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EVERY
HUNTER IS
HUNTED

A NOVEL

BARRY LYGA

CROOKED
LANE



NEW YORK

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To Morgan, for her patience

Not Today

PROLOGUE

PATRICK WOKE TO the shaky blue dark, his hotel room wobbling and vibrating in the cast-off light of the muted TV. It took him a moment to place which hotel room: a moderately decent airport Hilton. Flying out early in the morning, they had opted for the cheaper wedding night hotel in favor of more money for the honeymoon.

His last solid memory, floating in a sea of bemused and marrow-deep fatigue, was of checking in at the front desk. That must have been hours ago.

He tried to sit up, but a throb at the base of his skull sent him back to his pillow. Walking the fingers of his right hand across the mattress, he encountered not Rebecca, but instead only the cool of her empty half of the bed.

The bedside clock blurred before him. Through sheer force of will, he cleared his eyesight. The clock's display wavered, stabilized, digits melding back into themselves. It was 4:13 AM.

"Honey?" he called. "Honey?"

They were due to fly to Antigua at ten. There was no reason for her to be awake so early.

At no response, he struggled to a sitting position, this time successfully. The bathroom door was open. After a necessary

interval to catch his breath and make sure the room would not suddenly upend and hurl him to the floor, he stood. Feeling every inch an invalid, he crept to the bathroom, using the furniture for support along the way.

So utterly silent was the room that he felt he must be wrong, that Rebecca could not possibly be in the bathroom. With the door open, he would hear *something*, and the room was just so damn *quiet*. Maybe she'd stepped out for ice for a headache. Or something. Anything.

But, no, she would be in the bathroom, he knew. She would be in the bathroom, and as he leaned against the doorjamb, he saw she was, in fact, in the bathroom, lying in the tub, face up, one arm flung casually over the side, wearing her wedding gown, its white lace bodice gone almost black with her blood, her eyes staring up at him, staring, staring, and they would never, ever stop.

C H A P T E R

1

HE'D FALLEN ASLEEP on the sofa again and the house was as cold as Thanksgiving leftovers when the sound of the doorbell awoke Jasper Dent somewhere between eleven and noon. The cold hardly surprised him. The house had been frigid when he'd fallen asleep the night before; it had been cold all the previous day and when he'd woken that day, too. The only time the house was not cold was when the air conditioning ran in the summer. Then it was something approximating lukewarm.

He shivered his way off the sofa. The house was old and cranky, and it did not care how he set the thermostat. Its floorboards creaked; its offended stairs groaned at the slightest weight; not a single door within its confines would stay closed, so warped were the frames.

The house had belonged to his grandmother, who had willed it to him. It had little to recommend it save this: It was paid off. Jasper's grandmother had not accomplished much in her life, but by dint of her sheer longevity, she'd managed to leave him a residence free and clear. The old Dent house stood three rickety, drunk-in-a-hurricane stories, flaking its leprous gunmetal paint in great ragged peels. It

was, as his best friend Howie had once said, a house haunted by itself.

Jasper had lived there since the age of thirteen, shortly after his father had been arrested and put in prison. For four years, he'd tended to the house and its owner, propping up his Alzheimer's-addled grandmother so that the world thought she was taking care of him rather than the reverse. And then she'd died and he'd inherited. A free residence and the publication of his memoir meant that, for the first time in his life, he had money.

Money could fix things. He knew the house needed serious repair at the hands of experts, but he couldn't decide where to start. So the Dent house groaned and waffled its way into the future like an old beater patched up just long enough to get to the chop shop.

On his own, he'd tried to rejuvenate the house at least a little bit, to resuscitate its potential. The house resisted him at every turn. Everything took three times longer in the Dent house than it should have. The simple act of hanging a frame on the wall more often than not required multiple drill bits, two different stud finders, a can of spackling paste, and nearly inhuman forbearance.

Bulldozing it and starting over seemed the only sane avenue, but every time he decided on that path, some housebound memory would blitz attack him from the cellars of his unconscious and he would determine to renovate the old heap back to life. This was the only home he could lay claim to; he loved it and he hated it in equal measure.

The doorbell rang again as he hesitated between the living room and the kitchen. The kitchen meant coffee, and coffee meant life, but the doorbell was closer. He opened the door and immediately regretted doing so.

The woman standing on his front porch was in her mid-to-late thirties. Attractive. African American with an elliptical

face centered around a delicate button nose. She wore a deep-blue Gore-Tex coat, a tartan scarf, and sleek black gloves. Riding an explosion of tight curls, a knit cap perched jauntily atop her head, as though it had grown up there and felt quite relaxed and uninhibited. With a smile, she waggled her fingers at him.

“Hi, so my husband and I just moved into the neighborhood and we—”

As politely and as gently as one could slam a door in someone’s face, Jasper slammed the door in her face.

A quick walker, he was almost halfway to the kitchen and the promise of caffeine by the time he heard her protest, “Oh, come on! For real?”

