in the kitchen, knew she left out that door—

But she saw nothing.

And the footsteps were getting louder.

She looked down. Now she couldn't tell where they were coming from. And she still couldn't see anyone.

She continued down two more flights, listened.

Closer still—but where—

She ran back up two flights, stopped. It was impossible to tell, the echo was everywhere—

The door on the landing next to her said “58.” She ran to it, grabbed the knob—locked. She ran up two more flights, to the landing with the door marked “59”, the footfalls so close now, so loud, almost on her—

Her eye caught something while looking at the door.

There was white tape across the door catch, barely noticeable.

Marianne tried the knob.

The door opened.

But she hesitated, almost stepping through the

doorway but instead deciding at the last second to open the door wide and hide behind it—still in the stairwell.

She waited, the footsteps quickening, approaching the door, on the landing—

They stopped on her level.

Marianne waited for them to continue through the doorway.

They didn't.

She held her breath. She could hear the other person's breathing.

And suddenly the door swung back—

She pressed the trigger on Renni's Binaca-style canister and sprayed it directly into the man's face—

The jewel thief.

"Agh!" he cried, falling back, swiping the canister from Marianne's hand.

Marianne took a step forward with the knife.

"Damn it!" the man said, rubbing his watering eyes. "What the hell are you trying to do? Blind me with some cheap perfume?"

Marianne raised the dagger. "You told him where I was!"

The man looked at the knife, looked at her. "He found you?"

"I'll use this!" The blade quivered as her hand shook.

The man took a step forward.

"Stop!" she said.

The man opened his overcoat, exposing his shirted chest. He wore a blue button-up and black

tie. "Go for it," he said.

Marianne breathed through her nose, lips pursed.

"You and him both here on the same night," she said. "You expect me to believe that's some kind of coincidence? What was the plan? Steal the jewelry and kill anyone in your way?"

The man spoke slowly. "You've got this wrong. I don't know what you think—"

"Shut up." Marianne thrust the knife forward a hair. She was finally able to steady her hand. One swift move and she could plunge it into his throat.

The man stared at the knife and then back at her.

"I didn't tell anybody anything," he said. "I didn't. I swear."

Marianne searched his eyes. She wanted so desperately to believe him, to have a friend in all of this. But she wouldn't let hope overtake good sense. She studied his face a long time before she made her decision.

She knew he could have easily grabbed her and taken the knife in all that time. But he let her take her time, let her think she was in control. And she appreciated that.

Slowly she lowered the knife. The man let his coat fall back.

"Come on," he said.

Marianne went through the doorway and the man followed her into the fifty-ninth floor. She noticed him peel the tape off the catch and crumple it into his pocket before he let the door fully close.

They were on the first of seven solo NTX floors.

This one was administrative. Rows of desks and offices were before them as they stood just inside the doorway.

“Tell me what happened,” the man said.

“Who are you?” Marianne asked, staring at this man in full light now as he studied his surroundings with the eyes of a professional thief.

“It doesn’t matter.” He didn’t look at her.

“It does matter!”

His hard eyes swung back to her. “I’m not asking *you*.”

Marianne sighed. “The man in the penthouse is dead. The killer is still up there...I think.”

“Does he have a gun?”

“I don’t know. Do you?”

“No.”

Marianne took a second to think. “There’s only one other person in this building who could still be alive,” she said. “It’s a security guard who only works these seven floors.”

“If he’s armed, let’s find him,” he said. “If not, then the hell with him.”

“Oh, he’ll be armed.”

Marianne turned to lead the way.

“Wait a minute,” the man said.

Marianne turned. The man removed two walkie-talkies from his coat pocket.

Her face fell. She looked into his eyes. “You found the men downstairs?”

“Take one,” he said. “We can move faster if we split up.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I’m not going to be alone again.”

Marianne regretted the words as soon as she said them. Even though she meant it, she wasn’t pathetic, and she wasn’t weak, and she wasn’t about to come across that way. She just didn’t want to be alone.

He looked at her. His hard eyes grew gentle. It wasn’t a look of pity; he could just tell she’d been through a lot.

He raised the walkie-talkie. “Take it anyway.”

She took it, dropping it into her purse.

“What’s your name?” Marianne asked.

“John,” he said.

They walked deeper into the floor, past some desks and cubicles to a corridor of offices in the back.

“John? I’m Marianne. I’m real glad you’re here, John.”

NINETEEN

They emerged some time later back into the stairwell on the landing outside the door marked "59." No guard on this level.

John poked his head out to listen before he stepped through with Marianne behind him. He let the door catch silently and lock.

They stood quiet for a moment, listening. Marianne pointed up, and they made their way to the sixtieth floor.

She still held the dagger in one hand as she pulled at the doorknob with the other. This door was

locked. She looked at John.

He stepped in front of her and removed a shim from his coat pocket, working some magic and opening the door.

Marianne smirked, though inside she was grateful. Sometimes she felt that her straight life was a disservice, like for all her years of education and accomplishments, there was little she learned that was actually useful to real life situations. Though she didn't have a criminal mind, maybe it would be a useful thing to know how to pick a lock, hotwire a car, jimmy a car lock from the outside, use a firearm, do martial arts.

Even knowing that she'd probably never have to use those skills, she would feel safe knowing that she was at least prepared. But she wasn't. And she felt useless.

They let the door close softly behind them as they emerged onto a darkened level that was all laboratory, a spacious chamber shrouded in bluish nightlights. There was the soft hum of idling machinery. Test tubes and beakers. Shelves with files. Data processing equipment and radios. Drums labeled POISON. Glass-doored refrigerators with samples in jars and bottles.

Any door that wasn't locked, John opened, giving quick looks into bathrooms, closets, offices.

"What are you doing?" Marianne whispered.

"If the guard's dead," John said, "he doesn't leave his victims out in the open."

John kept looking, Marianne keeping watch.

John opened another door, flicked the light switch.

There was the wild squeal of a free baboon as it pounced off of a table straight at them.

John closed it just in time to hear it thump against the back of the door, growling and kicking.

A man's voice rang out: "Who's there?"

Marianne and John quickly looked around for a place to hide, diving beneath a long lab table that one could peer out of from underneath.

A flashlight beam cut through the darkness of the lab ahead, right at the end of a row of tables. From a back hall, a security guard emerged, sweeping his flashlight across the area.

He was a young guy, late twenties maybe, handsome, with a crew cut. He looked fresh out of the service and had that kind of a build. Two more freed baboons were next to him at the end of the lab. One jumped on a table and knocked over a glass beaker, shattering it.

"What the—" The guard pointed the flashlight at the baboons.

John saw the holster on the guard's belt, the gun inside. He slowly began to rise from behind the table, holding his arms up above his head. The guard moved his beam away from the baboons and began another sweep.

The beam rested on John.

Before either of them could speak, a flash of darkness flew out of the other side of the back hall—a large man in a dark overcoat—wielding a baseball

bat—

The bat slammed hard into the guard's side. The guard dropped the flashlight and hunched over, groaning.

John dove back under the table with Marianne.

The killer didn't wait long, driving the bat down onto the back of the guard's head.

The guard crumpled to the side, falling atop a small table. The baboons shrieked, running toward the other end of the lab where Marianne and John hid.

The guard was a fighter, and attempted to get up. But he faltered, and began to scream loudly as the killer brought the bat down across his chest. His agonizing cries did not drown out the sound of breaking ribs. Marianne gasped, his screams becoming Renni's. John put his hand over her mouth and held her close to him.

The bat connected with the guard's face. He stopped screaming and his body twitched. One more strike to the head and he moved no longer.

The body slid to the floor. The killer stood over him, breathing heavy.

The baboons were making noise close to Marianne and John, one of them squatting right beside their desk. The killer picked up the guard's flashlight and searched the apes out, sweeping the room.

Marianne and John stayed still in their hiding spot. Neither the killer nor the baboons found them.

The killer bent over the guard's body and began

dragging it behind the corner of the hall from which he had emerged.

Marianne and John were silent for a long time. They sat still, kneeling.

“You okay?” John asked finally, whispering.

Marianne nodded.

They waited another long moment. Finally John got up, slowly. Marianne followed.

The baboons ignored them as they walked slowly down the lab, past the aisle of desks to the back where it branched off.

There was a smear of blood on the floor where the guard’s body had been dragged. It hadn’t been moved far. It lay behind another desk in the corner.

They knelt over the corpse, John going for the service weapon fitted on the belt. Marianne noticed another newspaper clipping. It was across the guard’s chest, his hand weighing it down. In this photograph, NTX security guards wielded batons against a seething crowd. The caption: *NTX Goons Battle Angry Mob*.

Marianne imagined the poetic justice sought after here. But this was guard just a kid, had probably still been in his teens when the whole mess with the chemical plant and the protests happened. He had nothing to do with this. Just like Renni. Guilty by association.

John opened the cylinder on the guard’s revolver, opened his palm to receive the bullets.

There were none.

“Son of a bitch,” he whispered.

Neither of them noticed the empty spot on the guard's belt where the walkie-talkie should have been.

John took a quick glance around and helped Marianne up. He started leading her away, back down the hall and through a swinging door.

Inside it was pitch black. John kept it that way. He asked Marianne, "Where can I find a gun?"

"What?" It was her first time speaking since the attack. She had to find her voice again.

"You seem to know this building. Where can I find a gun?"

She didn't like not seeing him, not after all that just happened. The complete darkness was disorienting. "I don't know," she said. "Can't we turn the lights on?"

"No."

"What if there's another one of those apes in here?"

"You'd know it by now."

"Look, I don't even know where we are."

"We're in the men's room."

"Could you just turn the lights on, please?"

"It'll show underneath the door."

"Please."

John turned the lights on, just for a moment. Enough for Marianne to make out where John was, and see that they were alone.

"Okay?" John asked.

"Thank you."

Silence for a moment.

John said, “He’s probably on his way down now, thinking he’s going to leave. In a few minutes he’s going to discover that he can’t, that he’s trapped in this building just like we are.” He paused. “Then he’s going to come looking for you.”

