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CAROLYN ARNOLD

**THE
DEFENSELESS**

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THE DEFENSELESS

Prologue

TWENTY-SIX YEARS AGO

He should be celebrating at home with a bottle of Cristal. Instead, he was outside of his neighbor's house, frozen to the bone, his hands like ice.

He hadn't had a moment of peace and quiet all day. His project was getting further behind, the deadline ever looming, but the new resident next door gave no consideration to those around him. First it was the man's barking dog, but when he went to complain, the sight of it whelmed up pity into his heart and fueled his rage toward its owner.

With the canine now tucked away back at his home, warm and secure, he trudged back out through the snow.

The heavy-metal music that had drowned out the howls of the animal, now vibrated the deck.

All he needed was silence. So he could think. So he could get what he needed to get done, done.

He pounded on the door, and it sent pain flashing through his knuckles—the combination of determination and the bitter temperatures against flesh and bone.

The wind howled between the two houses, gusting up the snow into miniature funnel clouds of ice crystals. They assaulted any bare skin—his neck and face taking the brunt of it. A quiver wracked his body and prompted a deep exhalation, which created a cloud of white in the night air.

“Open the fucking door!” He pushed through the discomfort and knocked again.

Still no evidence the man was even listening.

He surveyed, left and right, glancing over his shoulder, feeling eyes on him. Were the neighbors watching him? Did they call the cops?

The light was on in an upstairs room, but otherwise the nearby house was shrouded in darkness. The only other illumination were the streetlights that cast dull beacons amidst the blowing snow.

He went to bang again, but his hands refused. They had seized up from the cold. He blew on them to warm them. Surely, the occupant was drunk and would awaken from his stupor to—

The door opened and with it, the music got louder.

“What the fuck do you want?” The man stood there, six feet tall, a few inches shy of his own height, and his face was unshaven. His suspicions were confirmed by the pungent smell of whiskey that flushed out of the house and exuded from the man.

But it wasn't his neighbor's appearance, or even the odor that burned his eyes and had his attention, it was his identity. He would never forget that face. It had scarred his childhood, and it wasn't until this moment, until this *reunion* that he realized how much. Ken Bailey was the man's name.

A warmth encased his insides and his vision grew clearer.

“Freak, what the fuck is up?” Ken went to lean against the doorframe but lost his mark and stumbled to regain his balance.

This arrogant son of a bitch didn't recognize him. It provided him clarity—and strength. A shiver laced down his spine as he stepped inside the house.

“Hey!” Ken slammed a hand against his shoulder.

It shuffled him back a few feet, but he never lost his balance. He was sober as a priest, thanks to Ken interrupting his evening's plans.

He pushed past Ken into the house. He shut the door behind him and stood there, facing his opponent, breathing as if he'd run a marathon. His heart beat so fast, it ached. Whatever happened next, Ken would deserve it for what he had done to her.

“Get out of my hou—”

He felt cartilage shift under the impact of his fist to Ken's nose.

Ken instinctively cradled his nose and blood poured down his face. A red mist spewed from his mouth as he spoke. "What the—" "It's your past calling, asshole."

He landed another blow. Ken's nose was broken.

Still, Ken retaliated, coming at him with force, and pinned him to the back of the door. It knocked the wind out of him.

He doubled in half, clenching at his injured abdomen, his eyes only seeing one color—red.

At that moment, adrenaline fused through his system, cording his sinew into tight springs ready to pounce. He would make him pay, make him beg for his next breath. He would no longer be viewed as weak and puny, instead, as powerful and in control.

He thrust his fist toward Ken's jaw but missed when he diverted to the side and dipped low. He took aim again, but a blow to his face stopped all movement.

White, searing pain hindered his vision. A constant rhythm pumped in his head, the music now a deadened cacophony.

Ken stood across from him, winded, each exhale exuding alcohol blended with nicotine.

"You don't even know who I am, do you?" he asked.