He stopped and chuckled despite himself. “Nice try, FBI!” he shouted back through the door.

She rang the bell again and then started pounding on the door. It sounded like she was hitting it pretty hard and she went on longer than he would have thought possible. Clearly, she wasn’t going anywhere.

With a sigh, he went back to the door and leaned against it. “Go away, FBI. Not interested.”

She smacked the door one more time, an impressively powerful blow. “Five minutes of your time. That’s all.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“We checked that a moving van was seen in the neighborhood,” she said somewhat petulantly. “At least tell me what gave me away.”

“A million things.”

“Humor me.”

He sighed and began ticking them off on his fingers, even though she couldn’t see him. “You’re wearing gloves, but they’re tight enough that I could tell you’re not wearing a ring. Married men often don’t wear wedding bands, but statistically married women do so overwhelmingly. Ergo, probably no husband. The car parked at the curb is the midsize rental model

the Bureau likes, not an SUV or minivan that you would get when moving in somewhere and buying a bunch of new crap for your house. Your coat is puffy, but your left armpit is a little puffier than the right, so that's where your gun is holstered. And last but not least, the FBI knows my girlfriend is Black, too, and one of their shrinks thinks maybe you'd catch me off guard as a result."

Silence on the other side of the door. There were more clues, more slipups, but he didn't feel like elucidating further. Jasper didn't think he was lucky enough to have driven her away with his first salvo.

Sure enough, after a moment, she spoke up. "You're as good as they say you are."

"And your profile has got to include that flattery is the wrong way to go with me."

"Not trying to flatter you," she said. "Just being honest."

She sounded sincere and truthful and earnest, and he took a moment to remind himself that absolutely none of that mattered to him.

"It's been fun, but now I'm going to have my coffee and you're going to disappear back to whatever cubicle the FBI has reserved for you."

In the kitchen, he fumbled around in the cabinets, then heaved out a sigh. His winter coat, a quilted, plaid affair that Howie said made him look like a truck driver, was on a hook near the back door. Slipping into it, he patted the pockets for his phone and wallet, then stepped into a pair of battered kicks. He almost opened the back door, then changed direction.

The FBI agent was sitting on the front stoop that led down into the yard. As he regarded her from the threshold, she wrestled a grin away from her lips before it could fully form.

"What changed your—"

“I’m out of coffee. I’ll let you buy me a cup.”

* * *

“Take the next left and get on the highway,” he told her.

She had introduced herself as Special Agent Maxine de la Croix. He hadn’t bothered introducing himself. In de la Croix’s inoffensive rental, he directed her off the two-laner that contracted to one lane while bisecting the heart of town. The town of Lobo’s Nod had a way of making most things smaller when it absorbed them. Roadways were no exception.

“There’s a place closer,” de la Croix said. “In town. I saw it on my way. Local joint. Coff-E-Shop or something. Looked nice.”

“I don’t go there. There’s a Starbucks one exit up.”

She hesitated only a moment, then signaled and switched lanes. Lobo’s Nod, his hometown, his home base, disappeared behind them.

“Do people still call you Jazz?” she asked, glancing over at him.

He favored her with the most withering look in his collection and very deliberately said nothing.

She returned her attention to the road. “OK, look, I’m here because—”

“Because the Bureau sends someone like you every few months. Congratulations—you have the length of the trip to Starbucks and back to talk to me. That’s better than anyone else they’ve sent. They might give you a raise.”

“All we want—”

“You guys think that just because my parents were serial killers, I’ve got some kind of gift for hunting them down.”

“You did a fair job of nailing your parents a few years back. And a few of their buddies, too.”

He grunted. “I was a teenager. I thought I was invincible. And a lot of people got hurt.”

“You’re too young to pull off the grizzled veteran routine,” she said, her tone tired and snappish. Her face crumpled in self-reproach as soon as she said it. He grinned.

By now they’d pulled into the drive-through lane at the closest Starbucks. De la Croix ordered for them both, handed his coffee to him, and—after a moment’s hesitation—headed back to the Dent house. Jasper took a sip of his coffee, even though it was scalding hot.

“Sorry about that before,” she muttered.

“Don’t be. You finally said something not in the FBI script. Good for you.” He saluted her with his coffee.

With a rueful chuckle, she tapped her cup against his. They both drank in silence for a moment as she drove.

“It’s not that I want to be difficult,” he said, staring out the windshield. “I just don’t want to be involved in—”

“We think it’s a Crow.”

He stopped. He did everything in his power to resist turning back to her, but all his power was not enough. Face-to-face with her, he set his jaw and, with as much testosterone as he could muster, said, “Do not screw with me. Not about this.”

“I’m not. I swear.”

The Crows. A secret nationwide collective of serial killers. So well concealed that no one who wasn’t a member even knew they existed until Jasper, as a teenager, had gone up against the Crow King, Janice. His mother.

And her right-hand man, Jasper’s father, Billy.