Marianne had to think for a moment to understand what he was talking about. It didn’t make sense. “Wait a minute,” she said. “He’s the one who invaded the security system to begin with.”

There was a long pause.

“No,” John said, “he isn’t.”

Marianne let this register. When it did, her sigh was part bitter laugh. She didn’t get it. All of this for jewelry? Of all the stores and all the malls—why choose this massive building when there were so many easier targets?

And Renni dead because of it all.

There was more silence. Finally Marianne heard a sound like a spattering stream, or trickling water.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“What does it sound like I’m doing? Now’s as good a time as any if you’ve got to.”

“No, thank you.”

John finished, zipped himself back up. “We’re all stuck here until six o’clock. There’s nothing I can do about that.”

“So we’ll hide,” Marianne said. “He’ll never find us. Not before morning. This building is too big.”

She felt John move closer to her. He washed his hands quietly with the faucet set to a low stream.

“You can be alone now?” he said.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m not hiding with you. I’m going after him.”

“But...why?”

“Because if he gets away and I get caught, then all those bodies are on me.”

“But I’m here,” Marianne said. “I can tell them you didn’t do it.”

There was another long pause. John’s voice was grave: “If you survive.”

He opened the door, a dim stream of light coming in. He glanced out into the lab and then back at Marianne.

“Watch out for those baboons,” he said. “They can kill a man.”

John left. The door swung shut. Marianne heard one of the animal’s muffled cries, sounding like the jungle.

She sighed. “Oh fine,” she muttered.

And she left too.

TWENTY

David Tennon returned to his desk in the back of the District One stationhouse with a second cup of coffee and a few Tums.

His digestive system didn't agree with the third shift life. The hours were a young man's game. And of course the coffee didn't help matters. But he needed it.

He had Homicide's files about Julian Maxwell in a mess across his desk. He was hoping a break would have done him some good. A little while back he had stood outside the building, brooding like an

old-fashioned movie detective, smoking the rare cigarette he allowed for himself on cases like this, and tried to clear his head.

But nothing seemed clearer when he came back. He had been hoping for another movie detective moment where from out of all that paperwork a name or some information would jump out at him with all the bells and whistles. Clue right here! Killer!

Homicide's files were all pretty cursory stuff, nothing at all that dug back into the NTX chemical plant days. The case was a stone-cold whodunit. The killer was a ghost. Physical evidence, witnesses, confession—the trinity of putting a case down—were nowhere to be found.

All that was unique was a note in the autopsy report about the knife used to stab Maxwell to death. It was a very specific, wave-bladed dagger, not at all with the typical curves one would find on a kitchen knife or a hunting knife. Homicide had tried recreating the exact shape to track the purchase, but came up empty.

But find that knife, and it was a fair bet that the owner was the killer.

Tennon had to wonder, if this did have something to do with the plant, why would the killer have waited this long?

He spent more time in his own old files, and notes from others back during that time. Field interview cards of suspects who threatened the company, and known rabble-rousers during the

protests. Arrest reports of those who were actually brought in. Those with family that got sick or died.

He ran through histories at the computer terminal on his floor. Over the course of a few hours he came up with a small handful of names that could fit the bill. Arrest report. F.I. card. Known threats. Sick family.

It was a long shot. Tennon doubted a connection. But if he worked it hard enough, maybe that transfer would still be there for him regardless of the case being put down or not. Day shift, Homicide.

He doubted it. An old partner from years ago, long since retired, used to tell him to just keep his head down and put in a clean twenty years. The department will use you up like a number two pencil, he liked to say. Don't be a hero.

But all ambitions aside, Tennon liked the job enough to put in the effort regardless of what they did. There were still leads—like the newspaper clipping found with Maxwell's body. Clear focus on NTX, the chemical plant, Maxwell's involvement.

And that newspaper clipping stopped him. Big-time Justice Department lawyer Harvey McKenna had not mentioned the clipping found at the scene when they talked, and he seemed to know everything about the case already.

If McKenna's theory about an inside job was correct, there would have been no need for that newspaper clipping. Unless it was meant to divert attention, make everyone think it was a revenge

play. Possible, though to Tennon it still seemed too out there.

From underneath all his papers, he pulled out the thick file McKenna had given him on NTX's private security guys. A big federal seal with fancy insignias that read CLASSIFIED stared up at him.

Tennon sighed, took another sip of coffee, and opened the file.

TWENTY-ONE

If John wanted a gun, she'd get him a gun.

They rode the escalator from the ground floor lobby down into the galleria, squatting on the steps to avoid sticking out. The piped-in Muzak floated up to meet them from below. To Marianne it sounded like the soundtrack to a previous life. It filtered softly through the empty corridors of the shopping mall, mingling with the rush of the running fountains.

The stuff on now had a real vintage sound to it, and brought to mind images soaked in a sepia-toned

nostalgia. Stock postcard photos of every hometown Main Street in America. Real Norman Rockwell stuff. When families took drives on Sundays, when people dressed up to go shopping. It sounded like her childhood, going to Goldblatt's or Marshall Field's with her mother, hearing the shuffle of housewife heels and Montovani's violins. It sounded like malls were supposed to sound before they became dumping grounds for punk teenagers.

And jewel thieves.

She knew why the music sounded like that, and she had only herself to blame. For in choosing the background music, she mixed in with the contemporary jazz a lot of the old stuff too. Shuffled into the playlist were all of the Muzak Stimulus Progression albums that malls and department stores were beginning to phase out these days in favor of a newer sound.

It brought her back, and hearing it tonight stirred an ache within her so unbearable she could suddenly barely walk, had to focus intensely on the salmon, teal, and tan tiles that dotted the floor, a path mapped out for the mall walkers.

Marianne sighed and shook her head.

John looked over at her. "I'm sorry for what we had to see up there."

"It's not that. It's...the music."

"The music?" For the first time, John paid attention to it.

"It's nothing, it's just...tonight it sounds so...lonely? I don't know. Nostalgic is the word I

want to say, but it doesn't really *say* it."

John nodded slowly. After a few seconds, he said, "Saudade."

"I'm sorry?"

"Saudade," John said. "It's a Portuguese word. It's like nostalgia, but more... profound. Like a deep longing, for someone or something that you love. Something that's never going to return."

Marianne thought about that. She looked into John's eyes. "Yeah. That's it exactly."

She wanted to talk about it some more, but it wasn't the time or the place. When she saw the sign for Gold Piece, Kappelmann's jewelry shop, she led John across the hall to the sporting goods store.

"They've got guns," she said.

John looked through the glass doors and examined the lock. He looked at Marianne. "It's double-bolted from the inside. There's nothing I can do."

Marianne threw her arms up. John continued down the hall, glancing in store windows.

Marianne walked to the center of the hall and picked up a standing metal ashtray. She'd had some practice, so with good form she ran up to the store and pummeled it into the glass, shattering it completely.

John spun around and looked at her with wide eyes.

"I'm getting pretty good at this," Marianne said.

John walked quickly through the busted glass into the store. Marianne followed. She didn't need to

point out the gun rack on a far wall. John saw it. They navigated through shoes and sportswear and down the aisle to the guns.

They were locked in a glass case. John took a swift jab at the glass with his elbow and it broke. The rifles and shotguns were secured by a thick metal wire running down the case through the trigger guard on each weapon. He pulled at it and found a Yale lock that held the long wire in place.

He looked around and then quickly ran back to the front of the store. He grabbed the standing ashtray and ran back. Marianne got out of the way.

John began pounding the lock, over and over until it finally gave way.

He slid a double-barreled shotgun off the end of the wire and opened it, checking the barrels. He looked at Marianne.

“It’s unloaded. I need shells.”

“Probably in the safe,” she said. “They’re supposed to be locked up separately. It’s state law.”

“Where is it?”

Marianne led him through the outdoor department to the back of the store. A door marked ASSOCIATES ONLY was locked. She stepped out of the way so John could do his thing with the shim.

Instead he just kicked in the door, busting the wood at the jam.

Marianne shrugged. They entered, walking briskly down a narrow corridor lined with tiny lockers. There was a bathroom and a manager’s office along the way. In the very back next to a fire

door, there was a floor safe that took up one corner.

John rushed up to it, quickly looked it over, then turned to Marianne, exasperated. "I can't open this!" He threw his hands up.

Marianne didn't understand. "You're a thief, aren't you?"

"I'm not prepared! It takes a key and a combination. You don't just put on a stethoscope and twirl the dial!"

"Then how were you going to get the jewelry?"

"I didn't come here for jewelry."

John turned to the fire door and pushed his way out into the back utility hallway. Marianne grabbed the shotgun and followed him.

John leaned against a wall in the concrete space, brooding. Marianne set the shotgun against the wall and stared him down. "What *did* you come here for?"

John looked at her for a long time. He sighed. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a stack of floppy disks. Each bore the NTX insignia with the swirling orbit.

"Industrial secrets," he said. "They're a lot more valuable."

Marianne's mind raced. She thought of the tape on the door catch in the stairwell, placed strategically on one of the NTX floors. Their administrative offices. John had pocketed the tape when they went in; he had already known it was there.

"You'd been up there already?" Marianne said.

“Obviously.”

“And the apes?”

John nodded. “They were a diversion.”

Marianne sighed. She was doing a lot of that tonight.

“What about the phones?” she said.

John crossed his arms. “They’re gonna need some repair work.”

Marianne laughed and shook her head. “I take it back. I am *not* glad you’re here. You picked a hell of a night for this.”

“Bad luck,” John said.

“That’s one thing you could call it.”

“Look,” John said, “by six o’clock the doors’ll be open. By nine o’clock this building will be full of people. Office workers, shoppers. I could have walked out of here and nobody even the wiser. At least not for awhile.”

Marianne kept shaking her head.

“And if it makes any difference to you,” John said, “I don’t believe in ripping off individuals.”

“You think taking those disks is different? That it doesn’t hurt people on the way down?”

John snickered. “You think NTX cares about the everyman? You think they care about you? They care about their shareholders.”

“Spare me the Robin Hood logic. A good friend of mine is dead because we couldn’t get out of this place, because *you* decided to shut it down.”