"I don't need to know you to kill you." Ken charged at him, the motive clear.

He had mere seconds, if not merely *a* second, to assess his surroundings and calculate the odds. They were in the kitchen. Dishes were piled on the counters and in the sink. Empty beer bottles covered the table. On the floor next to them were, easily, twenty to thirty alcohol magnums waiting to be returned for a refund.

He ducked just in time.

Ken's fist met with the wood door and had him howling in pain—but not for long. He came at him again, wrapped his hands around his middle and worked to pull him to a straight position. "You think you can come in here and attack me!"

The jab met his cheek, sliding his jaw askew and sinking his teeth into his tongue. He tasted blood.

He glanced back to the bottles again. They were close enough

that he could—

Ken yanked on his coat and pulled him upright. His opponent threw a punch and he returned one. They continued to come at each other, both men juking to avoid the other's blows, the odd one making purchase.

It was a misstep that had his foot twisting at a precarious angle, the move to divert, working to his detriment. He fell. Hard. He scrambled to regain equal footing.

It was too late. Ken came down on top of him with powerful force, straddling his midsection and constricting his airflow.

The music came back into focus. The droning guitar and screaming singer.

The blows landed consecutively, meeting with his face, his shoulders, his gut, and his sides until Ken paused, panting, and looked down at him.

"Now I know who you are." Still mounted over him, his laughter shrilled above the noise disguised as music. "I recognize your shriveling nature." More mocking laughter. Ken was driven to tears by his amusement.

He saw the one color again. Did he have what it took to take a man's life? He used to be peaceful...until he was eight and this man stripped his innocence. Life *isn't* but a dream, sweetheart.

He bucked, trying to break his arm free, but Ken applied more pressure.

It was time. He had a decision to make. Would he continue to stand back and let the Baileys of the world overpower him forever? Or would he make it clear, once and for all time, that he wasn't a man to be fucked with?

His insides warmed. His extremities cooled.

He assessed the bottles that were beside his head and he figured out what he had to do. But did he have the guts to do it? He had come over here prepared to fight, hadn't he? Well, he found one. He just hadn't expected it to be with Ken Bailey.

But what real difference did it make? It only reinforced the direction and power of fate. He had been brought to this point in his life for a reason. He was tired of letting everyone down—

especially himself.

His fingertips grazed a clear rum bottle. His fingers danced across the glass until he had a hold on it.

The hyena laughter stopped. Ken came to, realizing the intention in his eyes.

Ken drew his arm back to make a fatal blow—it was too late.

“For Molly, you asshole!” He let out a roar that challenged the music and ripped the bottle from the floor. He would be the last thing this man would see.

He wailed against him with the bottle until, finally, the glass weakened and shattered, raining over him, to reveal jagged edges.

Minutes later, he hoisted the limp body of Ken Bailey off of him and onto the floor.

His legs were rubbery when he went to stand, but he had proven himself. He had stood up to the bully and had come out the victor.

He gazed down and noticed Bailey’s chest still rose softly. Scanning the room, he found the perfect thing to fix that.

When he was finished, he decided he had something to celebrate after all.

CURRENT DAY
DECEMBER 15TH, 6 AM
DENVER, COLORADO

The plane touched down at Denver International Airport just after six in the morning. I was happy to have the tumultuous flight over with and thought it should have been canceled, but apparently those responsible for that sort of thing had cleared takeoff.

Flying typically didn't bother me, but high winds and various temperature pockets had buffeted the plane, rocking it almost like a ship at sea, only we were thirty thousand feet in the air. Land never looked so good.

Zachery slapped me on the back and had me lurching forward from the momentum. "We made it, Pending."

Months into my probationary period but still not clear of it—something I was reminded of all the time by his beloved nickname.

Jack brushed past, leading the three of us through the airport, no doubt driven by the undying urge for a cigarette. Paige hung back, and when I turned, she pushed a rogue strand of red hair from her eyes and adjusted the position of her suitcase strap on her shoulder.