Together, they had a serial killing career that spanned decades and bodies in the triple digits, but that was only the veneer of their depravity. The Crows were massing power and influence, placing their more agreeable members in positions of social influence and power, all in pursuit of an insane agenda that seemed to revolve around the idea of turning the country into a hunting preserve for serial killers.

The notion was so mad as to be risible, but the fact that the Crows had operated for so long without being discovered smothered any amusement he may have considered.

“Are you sure?” he heard himself ask. Despite his best, most cherished intentions, his temples began to pulse. His breathing had quickened ever so slightly.

They’d pulled into his driveway. De la Croix cut the engine and sighed, turning in her seat to regard him. “This is the end of our trip. I guess you’ll never know.”

Her lips curled the bare minimum to qualify for a self-satisfied smile. She truly looked nothing at all like Connie, but in that moment he desperately wanted her to. It would make his capitulation a tiny bit easier.

“Let’s go inside,” he said.

* * *

“He’s called Bridekiller,” de la Croix told him, strumming her fingers on a tablet that she had so far not bothered to hand to Jasper.

“What makes you think he’s a Crow?”

“There’s a passage in your father’s book that seems relevant.” She consulted a scan on the tablet. “He takes them in the white. He is pure in ways they are not, so he takes them in the white. In the white he takes . . .” She broke off and looked at Jasper. “It goes on about taking them in the white for a while.”

They were in the living room, Jasper’s blanket from the previous night still crumpled on the floor. De la Croix sat in what had been his grandmother’s favorite chair, an offensively pale blue recliner gone sweaty-bald-man shiny from decades of use. It reclined no longer on command, but rather at its own whim; it had nearly dumped de la Croix onto the floor when she’d first sat down.

“Go on,” he told her.

“So then the text stops in the middle of a sentence, but thirteen pages later, there’s a reference to veils in the marginalia that our guys thought was pertinent and seems to be from the same general time period as the stuff about taking them in the white. It seems like your father was describing Bridekiller.”

The FBI was in possession of the only thing in the world Jasper could think of as an inheritance from his father: a book Billy had written over his decades-long madness describing the Crows in language alternately lyrical and fuddled, a dense, impenetrable handwritten screed-*cum*-history that followed the rules of logic and syntax as filtered through Billy’s diseased brain. Jasper had been led to it by a cryptic comment of his father’s and exhumed it from his grandfather’s coffin one cold January night when he was seventeen while on the run from the police and on his way to his final confrontation with his parents.

As part of his ultimate plea deal, he’d turned it over to the FBI. They’d spent hundreds of thousands of dollars and some of their best brains on decoding it in the years since.

“Are there historical antecedents?” Jasper asked.

“We have some guys looking into that.”

“Because your Bridekiller could be the same guy Billy was describing or someone copying him. These Crows are obsessed with each other. They leave each other little clues, play games, riff on each other’s ‘art’ . . .”

“We know.”

“Then what the hell do you need me for?”

“Because he’s killed four women in the last seven months and we don’t know where to go.”

Jasper grunted and held his hand out for the tablet. She brought up the Photos app and gave it to him.

He’d heard of Bridekiller. Serial killer stories had a way of finding him, even when he wasn’t trying to find them. Their specific breed of evil and grotesque had a magnetic

attraction to his soul, and no matter how hard he tried, the news articles, the roundups, found their way onto his phone and computer as though trained to run a maze that led only to him.

Bridekiller murdered women on their wedding nights. He operated in the Pacific Northwest—of his four victims, three were in the Seattle area, one in Portland. He left the bodies for the new husbands to find.

Jasper swiped through the photos. Four victims. All women, obviously. All white. All brunettes. Each wearing her personal variation on the tried-and-true white wedding gown, that blank map of the future now encroached upon by bloody continents and islands.

Two were in bathtubs. One on a bathroom floor. The last lay face down, crumpled over a hotel toilet as though vomiting up the night's revels had gone pear-shaped.

Swiping further, then back, then forth again. Different angles. Same bodies. Same body type: average. All size eights, maybe, if his eye was accurate.

“What are you seeing?” de la Croix asked with a confidence that grudgingly pleased him.

“Probably not much more than you guys,” he admitted. “Look, it’s been a while since I’ve done this. I don’t know what you want from me. They’re pictures of dead women, OK?” Quite suddenly, he realized he was sweating, a constellation of beads blossoming along his hairline. Ignoring it failed, so he wiped at it with the heel of one hand. It couldn’t be the house, still haunted frigid by his grandmother’s pissed off, deluded spirit. It was him. Just him.

“You OK?” she asked with something approximating concern.

He didn’t answer. Kept swiping. The bodies became a blur of white, red, and black. He’d read somewhere that those were the only colors newborn babies could perceive, and now,

unbidden, an image of a baby crawling across a field of bodies crowded into his mind.

“Hates his wife, maybe?” de la Croix ventured, risking a lean forward in the temperamental recliner.