John looked ready to speak, but quickly shut his mouth. He looked away and was silent for a

moment.

When he finally spoke, he did so quietly. “I am sorry about that. Truly.”

When Marianne finally looked at him, he was looking at her softly, sincere. He didn’t shy away from her gaze.

“And I’m no Robin Hood,” he said. “The world is changing. Business is changing. Look around you. You think guys like Jerrold Manley don’t already know this? It’s the information age, but the world out there is stuck in industrial age thinking. Study hard in school, work hard all your life, retire with hopefully a few pennies to your name on a fixed salary. Sorry. Not for me. This recession we’re in now, this savings and loan crisis? The signs are all there. When GM or Sears and Roebuck suddenly start struggling, when NTX does too, people will have the nerve to be surprised. People who put their trust in men and companies who don’t care about them, or in manufacturing industries they expected to last forever. You have to take a few risks in this life, invest smartly instead of blindly dumping your money into mutual funds and sitting around waiting for social security, complaining you never have enough time, or you’re being raped by taxes, or you can never get ahead in life.” John sighed. “I don’t have to explain myself to you. Just don’t talk to me about morality. I’m talking about personal ethics. I have a code. It’s important for a man to have that. We both saw the newspaper clipping back there on that guard...”

“What?”

“We both know the blood NTX has on their hands, whether they were cleared for it or not. Whoever this psycho with the Louisville slugger is, he’s a consequence of the sins of this company.”

“And what,” Marianne said, “so are you? Does that make it right if you pick and choose the companies you steal from? You get to be the judge?”

“A man has to have a code,” John said.

“Whatever that means.” Marianne shook her head.

“Look,” John said, “whether I’m here tonight or not, the days of NTX are numbered. They may have won their case with the chemical plant all those years ago, but it hasn’t gotten the Feds off their back. It just made them angrier. I have it on good knowledge that they’re still being closely monitored. They may not be dumping toxic waste anymore, but there are still questionable business practices the SEC and IRS are very interested in.”

“How do you know all this?”

“It’s good for a man to know his business.”

“Who you do work for? Government? A competitive firm?”

“I work for myself.”

Marianne smirked. “You know, all this talk doesn’t make you sound dark or mysterious, it just makes you sound like a jackass. What kind of work?”

“You ask too many questions.”

“Well, I deserve it. If this is your moonlighting

gig, what's your day job? Your legit work."

John frowned. "I'm a consultant."

"A consultant. Well. That explains everything."

"I'm an accountant, of sorts," John said. "I have particular skills. And I'm very good at them. I can recognize market patterns. I can read the tax returns of wealthy people and corporations who think they're untouchable but like to evade their taxes. And oftentimes I'm hired for my skillset. So I have a lot of connections, public and private."

"So what, like, inside information?"

"Competitive intelligence. Above board. Completely legal."

"But."

"But, sometimes I use what I know for my own benefit, like tonight. Sell secrets to competitors and funnel certain information to the Feds. And it helps when those companies are one and the same."

Marianne stared at him and shook her head. She mocked him: "I got skills. I got connections." Maybe she was just feeling a little silly at this point, up so late past her bedtime, stuck in all these surreal situations.

"The point is," John said, "I'm going to grab something for myself before NTX goes down. Whether it be months from now, or years. And with their history, I'm not going to lose any sleep over it."

"And you don't think there'll be consequences?" Marianne said. "For *your* sins?"

John looked off pensively for a moment. "I'm

sure there will be,” he said.

Marianne stared at him a long time. “You’re not so different from this guy,” she said. “He probably has a code too. He just believes in violence.”

“Well, for the record,” John said, “I don’t believe in violence.”

“You don’t have a code, you just have a line you won’t cross.”

“Don’t we all?”

Marianne shrugged. She picked up the shotgun. “Do you believe in bluffing?”

“No. You never bluff a big winner or a heavy loser.”

“He doesn’t even have a gun,” Marianne said.

“We just haven’t seen it,” John said. “Only an idiot would come in here and do what he did without a gun.” He shrugged. “An idiot or a madman.”

They stared at each other for a moment, then walked far down the utility hall, back toward the front of the mall and the escalators.

The rest of the mall stayed quiet. Just smooth jazz and running fountains—a marriage of ambiance playing across the abandoned corridors. Neon buzzed faintly. The city night filtered through the skylights from the concourse level above.

Felix the cat’s meow was all that disturbed the tranquility. Off a side hall, he limped past the eateries and pastel chairs of the food court and turned down the next corridor. He navigated carefully over the broken glass in front of the

sporting goods store, making his way in.

TWENTY-TWO

Marianne and John rode the escalator back up to the spacious ground floor lobby. The plaza sat right there outside, taunting them on all sides from thick-paned windows that went floor to high ceiling.

They took a quick look around. They were alone.

Marianne saw a few cars passing on the street far out across the concourse. She ran up to the glass and banged her hands on it. For all the lights, the city was fairly desolate, even the Loop. The cars disappeared.

She took out a rarely used lipstick from her purse and spelled HELP in large letters across the glass, trying to form the letters' mirror image for anyone outside to see.

Marianne leaned against the glass and buried her head against her arm. "Why do I live here? This city is dead!" She threw her lipstick to the floor. She felt a strong desire to break out in tears, fought against it.

"What'd you expect?" John said. "Mardi gras? It's only about ten degrees out there. It's also three A.M."

Marianne found another standing ashtray before a railing that looked down to the galleria. She took a running start and hurled it with all her might at the window, right at the NTX logo.

It bounced off the glass without even making a crack, tumbling loudly to the floor.

"You like to make noise, don't you?" John said.

Marianne glared at him, panting.

"You'd never break that in a million years," John said. "And even if you did, the falling glass would cut you in half."

Marianne continued to breath heavy. "What if we start a fire? Someone might see it."

"With what? Marble? Nothing down here burns."

Marianne looked around, saw that he was right. "What about an upper floor?"

"Ceilings are too low. The sprinklers would put it out before you could get it started."

"It might set off an alarm."

“Not tonight.”

Marianne sighed. “Isn’t there anything we can do?”

John looked at her. She didn’t like the look.

“Sure,” he said, “if you’re willing to act as bait.”

Marianne stood silent, glancing away for a moment.

John continued: “He doesn’t know about me yet.”

Marianne stared at him.

“Otherwise,” John said, “just give me the knife, and go hide somewhere.”

“I thought you didn’t like violence.”

“I said I didn’t *believe* in it,” he said. “I never said I didn’t like it.”

Marianne watched his face, studying him closely, this thief, this spy, whoever he was. There was something dangerous about him, but while his face and his eyes were hard, they were genuine. She felt confident that he had only ever been honest with her. He wasn’t a free giver of information, but he wasn’t a liar.

She walked up to John and shoved the shotgun into his hand. Then she saw something in her periphery. Outside the glass across the plaza.

“Look!”

John turned and looked out the window with her. The NTX building was reflected in the glass of the high-rise across the street.

Lights were coming on from an upper floor.

And the lights on the seven floors beneath the

darkened penthouse were already on.

John thought out loud: "He's working his way down."

"He's fast," Marianne said.

"He's careless." John almost smiled. "That's good." He kept staring out the window as Marianne walked over to the elevator bank. If she could get back up to her office and get the master keys to the building, they'd have access anywhere. That would help move things along. And she could actually be helpful, useful. She pressed the call button.

A second later she heard John's running footsteps as he came charging up with the shotgun, his eyes wide. "What the hell are you doing?!"

"I'm going back to my office."

"On the elevator?!"

Marianne stepped back, looking at him like, what the hell?

"There's only two elevators that operate in this building after eight o'clock!" he said. "I want to find somebody. What do I do? I call both elevators to my floor. I stop one of them, I get in the other and I ride it. And if anyone's *stupid* enough to call for the elevator, it's going to take me right to them!"

"Okay!" Marianne said. "All right? I'm sorry. I don't do this every day. And he isn't even doing that. He's checking the floors."

"Let's hope he keeps on doing it too," John said, "'cause the elevator isn't going to forget this call until it's allowed to come down here." He walked back toward the windows, pacing.

"I'm sorry," Marianne repeated, softly.

"And why isn't the third elevator working anyway?" John snapped. "There're supposed to be three elevators running at night."

"There's nothing wrong with it," Marianne said. "It's the door. On the bottom level of the garage. It won't close."

"Should've had it fixed a week ago."

"The electricians are threatening a strike."

John narrowed his gaze, eyebrows furrowed. The anger was still in his tone, but Marianne was grateful to change the subject, and grateful not to be yelled at anymore. Still she was emotionally drained, and felt incredibly tired as she leaned against the wall and slowly let herself slide down to the floor.

"They turned it off," she said.

"Turned what off?"

"The elevator."

"You don't have to be an electrician to do that."

"Safety code. Said there was danger of it going into free fall."

"Free fall? There's a whole emergency braking system that would have to be circumvented. Unless...it's broken too."

"I'm not an expert," Marianne said, looking up at him. "Are you?"

"Maybe..."

She saw the wheels in his head turning just as her own were. If the killer was going to keep heading down using the elevator, maybe they could trap him in there somehow. And if the braking

mechanism was compromised, sixty-some stories would be a long fall.

A fatal fall.

A fatal flaw.

Marianne was delirious.

She needed sleep.

The tension was still in the air with her and John, so Marianne met it head on. "Look, I'm sorry. I only wanted to go up to my office. There are master keys there that open any door in the building, except of course the ones to the outside."

"Forget it," John said. "You're a law-abiding citizen. You don't think like a professional. Just stay with me and only do what I tell you. With any luck we'll get out of here. You can go back to your boyfriend, husband, lover, your job. You can go on with your life. What the world learns about me or anything else that's gone on here tonight...well, that's all up to you. I don't really care anymore."

Marianne looked away and didn't say anything at first. She turned back to him after a while. "I don't have anyone," she said.

John stared at her. His face softened again. For a moment his whole hard demeanor seemed to fall away, almost as if the hardness was an act, as if underneath all that was a true gentleness.

"What happened to your face?" he asked. Even his voice seemed to change.