Our team with the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit had been called to Colorado because some old-timer detective by the name of Mack McClellan was confident the area had a serial killer. He believed it strongly enough that we were convinced as well.

The label *serial killer* no longer fazed me, and it only took a few

horrid cases to rub off its shock value.

Regular people, who didn't have to hunt down murderers, lived life as if they were merely characters fabricated for entertainment purposes. The dark truth was, conservatively, there were an estimated thirty-five to fifty serial killers in the United States at any given time.

The local FBI office was to provide us with transportation, but it was the local detective who insisted on meeting us at the airport and bringing us up to speed.

Stepping out of the warm cocoon of the airport into the brisk winter air of Denver stole my breath. It had me wanting to retreat back inside for warmth.

For recreational purposes, Denver would be an ideal location to spend the Christmas season, with its mountain slopes and deep snow. Even facing the search for a killer, I'd rather be here, miles away from home, than facing the emptiness of the house on Christmas Day.

This would be the first year without my wife, Deb. The only thing that could make it better was reconciliation, but we were beyond that point. Truth be told, I wasn't even sure if I'd take her back. The divorce was already filed, and knowing my "gift" for attracting negative events, it would be official in time for the holidays. It didn't matter though. I had found a way to move forward in my life—at least I told myself that. Maybe I was burying my feelings, but I preferred to think I healed faster than most.

"Hey, there they are."

A man pushed off the hood of a Crown Vic, the cup in his hand steaming in the cold air. At full height, he was all of five eight. His dark-blond hair was sparse and made me think of a Chia Pet just starting to grow. He wore a thigh-length wool parka, zipped up shy of his collar by about six inches. It revealed a white collared shirt and a blue tie with white dots. I wondered if he dressed this way all the time or only when the FBI was in town.

He put his cup on the roof of the car and came toward us with another man who wore a fur-lined leather jacket paired with blue jeans.

It had me wondering which was more uncomfortable: frozen stiff jeans or dress pants. I was experiencing the latter.

Curse winter and all that's white.

"Gentleman, I'm Mack McClellan." The man in the parka extended his hand, first to Jack. He must have sensed his authority despite the lit cigarette.

Jack took a quick inhale and blew a cloud of pollution out the side of his mouth, then shook the man's hand. "Supervisory Special Agent Jack Harper, and this is my team." Jack left us to introduce ourselves.

After shaking Paige's and Zachery's hands, McClellan's gaze settled on me, and the glint in his eye told me he thought of me as an inexperienced newbie.

He gestured to the man with him. "This is Detective Ronnie Hogan. He's also with the Denver PD. We're not partners, but he's of the same mind. There's a serial killer at play here."

Hogan dipped his head in greeting but made no effort to extend a hand. His eyes were brown and hard to read. Crease lines were etched in his brow, but he also had smile lines, so there was some promise there. Not that we witnessed the expression.

McClellan, on the other hand, grinned with a warmth that touched his eyes. "Glad to see you made it all right. The weather hasn't been real cooperative. How was your flight?"

Jack took another drag on his cigarette. "Over now."

His retort killed the detective's smile. "A man who is all business, I see. So, the dead body. You know the name and details."

Another pull on the cigarette and Jack flicked the glowing butt to the ground and extinguished it with the twist of a shoe.

"We know what the file says, but we like to go over everything in person." Paige smiled at the detectives, no doubt trying to compensate for Jack's rather abrupt nature.

"Well, let us fill you in on the way to where the body was found. My, it's mighty cold out here." He rubbed his hands together and grabbed his cup before going around to the driver's side. "For everyone to be more comfortable, two of you can come with me, and the other two can go with Hogan."

McClellan seemed like an open book—what you saw was what you got. With Hogan, there was something about him, whether it was his skepticism or what, I wasn't sure. A quality that should repel actually made me want to get to know him.

"I'll go with Hogan." Paige and I spoke at the same time.