Jasper flipped back and forth, the photos continuing to blur. The baby was crawling, its palms and knees bloodied as it progressed across the red-marred virgin terrain of the brides’ bodies. He stood abruptly and threw the tablet down, then strode quickly to the powder room just off the kitchen, ignoring de la Croix’s startled shout.

With the door closed, he suffered a sudden and unexpected bout of claustrophobia, but nothing would get him out of this room right now. Braced against the sink, he did not look up into the mirror as he cranked the tap open as wide as it could go, trying to drown the static in his head with the white noise of rushing water.

The baby wasn’t in his mind. Not entirely. The baby—blood-streaked and never wholly innocent—was him.

His mother had birthed him solely so that she could kill him. Only his father’s twisted interpretative dance of paternal love had saved him. Years later, Jasper repaid the debt by paralyzing Billy and sending him back to jail instead of killing him.

As for his mother . . . he’d tried his best to kill her, something he was still coming to terms with. Not necessarily the effort, but rather the failure.

Shoveling handfuls of water onto his face, he blocked out the world, the dead women, the baby, de la Croix in his living room, prowling and finding who knew what. The water cooled him and slaked him, and eventually he could stop seeing the baby, the bodies. He could stop thinking of his mother, bloody and gasping for breath, her throat caught in the crook of his arm, the throb of his muscles as he choked and choked.

Enough.

There was no towel, for which he could only blame himself and his less than fastidious housekeeping. He stripped off his shirt and used it to mop the water from his face. In doing so, he caught a glimpse of his chest in the mirror. His chest and the tattoo, the damn tattoo he'd gotten years ago, when he'd thought nothing could stop him, nothing could evade him, nothing could hurt him.

Before he'd learned.

He had learned harsh lessons no teenager should have to learn. They echoed still, even in his twenties.

The tattoo dipped along the arc of his clavicle in two-inch-high black Gothic script. Executed backward so that he could read it in a mirror, it said, *I HUNT KILLERS*.

"Stupid," he muttered.

And then, "Shit."

* * *

In his sodden, wrinkled shirt, he stepped out of the powder room. De la Croix stood a few feet away, hesitant.

"Let's go," he told her.

C H A P T E R

2

IT WASN'T RAINING when they landed in Seattle, so the city seemed like a lie from the very start. Jasper disliked it for that reason and also because it was a city at all. Cities were too full of people for him. He preferred his hometown. The Nod was a rusted hulk of an outdated car, but he knew every twitch of its axles and could rebuild its engine blindfolded. That sort of comfort meant a lot.

He white-knuckled the landing, not caring that de la Croix was sitting next to him and noticing. She'd arranged tickets to Seattle before he'd finished packing his bag. At the same time, he'd called Howie to let him know he'd be out of town.

"You're doing *what?*" Howie demanded when Jasper called him, the phone wedged between jaw and shoulder as he fumbled socks and underwear into a beaten-to-hell Lobo's Nod High duffel that had once belonged to his father.

Howie Gersten was Jasper's oldest friend, the only person in the world who'd known him before Billy Dent's depredations became public knowledge and was still willing to remain in his orbit.

“Last I remember,” Howie went on, not waiting for an answer, “the FBI is the enemy. They hate you, man. You got one of their agents killed.”

It wasn't strictly true, but it also wasn't strictly false. A few years back, on his way to his final and fated confrontation with his parents, Jasper had tried to help catch two Crows in New York City. He'd fumbled badly and as a consequence an agent named Jennifer Morales—who should have known better—was murdered. Leave it to Howie to dredge that up in the most insensitive way possible. One more reason he loved his best friend; Howie never let sentiment or propriety fall as a scrim between Jasper and the truth.

He hadn't thought of Morales in months. Hadn't had the dream where he came across her body in a rented storage unit for nearly a year. There was a part of him that wanted nothing to do with another female FBI agent. He'd have to thrash it out with his therapist at some point.

“I guess they're over it,” he told Howie with a lightness he didn't feel. “Look, this is just gonna be a couple of days at the most. I'm going to Seattle to look at the scenes and see what I can see. Then I'm back and we can get back to business.”

“Simon'll be pissed.”

Simon Dixon. Jasper's business partner, for lack of a better word. Simon was the executive director of WorldVision, an upstart victims' assistance organization. The group did good work under his watchful eye. He was also the only person at WorldVision who knew that Jasper was the organization's founder and source of funding.

He'd called Simon on the way to the airport. “I know I'm going to miss the presentation,” Jasper told an exasperated Simon, watching his words carefully in de la Croix's presence. She kept her eyes on the road while pretending not to be listening in. “You can conference me in, if you want.”

“This organization either matters to you or it doesn’t,” Simon said bluntly. Jasper could picture him at his desk, earbuds in, cupping his face in his hands as he glared straight down at his desk. “You have to commit, Jasper.”

“Don’t doubt my commitment. Just my poor scheduling skills.”

“You shouldn’t try to be funny. You’re not good at it.”