Marianne instinctively touched her face, felt the swelling on her cheek, the dried blood. It had sustained worse damage after the initial attack in the

elevator, and was probably looking worse as the night wore on.

“I fell down,” she said.

“You fell down?”

“About ten stories.”

John nodded slowly, looking at her.

If this were a movie, it would have been a moment prime for sexual tension, or at the very least a fleeting glance. They had already had their action-movie meet-cute: violence, suspicion, a begrudging fellowship. By now it was the time for their guards to fall down a bit, the heroine to bat her eyelashes semi-innocently, the hero to make a borderline flirtation masked by a gruff demeanor. Then in the very end they would emerge from the burning building limping arm-in-arm, and after gazing at each other with wide eyes, share a passionate Hollywood kiss as the camera pans out and the music swells and the credits roll.

When you have a boring life, all you have to go on in these situations is what you’ve seen in the movies, so you fall into them like a familiar role, because you’ve seen it a million times. Lonely Career Woman trapped in a building with Mysterious Stranger, both on the run from The Killer. It almost made Marianne laugh.

But alas this wasn’t a movie.

John only stared at her a moment longer, and with a final nod, just like that the gentleness was gone. The muscles in his jaw went tight again and his eyes narrowed. He looked back out the glass at

the building's reflection.

"Why do you keep looking out that window?" Marianne asked. She stood up again, stretching a bit.

"I'm trying to think," John said. "I'm also hoping to see more lights turned on upstairs. It's been a long time...too long." He turned back to Marianne. "We better get out of here."

An elevator dinged.

John froze. Marianne's eyes grew large.

The doors slid open.

They each stood on opposite sides of the open elevator, out of sight from anyone inside. And neither of them could see in.

They stared at each other, frozen. John's hand ever so slightly rose in a gesture for her to remain still.

She wasn't going anywhere.

They waited.

The elevator doors slid shut.

John moved fast. He pointed behind Marianne. "Get behind the wall! Quick!" He was backing up himself, going for cover behind the wall on his side of the elevator bank.

He popped his head out as Marianne got behind her cover. "Throw me the knife!"

Marianne reached into her purse, digging. She found the knife, too late—

The elevator opened.

For a moment there was no movement.

It was a long moment.

And then—

The baseball bat appeared first.

It inched slowly into view out of the open elevator, poised to strike.

And from behind it—the killer emerged, gripping the handle tight, holding it forward.

John heard the soft footsteps as the killer very slowly began to creep down the elevator bank to the wall where he was hiding—crouched, ready. In the distance John saw the tossed ashtray on the floor by the window. He wondered if the killer noticed it too, and therefore knew for sure that they were down here.

The killer came to a stop. His shoes made a soft squeak as suddenly he turned around, his footfalls fading as they headed toward Marianne.

Marianne waited with the dagger held in close to her chest, raised high. She heard the footsteps getting closer...closer...

She was sure the killer could hear the furious beat of her heart as it nearly pounded out of her chest.

The shadow of the bat appeared on the floor in front of her.

She tightened her grip on the knife, her palms slick with sweat.

The shadow of the dark overcoat followed the bat.

The second he'd come around the corner, she'd—what would she do? Certainly he'd raise the bat. She could duck, he'd strike the wall, and she could run.

Maybe.

Or—or she could take a chance, jump at him fast as he reared back the bat, and plunge into his heart the blade of his own knife. The knife that killed Renni.

She didn't know if she was strong enough, if she had the physical strength or even the courage for it in the first place.

Intellectually she could wrap her head around the option to fight. But with the moment upon her, all she felt was fear. It clouded her head, creating panic.

She couldn't think at all.

The shadow on the floor grew larger, the hulking shape of the killer a nightmarish black mass threatening to swallow her whole. One more step and he would round the—

“Freeze!”

John.

He jumped out from behind his cover with the shotgun pointed at the killer's back.

Marianne nearly jumped, clutching the knife tight behind her wall, the suddenly stifled momentum of fight-or-flight indecision leaving such a strain on her body she could not help but shake.

The killer froze. No longer did his shadow move.

Marianne swallowed and waited. She couldn't see what was going on but she listened.

John watched from his end of the elevator bank, the gun trained on the killer's back.

The killer remained still for a moment.

John waited.

Finally the killer turned ever so slowly to face him.

Marianne watched the large shadow turn and recede.

John stared at the killer.

“Drop the bat!” he said. “Put your hands in the air!”

The killer did not do either. He stood there staring back at John, the bat still thrust out in front of him. There was an elusive trace of a smile on his lips before he took a step forward.

And then another.

“Hold it right there!”

The overhead lights of the lobby played shadows across the killer’s face. Dark, menacing eyes glared at John.

The killer took another step.

“Take another step and I’ll blow your head off!”

The killer stopped.

John stared at him a long time, thinking.

The killer began swaying the bat gently in front of him, a slow-motion swing, back and forth, back and forth, taunting...

He took another step.

John cocked the barrel of the shotgun and took aim down the sights.

The killer froze.

A few seconds passed.

And then, that trace of a smile again. The killer

began once more to gently swing the bat...

John swallowed. He could hear the killer tightening his grip on the handle.

The killer took another step.

And then another.

John's bluff was called.

And suddenly the killer charged at him, raising the bat, growling—

John turned the shotgun over and held it by the barrel, swinging it just in time to connect it with the bat.

The shotgun was an inferior weapon by far. John deflected one more blow, but it sent the gun flying across the marble floor.

The killer swung back for a third strike. John readied himself, arms up, squared off.

The killer swung.

John blocked the swing with the bottom of his foot and spun off line. But the killer was on him again, driving the bat back from another angle.

It was coming right at John's chest. He shot out his arm to block it and duck.

It didn't work. The bat collided with his arm. Searing pain. John cried out and crumpled to the floor, grimacing as he held his arm.

The killer stood over him and reared back the bat for a death blow to the head—

Marianne.

Suddenly she was right there. Behind the killer. Bringing down the dagger—

Her aim was off in all the excitement. Still it

landed at the top of the killer's arm, plunging into the flesh below his shoulder.

The killer dropped to his knees, turning and gritting his teeth in fury.

"Run!" John yelled.

The killer dropped the bat and grabbed at the knife, prying it out with a mad howl.

Marianne didn't look back. She tore across the lobby and flew down the escalator back into the mall. She pounded over the tiles, almost reaching the end of the floor before she tore into a narrow corridor in between stores, bolting toward the back utility hall, the fire door that led to the stairwell...

She ripped the door open and dove inside.

Mistake.

She flung herself back to the door just as it was closing. She grasped the knob but it was too late.

The door was locked. She was stuck in the stairwell.

TWENTY-THREE

A nudge from a colleague woke David Tennon up.

His head was on his arm which was on his desk. He picked his head up too quick and it hurt. He winced.

“Wakey, wakey, Dave,” Springer, a young clean-cut detective, said. “Saw your empty coffee mug there, thought it looked pretty lonely.” He placed an unlabeled to-go cup on Tennon’s desk.

“Thanks.” Tennon stretched. He went for his drawer, popped a few Aspirin that he took down

with the coffee. He looked at the wall clock and saw that it was four AM. He hadn't been down too long. He looked back up at Springer, who looked far too good and too peppy for this hour. His shirt was perfectly starched, and buttoned all the way to the top with the tie snug and centered. He even had a tie clip.

"What do you got?" Tennon said.

"Nothing. Pretty quiet night out there, actually. Came back to here to catch up on a few things. Didn't know if you wanted to be asleep or not."

"No. Thank you."

"Well, let me know if you need anything. Might make a breakfast run later."

"Keep up that go-getter attitude," Tennon said. "Don't ever change."

"I won't, Mr. Special Assignment." He jerked his head toward the federal seal from the file Harvey McKenna had given him.

"Thanks for the coffee." Tennon hid that file under some others.

"I got you."

Springer went across the room to his desk and Tennon looked again at all his work. He sighed heavily. If the file on NTX's private security team was supposed to illuminate anything, it didn't.

He had wasted a lot of time, and fallen asleep it seemed, reading up on these guys and searching for any red flags. There were a few little domestic and DUI things here and there, but nothing too crazy.

He gave them all another once-over now, and

spent a little extra time looking at the photograph of one young guy. What got Tennon's attention was that his paperwork said he worked third shift at the NTX building. He was the lone officer there covering the NTX floors, or at least the only one that the files mentioned.

He had no priors, in fact had an honorable discharge from the Army and even went to college.

Tennon thought about calling him.

Maybe.

He'd have to play that one careful, and prepare for it. He couldn't come right out with questions like McKenna had and not expect this guard to clam up and then warn the rest of the crew that someone was snooping around.

Tennon let the guard's paper fall and closed that whole file up.

He went back to Julian Maxwell. That was the murder. That was his job.

He had the facts all but memorized. Maybe at this point he had look at things on a more abstract level.

Call it revenge. Okay. Maxwell got NTX off when they were in fact guilty, and somebody wanted him to pay. Fine.

But why no one else? Why not more murders of other big names involved? Like the federal judge that ruled in NTX's favor, who was also all over the papers back then? And why not the top dog himself, Chairman Manley?

If only Maxwell was dead, there had to be a

reason for that. A reason it was him and not the others.

Unless—unless this was just the beginning.

And if that was the case, there were going to be more.

A serial job.

And that got Tennon thinking.

So he searched Jerrold Manley. No record. Most of his police-related contact had come during those protest years. His current address was listed as a penthouse apartment in the very-same NTX building in which he worked. He had stayed mostly quiet publicity-wise since the chemical plant days, though his name was popping up more with the construction of the new building.

Next up he ran the name Richard H. Dawes. This was the federal judge cited in the decision of *United States v. NTX Industries, Inc.* (1980).

The word DECEASED caught his eye, flashing in bold green letters after his name. Some research into that told Tennon that it had happened six months ago and that the M.E.'s office had ruled it a suicide.

Suicide by drinking a mixture of industrial-grade chemicals.

There had been no note left.

Tennon sat back in his chair, hand on his chin, and stared at the screen. He thought about all of that.