Our eyes connected. In the past, this symmetry in thought would have elicited a smile from both of us. These days, we were doing all we could to fight a simmering chemistry between us that had started when I went to the FBI Academy. Paige was a teacher there, and we'd had a brief affair, meant to be casual. Neither of us could have foreseen that we'd wind up on the same team. And there was no doubt the FBI—and Jack—would frown on fraternization among colleagues. Still, the urge to play with fire was something too tempting to ignore.

Paige stepped back and sought Jack's direction. "I'll go with whoever you want me to."

"It's fine. You guys go with Hogan. We'll all catch up at the crime scene."

She went past me and held out her hand to Hogan. "I don't think we've been properly introduced."

Hogan stared at her extended hand and, eventually, conceded to a brief handshake.

As he was getting into the driver's seat, I whispered in Paige's ear, "He's not really the touchy-feely kind, is he?"

I received a glare in response.

Things must be slow for you guys if you're willing to come all the way here for this case." Hogan kept his eyes on the road, his voice level as he spoke. He made a quick pass of a slower-moving vehicle.

My fingers gripped the armrest on the door, indenting the foam beneath it. "You don't think we're looking for a serial killer?"

A small snort, which could have been construed as a laugh. "I'm not saying anything. McClellan can be a convincing man. I agree the situations surrounding these men are similar. Whether that means anything more, I haven't fully decided."

He touched the brakes, and the back end of the car lost traction and swayed to the right. No one else seemed to notice or care.

"How long have you been with the Denver PD?" Paige asked.

It warranted a quick, sideways glance from Hogan. "Is this where you try to get to know me better?"

Paige's jaw tightened. "If you don't like people, why are you a cop?"

I settled into the seat, happy that I wasn't on the receiving end of her temper for a change. Part of me wished to be elsewhere, the other part wondered who would come out the victor.

"Who says I don't like people?" Hogan said. "I like people just fine. I just don't like feds."

"And what have we done to you?"

Hogan kept his eyes straight ahead. "McClellan feels the latest victim was left there for us to find. Like this guy wants to get caught."

“So that’s how you get by in life? You shut people down who try to get close?” Paige challenged.

“You want to get close to me, sweetheart, we’ll do it after-hours, but now’s the job.”

Paige knotted her arms, punched her back into the seat, and let out an angry sigh.

Hogan didn’t give any indication he was affected by her response. He took a street on the right, made a quick left, parked, and cut the engine. “We’re here.”

“I’m glad you told us,” Paige mumbled and got out of the car.

We had beat the other detective and the rest of our team, but as we made our way toward the dumpster where the victim had been found, the department-issued sedan pulled in, crunching snow beneath the wheels.

When we were all standing near the dumpster, which was at the back of Lynn’s Bakery, McClellan pointed to the right of the bin.

“The body was found there,” McClellan started. “He was covered in snow with only the tip of his boots showing. The waste-removal company found him when they came to empty the bin. At first, the worker thought he was trash, but when he stepped out of the truck to deal with it, he got more than he expected.”

“Something that he even got out of the vehicle. Most would carry on and not care. They’re hired to empty the container, not clean up the surrounding area,” Paige said.

“Exactly what I thought.”

“Did you question the garbageman?”

“Yeah. Even pulled a background. Nothing came of it.”

“Name’s Craig Bowen,” Zachery interjected.

McClellan seemed impressed by Zachery. “Read that in the file? Good memory. The cause of death?”

“Rat poison.”

The man had no idea with whom he was dealing.

“Impressive. Now this guy didn’t go silently, or easily, that’s for sure.”

“And you think this is connected to animal-cruelty cases?” I asked, pulling from the notes on the file.

“Yes, I do. The vic’s name was Darren Simpson. Twenty-six years ago he was charged with feeding his dog rat poison, but the charges didn’t stick. The guy walked. It was big news around here.”

“Animal-cruelty cases are *big news*?” They should be, but they rarely got the attention they deserved.