“I’ve been told that before. We’ll talk soon.”

As he hung up, de la Croix glanced over at him. “Girlfriend?”

He shrugged. Then he texted Connie. She spent long hours on a theater stage without her cell phone. There was no point calling her.

And now the plane taxied to the gate. Jasper didn’t let go of his armrests until the tone sounded that indicated passengers could disembark. He checked his phone. Nothing.

Backstage. On stage. Catching a cat nap back in the dressing room. She could be doing anything at all.

Still, it had been a long flight. He’d hoped to have heard from her by now.

There was no rain in the sky. No smell of it.

By the time they’d pulled onto the highway in another anonymous rental, de la Croix had already contacted the local field office. “We’ll hook up with the task force, so you can meet with the local PD, too.”

“Don’t care about that,” he told her. “I don’t want other people clouding me up. Just tell me what you know so far. Especially the stuff you’ve held back from the media.”

She licked her lips and hesitated.

“You want me on board or do you want to take me back home?”

“You know, you had the entire flight to look at the file—”

“I don’t fly well,” he said in his best *are you kidding me* tone.

She nodded. "He roofies the husbands. That's the big thing we've held back."

Jasper leaned back in his seat and stared up at the ceiling. "That makes sense. I was wondering why none of the husbands had anything helpful to offer. You ran blood tests?"

"Of course we did." She sounded truly affronted. "Same drug in every husband. So, it's coming from the same batch. I can get you specifics at the task force, if you want them."

"Not sure I need them, but thanks. Anything else you're holding back?"

"Some minor things. Two of the women had their underwear on. Two didn't. Before you ask: We found the underwear in the hotel rooms, on the floor, so he didn't take a trophy. No evidence of sexual assault, but evidence of sexual activity with one of them."

"Wedding night," Jasper grunted. "Makes sense."

"Did you know most people don't have sex on their wedding night? Either too drunk, too tired, or both."

"That is the least interesting fact I've ever heard."

If she was offended, she didn't show it. "We've confirmed sex/no sex with the husbands, so there's nothing hinky there. All killed by stab wounds. Multiples in some cases."

"Which cases?"

"Second and fourth," she said. "Four stab wounds for victim number two, Rebecca Sizemore. Two for number four, Theresa Van Whitten."

He stared out the window at a perfectly gray, rain-free sky for a long while. Neither of them spoke. At last, he said, "If you're expecting me to say I've cracked it, I hate to disappoint you."

She chuckled and signaled to get off the highway. "We figured it would take you more than the trip from the airport. In fact, we sort of . . ." She darted her eyes at him and slowed as she merged onto the surface street. "We were sort of thinking . . ."

No. He realized what she wanted and mentally slapped himself. Idiot. He should have seen it coming. Should have known from the start.

“We were hoping maybe you could talk to your father—”

“No,” he said out loud this time, intending it to be forceful. It came out, instead, as a whisper.

“Just to, y’know, get some intel on the book and that passage,” she went on.

“No.” Louder. “I don’t talk to my father. That part of my life is over. End of story. You want my help, you can have it. You don’t get him in the bargain.”

“He’s the one who wrote the book . . .”

At forty miles an hour, Jasper opened his door. A car in the next lane swerved and honked in surprised anger. De la Croix couldn’t slam on the brakes—too much traffic—but she slowed and shouted, “What the hell are you doing?”

“Getting out of the conversation,” he told her, and unfastened his seat belt.

“You’re—Jesus Christ! Fine! Fine! No more talk about your dad!”

He gave it a heartbeat, then slammed the door.

De la Croix’s breath came harsh and fast as she settled back into a driving rhythm. They’d gone maybe half a mile when she spoke again: “You’re crazy.” She said it without judgment or condemnation.

Jasper shrugged. “Blame my parents.”

* * *

The Bridekiller Task Force had set up shop near the Seattle Armory in a part of town called Interbay. De la Croix told Jasper this as she navigated the streets of the city, pointing out the Space Needle every time it peeked above the skyline or popped up between two buildings. Jasper had seen pictures. And

Interbay sounded like a spectacularly bad low-budget science fiction film to him.

The task force lived in an industrial park, in an anonymous two-story chunk of dirty brick with a key-carded set of double glass doors. The only hint of something more intriguing than a medical supply warehouse or rubber gasket distribution facility within was the lack of an overweight rent-a-cop. Instead, just inside the front door was a desk with a severely black-suited man who was doing absolutely nothing to hide the enormous pistol under his left armpit.

“Subtle,” Jasper remarked.

“We’re not trying to hide,” de la Croix told him as she flashed her ID at the sentry. “We didn’t have the space we needed downtown, so we moved here.”

Jasper flashed no ID. De la Croix had obviously called ahead. He nodded at the guard, who offered a grim little head tilt in response.