Then he shifted his gaze to the potential bad actors in the Maxwell case he had jotted down. He had a list of names and addresses and a little bit of

night left to work them. He took the piles of folders and notes and got up.

Tennon looked around the office. His eyes hurt from the computer, from looking down into files all night. He blinked several times and then stretched again, took another sip of coffee.

It was still dark, but it would be morning soon. People would be awake, getting off to work. And he had some more work to do himself.

TWENTY-FOUR

Marianne walked slowly and warily up the stairs, her heels off, making not a sound.

She wasn't sure how long it had been by the time she had climbed twenty-six stories to her office. What she did notice was the piece of white tape on the catch to the door. She walked across the landing and quietly opened the door.

She peered out carefully and slowly removed the tape, closing the door with barely a click. She put her heels back on and navigated carefully through the broken glass off the K&D main doors.

Once inside she went straight to the key cubby on the wall beside the secretary desks. She opened the box and swiped all of the keys off their hooks inside, pouring them into her purse. She should have done that to begin with, back when she had only grabbed the penthouse key.

She glanced at the wall clock—4:35—and then went over to the doorway of her darkened office, wondering if there was anything else she needed. She turned to leave.

“Marianne.”

She froze.

Slowly she turned back around.

John was sitting behind her desk.

He leaned forward in the chair, coming out of the shadows, muted city light offering the barest of illumination.

The smile that broke across her face stifled a cry of relief as she walked through the door into her office. John even had a soft smile for her. Gentle John had returned, his face dripping with a mixture of worry and relief himself.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

Marianne nodded several times, unable to speak.

“I was hoping you’d come back here,” John said. There was a heaviness to his words, his breathing labored.

“Thank God you’re alive,” Marianne said. “I was afraid...”

John nodded slowly. “So was I.” He exhaled. “But you, you did good. I wish your aim had been

about six inches back toward the center, but...I owe you.”

“Are you hurt?” she said.

“Yeah.” His voice was strained, body wincing with each movement. “He broke my arm.”

Marianne could see the pain in the way he held his arm, the tightness in his face whenever he moved.

“We’ve got whiskey,” she said.

“I’ll be all right,” he said. With his good hand he took a cigarette from his coat pocket and lit it, taking a few puffs. The orange ember at the end glowed in the dark, smoke swirling over the city lights coming through the window.

“I need your help now,” John said. “I can’t go after him alone.”

Marianne’s voice broke: “I can’t. I’m sorry.”

John looked at her softly. Slowly and painfully he rose from the chair and stood leaning with his one good arm against the window, the cigarette in his fingers. “You never had a husband who beat you? A cruel teacher? A dangerous neighborhood? You’re not used to violence, are you?”

Marianne shook her head slowly.

John went on, his voice soft, barely a whisper, mesmerizing: “Yes, you are. It surrounds us. Fear and violence. You just don’t think about it. But you do lock your doors at night. And tonight, on the other side of that door...”

“We can still hide,” Marianne said.

“So can he. He can get away if he wants to.”

"I know what he looks like."

"You've got to find him," John said. "There're a lot more places to hide out there. And maybe...he'll try and find you first."

Marianne let this sink in. She recalled her purse left in the elevator all that time. Her license that the killer may or may not have seen.

"I'm not hiding with you," John said.

"Please," Marianne said. "We're sort of a team, aren't we? Just for tonight?"

John stared at her.

"Sometimes," Marianne said, "I feel I could do anything, would do anything...just not to be alone anymore."

"Well?" John said. He whispered again, that whisper that seemed to put her in a trance: "Think about it. You've done things tonight you never would have thought possible. Not in a million years." He stared at her for a long time, then began walking to the door.

"Don't leave me," Marianne said. Maybe she was being pathetic, but she didn't care.

"I'm sorry," John said. "I just don't hide. It's not my nature. Some people do. Most people do. One way or another."

He walked out the doorway. Marianne watched him leave, like every other man in her life. She stood there for a while, then stepped out.

"John."

He was at the busted doorway to the lobby, about to leave. He looked back at her. Now out of

her darkened office she could see his broken arm in full light. His hand was tucked into his pocket, the lower half of his sleeve soaked in blood.

“Is this it?” she said. “I mean, aren’t we going to at least say we’re going to call each other? On the outside?”

John stared at her. “There’s this place, the south side. Danny’s. It’s a diner.”

Marianne had to smile. In fact she had to laugh. Of all the places in all of Chicago. “I know it. There all the time actually.”

John looked at her strangely for a second, as if surprised she would frequent such a greasy spoon in such a neighborhood. But then he just nodded.

“Okay,” he said.

It would never happen. But she knew he knew she needed to hear it.

“Thanks,” Marianne said.

They shared a long look.

Then John stepped over the broken glass and was gone.

TWENTY-FIVE

From the outside it was just a building. A high-rise like any other in the Chicago Loop. But its gleaming glass and steel beams and glossy exterior were a mask to the tower of terror it was on this night. Inside, despite all that space and all the amenities there were to offer, tonight it served only as a structure of oppression.

The wind howled, whistling through the plastic sheeting on the fifty-eighth floor where the tape peeled in the corners. If you listened close it sounded like screaming.

There was no screaming now in the corridor on the twenty-sixth floor, only the evidence of violence. A blood-stained wall. A shattered office door. A dented elevator.

In the mall, abandoned after hours, music played for no one, a silky jazz tune turned suddenly dark and melancholy, playing wistfully over neon storefronts and empty corridors, over the shattered window to the sporting goods store across from the Gold Piece jewelry shop.

But elsewhere in the building there were bumps in the night. An elevator moving in its shaft, getting louder and then fading away. Footsteps echoing through a stairwell. Baboons rooting around in an upper office.

Giant wheels high up in the building turned as an elevator rode, a rhythmic churning of gears around a motor. A door opened and closed. There was a mysterious pinging, metal striking metal.

Lights on the upper floors were turned off.

Far below, the long utility corridor before the sub-basement security office was dead silent. But someone had walked through the patch of wet paint, leaving small red prints that tracked off to the side.

There were footsteps in the parking garage. A car door opening and closing.

Someone on an upper floor grabbed an elevator and took it down. Moved through an underground tunnel, opened a fire door, and took a stairwell going even further down...

He was following a voice.

For when Marianne was hidden, she took out the walkie-talkie John had given her, took a breath, and held down the talk button.

“John...?” she said. Her voice was dry. She swallowed. “John...I don’t know if you can hear me or not. I’m down in the parking garage. On level five. You won’t be able to find me here, but if you come down I’ll see you and I’ll come out. I just...wanted you to know. I don’t know why. Bye, John.”

There was no car outside the mobile home at the trailer park on the south side, the first address on his list. Tennon parked his unmarked Crown Vic in the gravelly lot and approached the home. He looked around the neighborhood. There was nothing subtle about his unmarked Crown Vic. It practically shouted police, even without all the fanfare of lights and seals.

Tennon glanced at the mug shot of the man who owned the trailer. The photo was years old now, but when it was taken there was a fresh scar over his right eye that notes specified had been sustained during one of the chemical plant protests, when NTX security guards wailed batons against a raging crowd. He stuffed the photo in his coat pocket.

It was early yet, still dark, but Tennon swore he could make out a human shape in the picture window facing the lot. A woman’s silhouette, sitting in a chair. Maybe enjoying a morning’s peace before the day started, nursing her first cup of coffee.

There was no doorbell. Tennon knocked hard on the screen door that was half off its hinges. No answer. He tried again. Waited a long time. No answer.

But there was definitely someone sitting behind that window. He walked back. The woman had not moved.

He stared a long time.

She was also not breathing.

Probable cause.

Tennon drew his sidearm. He flung open the screen door and kicked in the main one when he found it locked. He swept the darkened trailer with his service weapon. "Police!"

The woman still did not move. Tennon quickly cleared the other small rooms. Then he checked the pulse on the frail woman in her chair. She had been dead at least a day.

There were no discernable wounds. He saw the wheelchair, the medicine bottles nearby, the family pictures that included a once vibrant, healthy woman. Suicide by pills? Possible. Natural causes? Likely.

Tennon wondered about those causes, especially when he remembered why he was here. It didn't take long to confirm.

A dresser against the wall. Covered in yellowed newspaper clippings. A shrine to the sordid history of NTX Industries.

Jackpot.

And next to those clippings, a bulky bundle of

blueprints. Tennon rolled them out. He saw the large building plans. Saw the writing in the corner. The address: NTX Industries.

No car outside. Dead wife at the window. And...

Tennon picked up the obituary...

A dead son...years ago...

“Oh my God...”

Tennon holstered his weapon. He grabbed a nearby phone. There was no dial tone. He clicked the receiver several times, but there was no service to the line. He slammed it down.

So he grabbed as much damning material as he could and ran out of the trailer back to his car. He jumped in, started the thing up, and kicked up gravel as the tires spun and he sped out of the lot.

The killer emerged from a fire door out onto level five of the parking garage.

He stood outside the door for a while, a lone figure in a dark overcoat, scanning the vast near-emptiness of the cold concrete floor.

He slipped the dead guard's walkie-talkie into his coat pocket. There was blood that ran down his sleeve but it did not hinder him. With his better arm he slowly raised the baseball bat, resting it on his shoulder.

There was a red mini-van some ways out, a red Toyota parked just beyond it.

He began walking, moving slow and quiet across the concrete.

As he got closer to the van, he gripped the bat in

both hands and held it tight, poised.

Then he saw the trail of red paint on the floor before him. There were drying smears of it, from what looked like the footprints of a woman's high-heeled shoe. It started back a ways from another fire door.

The killer turned. The footsteps led to the elevator bank against the wall. They ended at an open elevator shaft that was barricaded by a sawhorse.

He retightened his grip on the bat and moved slowly in that direction. He held the bat forward and stepped carefully around the sawhorse to the lip of the shaft.

As she climbed out of her tight hiding space below the glove box on the van's passenger side, Marianne moved slow. She peeked out the back window and saw the killer approaching the elevator shaft.

As she maneuvered herself carefully over the center console to the driver's seat, she even held her breath. She kept her eyes on the killer in the rearview mirror as he methodically searched the elevator chase.