McClellan leveled his gaze on me. “Well, there’s a spot for them in the paper. Bigger news years ago than it is these days.”

“So this guy was accused of poisoning animals twenty-six years ago and you think someone’s coming back for revenge now?” Paige asked.

“Exactly what I’m thinking.”

Hogan rolled his eyes.

I gestured to him and addressed McClellan. “Your friend here doesn’t seem convinced.”

McClellan smirked. “Nothing much fazes Hogan, but he does concede that *something* is going on here.”

“The file mentions there are a few missing men, including one more recently,” Zachery said. “This is why you’re convinced there’s a serial killer?”

“Yes. Two date back a bit ago. Dean Garner went missing in 2009. He left his dog outside for hours during a record heatwave with no shade or water. The dog’s heart failed. Charges were dropped because there wasn’t enough evidence.”

“Unbelievable,” I spat.

McClellan went on. “Karl Ball was charged with pit-bull fighting but got off on a technicality. He went missing in 2010.”

“So, our victim poisoned his dog and then dies of poisoning,” I summarized. “It certainly sounds like more than a coincidence.”

“Our unsub is targeting animal abusers who beat the charges,” Zachery said. “He carries out his own sort of vigilante justice, bringing the same punishment upon them as they inflicted.”

Paige tossed some hair behind her shoulder. “If that’s the case, is it wrong to side with the killer? What kind of monster abuses animals? They rely on us for protection, for food, for shelter, for love, and how are they repaid? Abuse. The thought makes *me* angry enough to kill.”

“He?” McClellan glanced at Zachery, picking up on his reference to gender. He rested his hands on his hips and drummed his fingers there.

“It’s a logical deduction to presume the killer we seek is male. The targeted victims are men for one,” Zachery explained.

“But poison? Isn’t that a common method for females?”

“It is, however, no women that fit the profile of being animal abusers are missing, are they?” Zachery countered.

“No.”

“That suggests our killer is a man hunting other men.”

Hogan stepped toward Paige. “All I know is this guy needs to be stopped. These are people he’s killing, not animals.”

Paige tilted her jaw out. “You sure?”

“I agree they were charged with barbaric acts,” Hogan said, “but they deserve to be heard and have a fair trial.”

“Guess you do like people.” Paige looked Hogan straight in the eyes, and he turned away first.

Jack slipped a hand into his coat pocket. “Tell us about the man who was recently reported missing.”

McClellan nodded. “His name is Gene Lyons, reported missing by his wife five days ago. After finding Simpson, we realized the similarities between the two men. Twenty-five years ago, Lyons was alleged to have tied his beagle to his deck with a choker and leave it unattended. The poor thing ended up strangling itself.”

Anger rippled through me. The man we hunted—was he a monster or a hero? Faced with knowledge of what the victims had done turned my thoughts homicidal.

“The file notes that all four men were married,” Zachery said. “Four, including Simpson.”

A slow nod from McClellan. “Not all happily, but in somewhat committed relationships.”

“Did you speak with them?” Jack asked.

“Oh yeah,” McClellan replied. “Let’s just say the women in these men’s lives are interesting. We’ll leave it at that. They had alibis, if you want to call them that. Of course, you say we’re looking for a man, but the spouses are always looked at first, as you know.”

Simpson's wife's alibi was jail. She'd been locked up for the night for drunk and disorderly. Let's just say some people dance to the beat of a different drummer. These would be them."

"The file said Garner's wife, Jill, was home watching TV when she decided enough time had passed and her husband should be home. Ball's wife, Renee, was out drinking with her girlfriends at the time of his disappearance." Zachery burrowed his hands into his coat pockets. "With Lyons, the wife was trying to hunt him down for some spending money and couldn't find him. She didn't really know exactly when he went missing."

"Correct on all counts. Lyons and his wife were separated, except when it came to finances. He carried her."

"His line of work?" I asked.