They passed through an inner door and into what was clearly a repurposed warehouse space. There were desks arranged in ranks of two down the middle of the floor and temporary office partitions set up in a ring around the perimeter of the facility. Wheeled corkboards, chalkboards, and whiteboards stood at angles to each other, decorated with red lines, circles, photographs, and printouts. Twenty or thirty people—most of them in shirtsleeves and slacks, a few in jeans, a rare two in uniform—rushed and bustled, moving from place to place, from desk to desk, as though tasked with burning as many calories as possible in this one place.

An air of nervous energy and angry intent buzzed, and Jasper thought that if he were Bridekiller and had stumbled on this room, he might just confess on the spot.

“Well done,” he murmured.

“What’s that?” De la Croix was hanging her coat and hat on a nearby hook.

“You have a nice sense of purpose going here. Get a suspect in here and he’ll be terrified.”

“Let’s hope we get someone to bring in,” she said darkly. “Let me introduce you around.”

What followed was a blur of faces, names, organizations, and ranks that Jasper didn’t bother committing to memory. They seemed too happy to see him. There was hope in their expressions, in their voices. Each of them seemed to come a little more alive. This, he thought, must be how neurosurgeons feel when they meet people with tumors in their brains.

He allowed his hand to be pumped in a succession of annoyingly firm handshakes and managed appropriate expressions of benign interest and muttered platitudes for each new acquaintance. They were all dedicated, as far as he could tell, and also completely superfluous. He wasn’t here for them.

Toward the end of the nearly endless meet-and-greet, a self-identified FBI agent held Jasper’s hand and attention a little too long, doubtless working up the nerve.

“I’ve been studying your parents,” he said, finally getting to the point and also finally letting Jasper’s hand go. “I read your autobiography cover to cover three times. I know you’re not in town for this, but I was wondering if I could get just five minutes of your time . . .”

The man had a diseased sort of light in his eyes, a fanatic’s tic, a click to his words from too little to drink and too much excitement. Jasper knew a thousand put-downs and shut-downs for this moment, but today he couldn’t be bothered. He was, suddenly, exhausted beyond belief. His sofa back in his grandmother’s house seemed further than the miles he’d flown, and the frigid Dent house seemed warm in memory.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he told the agent, then gestured to de la Croix that he was done and it was time to move on.

She ensconced him in an office that had clearly been abandoned on the quick—thumb tacks still pinned shreds of

torn-away papers to a wall-mounted corkboard and there was a dregs-fouled mug with a lipstick stain on the desk. He settled into an office chair that still squeaked with newness.

"I'm not here for that," he told her in a low voice, gesturing to the outer area. "I'm not your pet celebrity. I'm here to look at things, ask some questions. If I can help, I will. But I'm not running for office—nix the shaking hands and kissing babies, please, OK?"

She nodded, chewing her bottom lip. "You're right," she said, surprising him. "I'm sorry about that."

"I did stuff when I was younger," he said. "Yeah, I caught some killers. I caught my parents. I was lucky. That's the thing everyone seems to miss when they read my damn book. I got really, really lucky. And even with that luck, my grandmother was killed, my girlfriend ended up with more broken bones than I can count, and my best friend almost bled out on my living room floor."

"And—"

"And Jennifer Morales died," he said before she could. "Believe me, you don't have to remind me. She died. A lot of people died and were hurt. Some good cops lost their jobs. It wasn't fun and games and I'm not the serial killer whisperer. I'll do my best and then I'll leave, and when I go, I won't be walking on water."

She nodded. "Now I get to put you to work?"

"Yeah. Bring me everything."

She arched an eyebrow. "Everything?"

He dragged out the word into its component syllables: "*Ev-er-y-thing.*"

* * *

"Everything" turned out to be readily available on a single tablet. Jasper had to hand it to the task force—it was efficient. Every note, photo, test result, impression, and interview had

been thoroughly digitized, cataloged, indexed, and uploaded. He sat at the desk he'd been assigned, the office door closed, and swiped through document after document.

At regular intervals, de la Croix—and only de la Croix—would ply him with coffee or water. Around two in the afternoon, she reminded him that he hadn't eaten anything since the plane that morning. He agreed to a chicken wrap and chewed his way through it as he continued studying.

He read an awful lot and learned very little. This was not the fault of anyone on the task force. As best he could tell, the Bridekiller case was a perfect storm of almost everyone in law enforcement doing their jobs to a nigh-perfect standard. They had found every clue, chased down every lead. But there just wasn't enough to go on. He could see why they were stuck, why they were desperate enough to call on a guy in his twenties who'd last chased a killer while in his teens: Bridekiller was going to get away with it. All of it.

Four victims. White. Brunettes. Late twenties/early thirties. Murdered on their wedding nights, left in their gowns to be found by their drugged husbands.

Other than those facts and the geography of the murders, the victims had nothing in common. They hadn't known each other, had had different occupations and hobbies, had run in different social circles. They'd stayed at different hotel chains. There was an exhaustive report from something called the "Social Media/Online Analysis Cohort" (SMOAC—they pronounced it "smoke") that ran to thirty pages before concluding that the four women had absolutely no overlap in their online presences and had never so much as retweeted one another.