Finally she settled into the driver's seat and took a deep breath, tried to breathe normally. Now was her chance. She didn't have a lot of time.

The killer peered into the darkness.

Nothing.

He dropped the bat at his feet, then used both hands to take out of his pockets a flashlight...and a revolver.

He clicked the flashlight on and swept the beam across the shaft below him. The chase went only a couple of feet down before ending on a dirty concrete floor. There was nothing except—

A woman's heels tossed into the corner.

He swept over the dark space again. There was an iron-rung ladder affixed to the wall of the shaft. He ran the light up the rungs until the beam was swallowed by the darkness.

There was nothing.

But he could hear something up there. A faint pinging noise that echoed through the shaft.

He kept the flashlight pointed up but could see nothing above save the steel hoist ropes.

Marianne took the keys out of her pocket and slipped them quietly into the ignition. She planned her move. It would have to be quick.

Now was her moment.

Lonely Career Woman Marianne Marshall.

She heard it like a taunting mantra in her head.

Look at her now.

In the span of one second, she started up the car, threw it in reverse, and floored the gas.

Tires peeled. Rubber burned. In the rearview mirror, she saw killer spin around just in time to see the van speeding at him in reverse, barreling toward the elevator shaft.

He had no time to get out of the way.

For Renni, you son of a bitch—

She almost said it out loud, like the hero in a campy action movie, or the final girl in a low-rent slasher flick.

She liked that though.

Final Girl Marianne Marshall.

Had a nice ring to it.

The van slammed against the concrete wall on either side of the elevator shaft, denting steel and shattering brake lights—knocking the killer back into chase.

Marianne jerked on impact. She looked in the rearview and then over the backseat at the fractured back windshield. She fumbled for her walkie-talkie, screamed into it: “Go! Go!”

The killer was getting up. Marianne saw his dark form rise through the splintered glass of her back windshield. The van was completely blocking his exit. No way for him to get out of the shaft.

The pinging noise the killer had heard earlier turned suddenly into a high-pitched whine, followed by a low rumbling that became suddenly much louder and deeper...

And then a rushing sound like a great wind...

He looked up.

The elevator was in free fall, barreling down the shaft, coming straight at him—

Gunshots.

Marianne ducked.

Bullets tore up what was left of her back window, pounding the dashboard and front windshield, glass and plastic and rubber and cushion debris flying everywhere—

She dove into her previous hiding place, scrunching as far down as she could go on the floor before the passenger seat.

She held her eyes closed tight and clenched her teeth.

The gunfire stopped. The now-deafening rumble of the elevator's downward plunge drowned out most of the killer's scream.

It hit the bottom of the shaft like an explosion. A concussive blast of awesome power shot the van forward several feet, stalling its engine and blowing out the rear tires. Marianne bounced around, curled in the fetal position.

The van came to a rest.

She opened her eyes.

There was a ringing in her ears. And her head pounded.

But she didn't care.

She had made it.

At that moment she felt nothing but joy and relief. It felt like sunshine shooting through her veins.

She was alive.

And the killer was dead.

It was over.

It was all over.

The muscles in her face hurt amidst all the ringing and her pounding head. And she realized it was because she was smiling. Grinning, in fact. Grinning big.

She wasn't sure if this was what shock felt like, some kind of hysterical delirium, but suddenly all she wanted to do was laugh.

Slowly she pulled herself back up, returning to the driver's seat, that ringing endless.

A voice was trying to break through all that ringing: "Marianne? Marianne?"

John. On the walkie-talkie.

She reached for it, weak, trying to get her senses back. She grasped the passenger seat where it had been last. It was no longer there. She leaned over. It was on the floor. She snatched it up. A bullet had taken out a chunk of it but it could still receive.

She pressed talk, breathing heavy. "Yes...I'm here." The smile was still there. It was in her voice.

"Marianne?" He couldn't hear her. It could no longer send.

"I'm okay," she told herself, trying to calm down, shake off the hysteria. "I'm okay." She leaned over, resting her head on the steering wheel. "Thank you, God. Thank you, Jesus."

She thought about what John had said. If she hadn't changed her mind, the killer very well could have escaped. And then she'd be looking over her shoulder the rest of her days. Since the death of her parents she had lived in a self-made cage of security and comfort, the walls of which she drew in even

closer after her husband left.

Pull that cage in any tighter and she would suffocate. When she stood watching John leave the office earlier, that very real fear gripped her heart like a vice. And that feeling was worse than the thought of what might happen to her if she did fight.

So she went after him.

And now—she felt good. She felt really good.

She continued to just breathe, and let the night drain out of her.

Her smile never faded.

TWENTY-SIX

David Tennon stopped at a phone booth on a south side corner and made a few calls in the darkness of pre-dawn.

First he had sat for a few minutes in his cruiser, parked by the curb, taking in the information from the man's trailer he had spread out across the passenger seat and the dashboard. He rifled through newspaper clippings and found several about Federal Judge Richard H. Dawes, champion of NTX and other corporate interests.

Sometime after the chemical plant and the

protests, Dawes had been appointed by the governor to the state appeals court. That appointment had been heavily contested. A sheaf of public record copies in this man's collection even revealed a weighty petition by several members of the Illinois and Federal Bars who had attempted to sway the governor from appointing Dawes, citing arbitrary decisions on the bench, as well as allegations of corruption throughout his career, most notably in corporate ties and interests in firms that included NTX. Tennon smiled to see the number one name on that petition: Harvey McKenna, young hotshot federal prosecutor. He had balls.

The man that owned the mobile home had circled and underlined and highlighted much of that information with an obvious fierceness behind the pen. But most incriminating was a paper-clipped grouping of articles from Dawes's death—his obituary, a remembrance column that noted high-profile cases and accomplishments in his career, and one that detailed the circumstances surrounding his death. "Suicide" had been underlined, as well as "no foul play." And clipped to all of that were detailed hand-written notes on legal paper that listed industrial solvents and cleaners specifically used for the clean-up of toxic waste. Several were marked with an asterisk, with further information detailing companies that sold said cleaners.

"Jesus," Tennon said. He could picture in his mind Dawes sitting in his home study, a gun to his head, chemicals in his brandy glass he was being

forced to drink...

Julian Maxwell, Richard Dawes...

Jerrold Manley.

There were stacks of articles on Manley, with his living quarters in the new NTX building underlined wherever mentioned. Tennon turned his head back to the rolls of blueprints and wasted no more time.

Harvey McKenna was going to be upset, but none of this had anything to do with Julian Maxwell being a snitch for the Feds. NTX didn't order any hit. This was a lone man's simple revenge game. And he was planning to take out the company before McKenna could get a case going against it.

Tennon dropped quarters and made the calls to the right people. He tried to call direct to the NTX security office first, get Dan Esposito and make sure Manley was protected. The CEO had a building's full security at his disposal, as well as personal daytime bodyguards, but he couldn't be too careful. Not now.

And that feeling only heightened when the call to the security office just rang. No answer. It just rang. Someone would have to be on duty there. Someone.

But if it was just ringing...

And Tennon remembered then how the call to Esposito last night had seemed to cut off suddenly as they were about to hang up on each other.

What if...

And that had been hours ago.

Hours.

If only—if only he had made that call earlier when he was looking at the photo of the young NTX guard who worked midnights. Tennon would have discovered the line out of service and could have gone to the building then.

No use crying about it now.

So he hung up and made another call, madly spitting out as much information as he could, as fast as he could. "...killed Julian Maxwell, Richard Dawes too, made it look like suicide, he's not home, wife is dead, and he could be at that building now, we need protection for Jerrold Manley, get guys over there, I'm on my way—"

And after hanging up a final time, Tennon jumped into his car and began speeding towards downtown.

Eventually Marianne lifted her head.

She finally felt her face muscles relax, her smile waning as the pounding in her head began to subside and the ringing was just a dull background noise.

There was a flicker of movement to her left, out the window.

John.

He had moved fast, made it down here already.

She turned.

A bat came barreling at her.

She didn't have time to scream. In fact she barely had any time to process it—because it didn't make any sense.

He was dead.

The killer was dead.

She killed him.

But alas—the bat bounced off the glass and immediately reared back for another swing.

Alive.

Somehow he was alive.

The bat pounded the driver's side window again, frosting it over with a thousand tiny cracks, preventing her from seeing out.

This time she screamed, and at the same time kept wondering just how in the hell he did it. Press himself behind the iron rung ladder in the elevator shaft? Crawl under her car just in time?

It didn't matter. She was wasting precious nanoseconds.

So she scrambled, her hand finding the ignition, the key. She turned it.

It didn't start.

A third swing—boom—the glass still there but tiny shards flying at her.

Marianne turned the key again. The engine rolled over. Nothing.

A fourth swing, the window caving in. It wouldn't take a fifth.

“Come on! Come on!” But the car was dead.

The fifth swing. The window exploded.

The killer—

His snarling face where the window was—face red and covered in sweat, strands of hair askew, eyes wide with rage—his arm reaching in, searching for

the door handle, finding it, opening it, tearing at Marianne's clothes as she dove across the seat to the passenger side—

He climbed in, right on her tail.

She flew out the passenger side, vaulting across acres of bare concrete, nowhere to run—

Renni's car.

The red Toyota some yards ahead.

Marianne bolted in that direction. Reached the car, opened it, flew in, pulled it shut, locked it just as the killer reached her. His hand pounded on the door, mouth tight, eyes large.

She quickly looked around, made sure the other windows were up and the doors locked, ready for the bat to return with a vengeance.

When she turned back, a revolver was pointing at her point blank through the driver's side window.

Marianne had no time to cry out. It was the end. He pulled the trigger.

Her last thought was how impossible it seemed that just under a minute ago she was high on life, sure this was all over.

Click.

Marianne's wide eyes stared at the barrel in shock.

The gun was dry.

Click.

Empty.

Click.

Not her time.

Not yet.

The killer tossed the gun to the ground with a tight-lipped grunt and raised the bat high, bringing it down with all his strength onto the front windshield.