"A computer geek."

"You've got to be kidding me. Just when you'd think he'd be harmless, he's at home abusing the dog." Paige bounced, in what appeared to be an effort to fend off the cold.

"Why don't we go inside Lynn's?" McClellan suggested. "She's got hot coffee and baked goods you would die for—maybe not the perfect turn of phrase."

Paige smiled. "Sounds better than standing out here freezing."

Jack nodded, and the team followed the local detectives.

LYNN'S BAKERY WAS A FAMILY-RUN business. It hadn't been touched by corporate America with flashy monikers and steep prices. Stepping inside, the warmth made my cheeks tingle and encased me in a metaphorical hug while the smell of cinnamon buns and apple pie baking in the oven tantalized my senses.

In a front display case, there was an assortment of baked goods, which included cookies, muffins, scones, donuts, pastries, and cakes. Everything came in a seemingly endless variety. On the counter were more tiered confections, with slices missing, displayed in glass domes. A wooden easel held a chalkboard sign that read *Please seat yourself*.

We followed its direction and pushed two tables together.

McClellan gestured to a waitress. She was maybe twenty and had

long brown hair that was swept back into a loose ponytail, with the exception of two curly strands that dangled in front of each ear. Her eyes were pale green, and she didn't wear any makeup. Stitched onto her uniform was the name, *Annie*. She held a pen in her left hand and a small notepad in her right.

"You guys all here 'cause of—" She gestured with the end of her pen behind her shoulder, denoting the back alley.

"Now, what have I told you, Annie?" Detective McClellan sustained eye contact with her.

"Dad, I'm just curious. It's not a big deal. You guys are all FBI?" Annie's gaze drifted to me, and she smiled.

Paige noticed and raised her brow.

"We're here to warm up, not to meet and greet," McClellan directed her.

Annie's shoulders sagged and she jutted her hips to the right. "Fine."

"All right, so we'll each have a coffee and a Christmas cookie."

Annie's pen never met paper, and she walked away. I was left wondering a couple things, one being what a *Christmas cookie* was. I voiced my other observation. "You never told us your daughter works here."

McClellan waved a dismissive hand. "What does it really matter? She didn't kill that man."

"That you know of," I shot back, toying with the man.

McClellan's cheeks flamed red. "You're serious? I thought you said that it was a—"

I smiled. He grimaced.

McClelland rested his hand on a napkin in front of him, fanning up a corner and repeating the cycle a few times. "As we were starting to discuss out—"

Annie put a coffee in front of Jack. "You must be the boss. It's easy to tell."

Did I detect an underlying smile on Jack?

"I am." Jack grabbed a sugar packet from a small glass bowl in the middle of the table.

She set the tray down with the rest of our coffees and extended

a hand to Jack. "I'm Annie."

"Jack Harper." He shook her hand.

"Annie, we don't have time for this," McClellan coolly reminded her.

Annie ground the heel of one of her shoes into the floor and offered a pressed-lip smile. "My dad likes to control everything I do. He drives me nuts."

"Well, until you pay your own rent."

"Yadda, yadda." She rolled her eyes and looked at me. "You ever get the as-long-as-you-live-under-my-roof speech from your parents?"

How young does she think I am? I have at least seven or eight years on her.

"You're kidding?" Zachery laughed and patted my back. "He still gets that."

Annie laughed. The expression suited her—well. She was probably a heartbreaker. I had a feeling McClellan was well aware of it, too. His attention narrowed in on me.

"Annie, please, we have work to do."

She rolled her eyes again and distributed the coffees, then held the round tray against her chest. "If it's true that murdered man killed a dog, then he deserved what he got." She gauged us for a response, but when none of us offered one, she left.

"You discuss open cases with your daughter?" Jack asked.

"I didn't discuss anything with her. The news was all over it. It's kind of hard to keep them quiet."

"Hmm."

Jack's famous—or *infamous*—guttural response. Sometimes it was hard to tell if he was pleased or not. I'd side with the latter in this case.