He spent some time noodling about with various number replacements for the victims' names, applying the Crows' love of codes and their own peculiar gematria in hopes that something would pop. According to the files, the FBI had already

tried this, to no avail, but he figured it couldn't hurt to try again.

Nothing. And despite his assumption, it did hurt: His temples began to throb. Migraine or too much caffeine?

There's no such thing as too much caffeine! It was Howie's voice in his head, mock-horrified. Jasper needed the laugh. Other than horror, the one constant in his life was Howie's ridiculous sense of humor and wholly inappropriate timing.

With a sigh and a rub of his stressed, tired eyes, he leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling. The ceiling stared inscrutably back.

The next time de la Croix eased open the office door, he said, "OK, let's talk."

3

SHE BROUGHT ONLY two more people into the office, which he appreciated—he was sure she was tempted to bring more. But the office could barely hold the four of them, and Jasper’s comfort level typically maxed out long before the space around him.

Even though he’d met them when he arrived, the man and woman who entered the room were ciphers to him. He remembered nothing except shaking their hands briefly. He thought maybe their names were Sam and Chris. Or perhaps the other way around. He decided not to let it bother him. Sam (or Chris) was the Bureau’s behavioral specialist. Chris (or Sam) was the liaison from the Seattle PD. They were both intense and tired, but spoke with minimal formality, which Jasper appreciated.

“We’re dead-ended,” de la Croix said to begin with. “The last murder was five weeks ago and we have nothing. Not even an estimate on when he might strike again.”

“That’s the weird thing,” Sam (he’d decided she was Sam, the police liaison) admitted. She was leaning against a fragile temporary wall with more confidence in its stability than Jasper would have had. “He’s lengthening his time between kills. Makes it harder to predict his next.”

“I noticed that,” Jasper said. “Usually these guys get more confident as they go along and the high from each kill fades faster and faster, so they have to accelerate.”

“There’s no pattern,” Sam admitted. “He kills the first one. Then three weeks later, the second one. Then it’s like five weeks until the third, then almost two months until the fourth.”

“It’s like he’s becoming *less* confident as time goes on, not more,” said de la Croix. “He seems to be losing his nerve.”

“We think there are constraints on his behavior.” Chris, the FBI behaviorist, had unchivalrously taken the last chair. He leaned forward in it, consulting papers on a clipboard. “Something is preventing him from taking action when he wants to or needs to, hence the growing delays. We think he’s in a business that requires a lot of travel.”

That made sense. “Have you guys done a general Jack Dawes check?” Jasper asked.

Jack Dawes was a cover name and alternate identity shared by the Crows, who thought they were so clever that no one would make the connection between a jackdaw and a crow. Then again, they’d successfully used the name for decades before Jasper stumbled upon it, so maybe they were precisely as clever as they thought. In the years since the capture of Billy and Janice Dent, the Crows certainly should have changed their methodology as a precaution, since they couldn’t be aware of what information might have been compromised. Any remotely intelligent criminal would have burned the old identity to the ground. But when dealing with the compulsive nature of serial killers, anything was possible. Jasper had spent much of his life revering a killer named Bobby Joe Long specifically because Long had felt an unalterable and unavoidable compulsion to let his last victim go, a decision that led to his arrest.

The greatest weapon available to the hunter of serial murderers was the irresistible impulse the killers couldn’t elude, no matter how hard they tried. It transcended *modus operandi*—it

was not a method of operation, but rather a signature, one they could not help but to leave, inscribed in indelible ink.

“The Bureau has been running constant checks on property deeds, driver’s licenses, and credit card applications for anyone named Jack, Jonathan, or Jacqueline Dawes since you turned in the book your father wrote,” Chris told him, skimming the clipboard. “We’ve rolled up a bunch of property that appeared to be safe houses and frozen a bunch of credit lines.”

“Bet you also pissed off some guys who just happen to be named Jack Dawes, too,” Jasper said.

“Well, yeah. But there’s nothing connecting that name to this case anywhere in the Pacific Northwest. We’ve also begun monitoring names that are combinations of your parents’, including your mother’s maiden name, on the theory that the Crows may begin using them.”

For the first time, Jasper found himself caught off guard. That made excellent sense, he hated to admit. The Crows had elevated group solipsism to Olympian levels, and their reverence for their dethroned Crow King and her blood-drenched consort could very well show itself in a new series of aliases.

“Smart,” he said with as little begrudging as possible.

If any of the career law enforcement officers in the room took pride or pleasure in his compliment, they didn’t evince it.

“That’s what we *don’t* know,” Chris told him. “Here’s what we *do* know:

“First of all, Bridekiller isn’t his name or even ours. The press gave it to him after the second murder and it’s just convenient to use. Anyway, there’s a reference in your dad’s book—”

“Agent de la Croix enlightened me.”