Cracks moved out in web fashion from a center hole.

He reared back for another blow. Marianne spun around. The car was so compact, barely any room to duck, much less hide, and so tight there was no chance of making it out the passenger side this time without him immediately catching up with her.

The bat crashed into the windshield and she screamed, losing her focus, panic rising now.

But then she saw the keys. Still in the ignition.

Car won't start. I'm calling triple A.

On nothing but a prayer Marianne tried to start it. The engine turned. Nothing.

She tried again. It rolled over. Nothing.

The bat slammed a third time into the windshield. The hits, while fierce, were losing their steam, not doing nearly as much damage as the first swing. But eventually the glass would break.

Marianne tried one more time, holding that key tight in the on position, hearing the engine try, try, try—when suddenly, swiftly, the Toyota came to life.

With time only for a leap in her chest, Marianne slammed the car into gear and tore across the parking lot, burning rubber.

She glanced in the rearview mirror, breathing heavy.

The killer stood there, bat at his side, growing

smaller.

In her dash to escape, she had enough time for the thought to process that if only Renni had tried a few more times, she would have gotten the car to the start. She would have left the building. They both would have left the building. None of this would have ever happened.

Or maybe not...

Suddenly the engine began sputtering. The car slowed down and stalled out, rolling to a dead stop.

Marianne turned the key. There was an unhealthy cranking sound that went nowhere.

She glanced in the rearview again. The killer was in the same place. Watching her from afar.

She tried again. The engine turned and turned and stayed dead.

Another glance up in the rearview. The killer was walking now. Slow. Taking his time.

Marianne turned the key so hard her fingers hurt. Nothing. The same grinding. Again—

It caught.

The engine roared back to life. Marianne slammed on the gas, speeding up the nearby ramp to the next level.

She took this level all the way to the end and spun around, stopping the car but keeping it on, feathering the gas to keep it running.

She faced the top of the ramp that went down to the lower level. She'd see anyone that came up it. And the minute the killer emerged she was going to plow him down.

Maybe the high-on-life certainty of the killer's death was gone, but it was replaced by something just as intense—a cool, focused rage.

She waited, revving the engine.

Nothing happened. No one appeared atop the ramp.

And then she remembered the stairs.

She looked around. There was a wall behind her running down along the side, blocking her view of the elevator bank and the fire doors.

The killer could have been hiding anywhere behind there. He could get over the wall and she'd be right there.

She had to reposition, move forward just a bit and turn, be able to see over the wall, see anyone exit the stairwell—

The car died.

Just as she began to move again the engine gave out.

She looked back at the wall. She could picture him. The dark overcoat. The snarl. The bat. He would be there any second.

She drove the ignition home over and over again. The engine rattled, the battery on fumes.

She closed her eyes. Could her luck hold out so long? Could she get this machine to start a third time?

It wasn't luck. She could hear her father's chastening voice, telling her there was no such thing as luck, or chance, only the grace and the will of God.

She needed some grace right now. Just a little more, Jesus. Did she deserve it? No. Had she really even been a believer these past few years? Life had beat her down in such a way that she had become so lukewarm in her faith it was practically cold. Would she be punished for her doubt? Was this her due?

But she had been brought this far through so much tonight. She should have been dead—

There was the sound of a sputtering engine coming to life.

But it was not her own.

Another car started up, gained speed, and suddenly emerged at the top of the ramp before her.

An old Chevy Nova, its blue so faded it looked gray.

And while it was compact, it was still bigger than Renni's little Toyota.

Marianne remembered that car. She had seen it earlier that night when she first tried to leave.

The Nova tore off the ramp and began speeding across the parking garage toward her. If she stayed in the car she was going to be crushed.

She tried another time to start it. It didn't.

She shouldn't have bothered. The Nova was gunning for her and she didn't have any time left to get out of the car. She kept turning the key anyway.

The car started.

At the very last possible moment she shot away from the barreling Nova. Her car took a hit on the side of the trunk, causing her to spin. With the speed the Nova had going it spun too. The screech of tires

filled the garage.

Marianne straightened out, working the steering wheel like a mad woman, and shot forward at high speed. The killer was on her heels, straightened out himself now, his car gaining on her as she took the ramps down a couple levels.

She was able to tear around the large concrete stanchions and make tight turns, avoiding the Nova. But though he couldn't turn as clean, the killer's car had better acceleration. He reached her bumper at one point and slammed her hard. The fender fell off. Rear light casings busted open. A hubcap broke away spinning.

She wasn't going to get the moment she needed. The second she needed to jump from the car and make the dash for a fire door. She'd be dead before she ever reached it.

It was a car chase until the end.

They sped side by side down the garage with only the stanchions between them. Marianne quickly spun the wheel to negotiate a tight turn around one of the stanchions. The Nova sideswiped her hard. It knocked the already compromised windshield out of place and in pieces across Marianne's lap and the front seat.

As the Nova spun around to follow, its rear end slammed into the stanchion. Gas began to leak out steadily from the tank. Still it regained speed and took off after Marianne, leaving behind a slick wet trail.

Marianne soared up the ramp to the next level.

They were back on level five where it all began. The killer rammed her from behind and pulled even next to her as they poured out onto the floor.

That was when Marianne saw John.

He was standing in the distance by the elevator bank, looking at the open shaft and her totaled minivan. He spun upon hearing them tear up around the corner.

The Nova pushed her into a concrete wall from the side, sandwiching her as they drove neck and neck. Metal crunched and sparks went flying.

The killer veered off and spun to charge her from the front. Marianne quickly slammed the car into reverse and spun back, jerking a bit as she never let up on the gas, not chancing another stall.

She circled back into drive and tore off.

“John!” she yelled, flying past him as she sped to another ramp.

There was nothing he could do. He turned as Marianne passed him to see the killer’s car bearing down on him.

With a quick jump, he raised his good arm and hooked onto a pipe that hung from the ceiling, hefting himself out of the path of the Nova.

The car didn’t stop. It went off in pursuit of Marianne. John let himself fall, grunting, the effort hurting the broken arm that he held folded into his chest.

As the Nova rounded the corner ahead, he noticed the fluid leaking out of the back. And he saw the thick trail of it that had been left behind.

He ran back over to Marianne's van and climbed in, turning the key over and over. It wouldn't start worth a damn. He punched the wheel, hearing the sounds of the chase on the floor above him, squealing tires and revving engines.

There was nothing he could do.

But the potent stench of gasoline put his focus back on the stream that had leaked out of the Nova. He jogged back over to the trail—and took out his lighter.

John flipped open the top and lit it, touching it to the gas. He quickly drew his hand back. Flames shot up, spreading down the trail in both directions.

He pocketed the lighter and ran back to the stairs.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Marianne poured out onto the uppermost level of the parking garage. Just across the floor was the final ramp that led up to the gate. She wondered what would happen if she charged at it as fast as she could go, if she would rip through it or if it would even budge at all.

Her only hope in this dance with the killer was that he would run out of gas. She saw the steady leak out of the back of the Nova and knew it was only a matter of time. But how much time? Could she evade him that long?

They tangoed a bit across the floor before he forced her against the concrete wall. Marianne braked hard. The Nova ripped forward out of her way and kept driving.

Marianne gave it gas but she could already feel that she had screwed up. She had braked too hard and too long—and the Toyota stalled out. Giving it gas did nothing. She turned the key. Futile.

The killer reached the other end of the garage and spun around a far stanchion, facing her.

He saw her not moving.

The nose of the Nova was aimed at the side of the Toyota. The killer revved the engine, taunting her.

And then with a screech of tires he began speeding toward her.

Marianne turned and turned the key to no avail. The concrete wall was right out the passenger side. There was no way to open that door to escape. The killer would hit her and crush her into the wall.

If she left the driver's side, she could make a run for it. But at his speed, the killer would reach her and run her down almost immediately.

She was going to die.

She had used it all up, luck, grace, whatever—now was her time.

She was momentarily distracted by the flames that suddenly shot up the ramp from the lower level and raced across the concrete floor. A line of fire tore between the Toyota and the pursuing Nova.

The killer was going too fast. He didn't have

time to brake.

The Nova went over the flames—and exploded. A blast of fire fanned out in all directions as the tank erupted and spread to the rest of the car.

But it didn't stop.

Marianne watched the burning thing as it bore down on her. At least he was going with her. She closed her eyes.

But it was still not her time. The door swung open and rough hands reached inside the car and grabbed her.

She opened her eyes.

John.

He pulled her away running just as the enflamed Nova pummeled Renni's car, crushing it against the wall.

Another explosion took out the gas tank on the Toyota. The fire spread over both cars. From some place beneath all that heat was the agonizing howl of someone in unbearable death throes. It didn't last long.

John stood holding Marianne against the wall, his good arm wrapped tightly around her. They watched the scene for a long time, breathing heavy.

Eventually John took Marianne's chin and lifted it up. He looked into her eyes.

"You did it," he said. "It's over."

Her gaze was glazed over, barely seeing him.

"How do you feel?" he said.

Marianne nodded weakly. Her gaze eventually found focus on his broken arm. There was more

blood now. It was running.

He saw her staring.

“I’m okay,” John said.

She stared back at him, not speaking. Her head was spinning. It was hard to keep focus.

John kept his eyes tight on hers. He spoke slowly: “Listen to me. You’re going into shock. I want you to lie down and keep your feet up, so the blood will come back into your head. And just stay that way.”

Marianne kept breathing.

“Others will be here soon,” John added.

“Okay?” He waited for her to nod. She eventually did, slowly.

John made sure she was stable leaning against the wall before he turned and began walking slowly away.

Marianne watched him. Halfway across the garage, he stopped. He went down on one knee and slung his head low, breathing heavy, steadying himself.

Marianne got off the wall and almost started off after him. But then he got up again and continued walking to the fire door.

“John,” she called.

He stopped at the side of the door and looked back at her.

“What’s your last name?” she asked.

John opened the door. “Doe,” he said. “John Doe.”

And he was gone.

A few minutes later the gate to the outside began to rise slowly. Marianne's card was still in the slot from last night.

She checked her watch. It was six o'clock.