"We were talking about the missing men's significant others before we came inside. Tell us more about them," Paige prompted.

McClellan pulled his eyes from Jack. "None of the women have a violent history. Even with Simpson's drunk and disorderly, she wasn't hostile; she was half-naked in a public place. Charges of indecent exposure should have been pursued."

“Why weren’t they?” I asked. “You said she spent the night in jail.”

Color saturated the detective’s face. “That’s all she got. The chief thought formal charges were excessive.”

“She’s nice-looking,” Jack concluded, pulling out his pack of cigarettes and placing it on the table. His hand covered it, but he didn’t light up. There were “No Smoking” signs posted all over the place.

“Yeah,” McClellan mumbled.

“What about here?” I started, hoping to put the conversation back on track. “Anything about this site that seems significant?”

McClellan shook his head. “None that we’re aware of at this point.”

“We need to know who wrote the articles about these men,” Jack said to McClellan. To his team, he added, “We need to speak to the garbageman who found Simpson. We also need to have a chat with Simpson’s wife, as well as the wives of the other missing men. I’d say things possibly started with Karl Ball, who went missing in 2009, but we’ve got a fresh body and another man recently reported missing. We dig into those first.”

“Agree, boss.” Paige blew on her coffee and took a sip.

A thought struck, and I shared it with the group. “Zachery mentioned it’s likely the killer we’re after is male, but I’d say it also sounds like he’s targeting those who specifically abuse dogs.”

Zachery popped a piece of cookie into his mouth and then jabbed a finger at me. “Good point. He probably also experienced something at a younger age that made him predisposed to—”

Hogan coughed and held a hand over his mouth. Its source, clearly, was derision.

We all looked at him.

“You can tell all of this from what we have so far?”

“Hogan, please,” McClellan said.

“It just seems like, what’s the point of local law enforcement as long as we have the FBI.” Hogan tossed a five on the table and stood.

McClellan shot to his feet and leaned in toward Hogan. He

spoke low, but it was easy to hear. “Why are you acting like this? You said you’d be of help.”

Hogan scanned McClellan’s face but addressed us. “I want this killer stopped just as much as all of you, but a serial killer at work? Unsub? Your fancy terminology for what we would call a perp.”

“Abbreviation,” Zachery cut in, “and to be more precise, it means unidentified subject.”

Hogan clenched his jaw. “You have to do everything different. And, if that’s not enough, you have to pry your nose into our cases.” Back to McClellan. “I’ve gotta go do some police work.” He left, and his wet boots squeaked on the floor as he made his way across the bakery.

McClellan’s exhale puffed out his chest. He took his seat again. “I’m sorry about him.”

“From the file, one journalist reported on all these cases,” Zachery said, prompting for a response to Jack’s earlier inquiry. He seemed unaffected by what had just taken place.

“Yeah.” McClellan went for his coffee. Disappointment radiated from him, but he tried to shuck it off with a smile. But it didn’t fully form. “The guy’s name is Kent Fields, now a giant in the publishing industry. He’s got three Pulitzers to his credit and many other awards. I highly doubt it’s him behind these murders.”

“He might have information, from behind the scenes, that will prove useful to the investigation,” Paige said.

“You sure about that? Remember these cases go back twenty-six years. That’s a long time.”

“We’ll see if it feels that long ago to him,” Jack jumped in.

McClellan nodded. “It might not be a bad idea to talk to the main animal-activist group in town either. I’ll get you their information.”

“There’s a lot of people we need to speak with and we’re not getting it done sitting around here.” Jack stood and the rest of us followed his lead.

“You guys take my car. I’ll call for a ride.” McClellan’s gaze went to the window. Outside large snowflakes fell in quick succession.

“Don’t worry, Detective, we get snow in Virginia.” Jack slipped

out a cigarette and tucked the package back into his pocket.