She stared up the ramp for a long time, the gate wide open. The barest glimmer of sunlight that kissed the horizon was all that hinted at night's end. It teased the city buildings with the promise of morning, the promise of a new day.

Even in the midst of her shock, a sudden surge of hope arose in Marianne like that new-day sun. It coursed through her veins, an ecstatic tremor beneath her skin, a high that felt like it would never wear off.

She felt gratitude with that hope, a giddiness. She had survived. She was alive. And she *felt* alive. For the first time in a long time she felt really, truly *alive*.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Timing was everything.

If he had only been assigned this case a day earlier, David Tennon could have avoided this whole thing today. A lot of deaths, a lot of paperwork.

But he had been police long enough to know he shouldn't dwell on such things. And it was over now, a sudden and abrupt end all out of his control.

He was one of the first units to arrive as he heard the dispatch over the scanner, just as dawn was breaking across Chicago. He threw the light on his

unmarked cruiser and sped through the city, tearing into the NTX parking garage with an ambulance, a fire truck, and a cavalry of blue-and-whites.

He was introduced to Marianne Marshall shortly after a uniform had wrapped a blanket around her and sat her on the back of an ambulance.

Tennon took out his pad and pen and approached slowly as an EMT tended to her. Years of studying the battle-fatigued gazes of victims taught him how to tread lightly, how much space to give, how much time to allot for questions.

Marianne was slow to come out of shock. But he saw the signs. She was strong. She was going to fine.

Tennon had to swallow his own feelings as he learned shortly into the interview that his old friend Danny Esposito was dead.

One day sooner, he thought again. One damn day.

The trick was not to dwell.

If Marianne was going to be fine, she didn't know it then. As the shock lifted, so too did her high. It felt like hitting a wall, a sudden disappointment so crushing and total it sobered up her new lease on life and put her right back into a trance.

When she really thought about it, she knew that it was her mind that had gotten to her. Her mind that told her how fleeting hope always was, how reality didn't care and always crept back in, unforgiving yet

sensible. A near-death experience was not a new beginning, just the illusion of one. She knew this from experience. Life would go on the same.

For a few seconds Marianne had tried hard to hold onto that hope, but the wisps of it were too tenuous to grasp. She was far too rational to believe in it, far too jaded.

She sat in the back of the ambulance as radios squawked and police lights swirled silently around her like a dream. A crowd of onlookers stood out in the cold atop the exit ramp, blocked by police barricades and uniformed officers.

The fire was out on the two cars, wisps of residual smoke rising from the remains. The Nova was raised by a winch and towed away.

Marianne sipped numbly at some bad coffee out of a Styrofoam cup. The EMT worked behind her in the ambulance as she answered Detective Tennon's questions.

"Can I go home?" she asked.

"We'll take you to the hospital first," he said, "then run you by the station. Routine. It won't take long."

"How are you feeling?" the EMT asked her.

The look Marianne gave him was her answer.

"Maybe you'd rather stay with a friend?"

Tennon said. "A relative for a couple of days? It helps. Is there someone we can contact for you?"

For all the terror and numbness of the night, that familiar feeling of profound loneliness washed over her and held its grip hard. "No," she said. "There's

no one.”

“Dave?”

Tennon turned. Two uniforms stood on each side of a handcuffed man in a dark overcoat.

“We caught him in front of a jewelry store in the mall,” one said.

“Marianne,” Tennon said, “is this the other person you were talking about?”

Marianne turned quickly. It was impossible that John could have let himself get caught. She looked at the dour-faced man in cuffs and almost smiled.

“Awful early to be opening up your store, isn’t it, Mr. Kappelmann?”

Nathan Kappelmann scowled. “It’s my store, I’m paying for it. I can come and go as I please.”

“Marianne?” Tennon said.

“No, it’s not him.”

Tennon nodded to the uniforms who whisked Kappelmann away.

“Wait a minute!” Kappelmann yelled.

“Marianne! Tell these gorillas who I am, will you please? Get these handcuffs off of me!”

Marianne told Tennon, “I barely saw him. I don’t think I’d know him again if I saw him on the street.”

She heard a meow and looked down to discover Felix. He did a figure eight around her legs and meowed some more. She reached down and picked him up.

“Marianne?” Tennon said.

She looked his way.

TRAPPED

“Let’s go now.”

She stood up from the ambulance with Felix and he led her away gently to his unmarked Crown Vic.

TWENTY-NINE

After the hospital and the stationhouse, Tennon pulled up in front of her brownstone in Lincoln Park. He opened the door for her and helped her out. Marianne held Felix under her coat. She smiled softly to Tennon and nodded. He went back to the driver's side and drove away.

Marianne watched the car leave, then walked up the sidewalk and the steps to her home. She stopped right before the door, gazing at Felix. He purred gently against her neck.

Marianne turned around and went back down the

steps. She looked up and down her tree-lined street, the branches bare. She gazed at the tranquil homes, the quiet neighborhood, picturesque but for it being another frigid winter day.

She began walking down the sidewalk. A few minutes later she boarded the L and took it to the south side. She sat numbly on the train, staring out the window at the skyline but not really seeing it.

A few minutes after she got off she approached Danny's Diner, standing outside for a moment before she went in. The last time she had been there was just yesterday. So much had happened.

Danny's radio was playing the news this time. She looked around at the small early afternoon crowd in the narrow establishment, studying all of their faces carefully. She sighed and took a stool.

"Marianne!" Danny emerged from the back, his eyes wide. "Holy Christmas! I just been listening to the radio. You're all over the news! Are you okay? Let me get you some coffee."

Marianne shook her head. "No, thanks. I'm fine. Thanks, Danny."

"Jeez! You been through hell and back, huh?"

"I'm okay, really. I just came for some milk." She lifted Felix from inside her coat and let him out on her lap. "I have a new friend."

"Sure, sure," Danny said. He reached into the mini-fridge next to the coffeemaker and pulled out a jug of milk. "On the house." He poured some in a coffee mug on a saucer.

"Thanks, Danny."

Felix lapped eagerly at the milk. Danny left to check on some other customers and take a few orders back. Marianne continued to look around, check the door. Danny returned to her once he was done, his open face full of concern.

“You sure you don’t want a coffee or anything?”

“No,” Marianne said. She got up with Felix, buttoned her coat back up. “I...I’ve just got to go home.”

Danny nodded. Marianne turned to leave.

“Hey,” Danny said, “who was that other guy anyway? Do you think they’ll catch him?”

Marianne looked at him with a bitter smile. “Not if he doesn’t want them to.”

She left.

Tennon made the call to Lieutenant Hotchkiss shortly after he came home. His wife wasn’t out of work yet, nor were the kids out of school. He loosened his tie and slipped off his shoes as he stood in the kitchen. After a double like that, he was fantasizing about sleep. It felt like the old days, the bad old days.

He caught Hotchkiss before first shift’s end and filled him in.

“I know, this thing’s all over the news,” he said. “I look forward to reading all of your reports.”

“And?”

“And you did good. I’ll be sure to put in a good word if that opening pops up.”

“*If* it does, huh?”

“Well, you know how these things work, Dave. Nothing’s ever right-away, or even a sure thing.”

“Right. Sure. Okay.” Tennon looked at a cluster of pictures on the fridge. Pictures of his wife, pictures of his boys. He was not in many of them.

He thought about Danny Esposito’s kids.

“But,” Hotchkiss said, “I want you to know we appreciate—”

Tennon hung up the phone. He heated up some cold coffee still in the pot from that morning and sat at the kitchen table.

When the kids got home, he spent quite a bit of time talking to them. And when his wife pulled in, he helped her bring in some groceries and talked with her a lot too. He told her she looked beautiful, and that he liked her hair. She had gotten it done. He had noticed. Then he kissed her and told her he was calling in that night, that they were all going to have some fun tomorrow.

Before she could say anything, he traipsed upstairs to the master bedroom. He showered and brushed and climbed right into bed.

He slept hard. It was glorious.

Marianne took the L back to her brownstone. She climbed the steps heavily and entered, crossing the first-floor hallway to her apartment.

She took out her keys and unlocked the three sets of locks on her door. She walked in and wondered if after last night everything would look different, feel different.

She closed the door and set Felix down. He went scampering off like he already knew the place, down the entry hall into the living room, his one limp leg hopping behind the rest. Marianne wondered if in her loneliness she was going to turn into a cat lady now.

She re-locked all the locks and leaned back against the door. A distant siren blared before fading into the rest of the city noise. Life went on out there. The world kept spinning.

But over the din of sirens there came the sudden ringing of church bells, and for a moment that pang of hope returned. She had to smile, albeit wearily. It was like her father speaking to her from beyond the grave. That high of survival she had felt in the parking garage had fallen away hard, but her father had always said never to trust feelings. Feelings change, he'd say. They're fickle like the heart. Real faith and real belief are active, persevering despite circumstance.

Church. Marianne needed some church in her life again, needed to say thank you, needed to renew her faith. All these years she had held on to the anger of what happened to her rather than give it up, let it go. She couldn't hold on to that earlier hope by herself, but she knew who the true author of joy was. She could wallow in her trauma, or she could really let it motivate her, really go ahead and try to live that abundant passionate life instead of just waiting for it to happen on its own and being bitter when it didn't.

She needed a shower and some heavy sleep for

now, but after that she was going to find a service somewhere. She wasn't Catholic, but they were always having a mass somewhere, so she would go. She would go and she would pray and she would take communion and she would thank the Lord.

Marianne began to walk down the hall.

She stopped.

John was sitting in her living room.

He stared up at her intently from a rocking chair. He had cleaned up. He wore a casual dark green polo shirt and tan slacks. His arm was in a cast and a sling.

Eyes on her the whole time, he stood up slowly from the chair.

“My name *is* John,” he said. “John Brookings. I was born right here in Chicago. I’ve lived here all my life. And I’ve never met a woman like you before, ever.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meldrick Carter is the author of *Trapped* and *Harvestland*. He holds a master's in criminal justice from the University at Albany, and has been a corrections officer since 2014. He lives with his wife and son in upstate New York.

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