McClellan's eyes went to it. "Of course you do. I didn't—"

"We'll head to the station first, see if our rides are there, and get someone to come back for you."

"I'd appreciate it."

I can't say that I was excited about Jack driving in this weather. Behind the wheel, the man typically scared me on clear sunny days, but I hurried, hoping to call shotgun first.

Three

His hands shook every time, but someone had to clean up the city. The government certainly wasn't going to do anything about it. Those who were elected put on a show for pomp and ceremony and were all about money and fame at the end of the day. They slept in their multimillion-dollar homes and shut out the ugliness of the world around them. For appearance's sake, they went to their charity benefits while being too lazy to deal with the issues. The promises made to those who'd voted them into office in the first place were forgotten. It was a disgusting reality that defined politics. The very men who swore to deal with issues, to rectify injustices, sat on the sidelines, more incompetent than most.

This is why he was left to take the power into his own hands and make a difference to society. He brought justice for the Defenseless by condemning their Offender.

It was this reasoning that added justification for his actions. Everyone had a purpose. His was to speak for the victims who have no voice. He was their Advocate.

Placing Simpson's body on display was to be a message that crimes against the Defenseless would not be tolerated, and that those who inflicted abuse upon them would be held accountable.

This Offender, his latest captive, would take patience, but that was one thing he had developed over the years. A tempering of knowing whom to strike and when.

The Advocate watched his captive through a camera he had placed in the man's cell. The Offender was extended the same

courtesies he had provided his canine companion—a dank corner with an empty food dish and a shitty water bowl. To complete the retribution, he put a tight choker around the Offender's neck and attached it to a short chain.

For hours, the man had protested his captivity, but now his cries for help had lost conviction. What were once high-pitched screams had dulled to mumbled pleas. Despair and hopelessness were taking over, and that thought made the Advocate smile. He was making a difference. He offered no mercy for the Offenders, as they deserved what was coming their way. The Advocate took pleasure exacting revenge and punishment on these mongrels, and it had become his driving purpose in life. It was what he was meant to do.

He watched the Offender pull on his choker again, but his efforts would never meet with success. The collar was latched tight and secured with a tiny padlock at the base of his neck.

"Aw, is it getting a little harder to breathe?" the Advocate said to himself. Laughter had his eyes pinching shut and tears seeping from the corners.

The man also kept trying to reach the bench in his cell to sit down, but the length of the chain had been adjusted so there was no possibility of that happening. He would stand or hang himself.

Still, the Advocate experienced no remorse. The Offender should have thought about the consequences of his actions before he had hurt one of the Defenseless.

"Why are you doing this?" the Offender called out.

Rarely did the Advocate respond. They didn't deserve to be heard, to be granted an audience. He had tried that in the beginning, but their speeches about being guiltless fell not only on deaf ears, but on a mind steeled by retribution.

The Advocate pushed the button that would allow his voice to carry into the room. He wasn't worried about being identified—there would be no escape for an Offender—but he had modified the output anyhow. The speech distortion would toy with their minds even further.

"You brought this on yourself."

“I—” The Offender buried his face in his hands, the muffled sobbing still loud enough to hear.

The crying always reaped the opposite of their desired outcome. Instead of it tugging on the Advocate’s humanity, his mind went to the Defenseless, to those who wept internally, in darkness, in silence.

“You deserve to die!”

The man slid his hands down his face. “I haven’t done anything.”

“Drink your water, animal.” It pained the Advocate to equate this mammal to the four-legged variety. The Defenseless were superior to the Offenders in many ways.

The man’s legs buckled beneath him, the choker, doing its job, tightened its hold against his larynx. The Offender righted himself and his hands rushed to his throat, where he clawed at the collar again.

“Drink!”

“Why are you—” Vomit spewed across the room, splattering some on the camera lens.

The Advocate rubbed his hands, sat back, and swiveled in his chair.

Now things were coming together. The man would break, and when he did, the Advocate would be there to watch him take his final breath.

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