Chris nodded and flipped the page on his clipboard. “Got it. We’re feeling pretty confident at this point that the person described in your dad’s book isn’t the same individual killing women right now. The reference in the Crow Guide—”

“Is that what you call it?”

“Well.” Chris shrugged. “We have to call it *something*. Anyway, the reference in the book would have to predate your grandfather’s death, since your dad buried the book with him. That would make the individual in the book—let’s call him Bridekiller One, OK?—would make him probably something like sixty years old by now. We’re not sure he could do this.”

He handed over a photo of a scene Jasper had seen already, but from a different angle. Victim number four, Theresa Van Whitten. She lay sprawled in her wedding gown in a tub, yes, but with the new perspective Jasper could see that this was a jetted hot tub, with sides much higher than your standard, run-of-the-mill hotel bathtub.

“Theresa Van Whitten is the heaviest of the victims. Tall girl. Judo teacher. Weighed close to one-eighty. That’s a lot of weight, in a long, bulky package.”

Not a single person grimaced, objected to, or even blinked at Chris’s use of the word *package* to describe a dead woman. It was that kind of room.

“I’ve known some strong old people,” Jasper said.

“We’re talking someone in their sixties,” de la Croix said. “Maybe even older. And yeah, sure, it’s possible to be that fit at that age, but unlikely.”

Sam jumped in. “We think the”—she fumbled for the right word—“job—”

“Onus?” de la Croix offered.

“Sure, onus,” Sam agreed. “The onus of ‘Bridekiller’ is sort of like a vocation or an identity passed down from one Crow to another. Or maybe—more likely—taken from one by another. So this new guy, Bridekiller Two, is just picking up where some older Bridekiller left off.”

“Do you have stats on women killed on their wedding nights?” Jasper asked. “Instances *not* connected directly to these? From a while back?”

Chris picked up. “We’ve done a search on similar MOs over the last several years. Nothing there. The problem is when you go back further. The earlier Bridekiller—or Bridekillers; maybe our guy is the third or the tenth—could go back pretty far. Go back far enough and the data isn’t tagged or indexed. We have people going through paper records, but it’s possible there could have been a guy in the seventies, say, going from small town to small town, killing brides on their wedding nights, and back then no one would have been able to piece it together.”

“He’d be a lot older than in his sixties now,” Jasper said.

“Yeah, there’s no way to know how old Bridekiller One in your dad’s book is or would have been.”

“Go back far enough and it would have just been a string of disconnected local tragedies,” de la Croix put in.

Jasper nodded, pretending to take it all in. In truth, there was nothing *to* take in. He’d looked at all of the information and evidence; he’d absorbed it as best he could. At the end of the day, though, there was a man out there killing women for reasons known only to him, and there was nothing that led to him. Everything else was conjecture and supposition.

“Let’s take a look at the crime scenes,” Jasper said.

De la Croix startled. She and the others shared a brief, almost intimate look. Jasper thought he detected disappointment in it. *This is the great human radar gun for serial killers?* they seemed to beam to each other.

“It’s been a while,” Sam said, clearing her throat. “They’ve all been processed. There’s nothing left to see.”

Jasper stood. “Sure there is. Whatever *he* saw.”

W HATEVER HE SAW.

The police were always obsessed with what was left behind, clues like the droppings of a predator on the veldt. But Jasper knew that what mattered almost as much was what the killer saw *before* the killing. Environment and action were causally related. He had learned many things at the side of his father—how to dispose of evidence, how to reduce a body to its component parts for quick removal, how to leave false clues to throw the “bastard cops” off the trail.

But he’d also learned how to pick the assault site. How to maximize reward and minimize risk with the proper assessment of the environment and the best possible location. How to avoid leaving clues in the first place by being aware of the setting and everything within.

Whatever *he* saw.

Jasper replayed it in his head over and over on the way to the first crime scene, which also happened to be the closest to the task force’s headquarters.

Whatever *he* saw.

He because most serial killers—overwhelmingly so—were men. It was a small and accurate bigotry to assume the killer

was a man, even to someone with Jasper's life experience, someone who had witnessed the murder-rage of his own mother and nearly succumbed to it.

On cold days, the spot where she'd driven a knife into his side three times ached. When it rained, his chest throbbed where she'd shot him.

At those times, the only balm for his pain was to think of her where he'd left her: in a bed at Kettle-Herrara Care Institute roughly forty-five minutes from Lobo's Nod, where she lay in a vegetative state. Had since the night eight years ago when they'd tried and failed to kill each other. He visited her often—to be sure, to see with his own eyes that she was still there—and on the days when the pain was great, the temptation to sign the order to terminate her life support oozed over him like a mud bath.

Bridekiller could very well be a woman. A jealous or snubbed or maltreated woman looking for . . . revenge? Satisfaction? Justice?

"We considered it," de la Croix told him when he ventured the possibility. She was at the wheel and they were alone in the car. A surfeit of task force members had offered to accompany them. De la Croix—suddenly and quite scarily adept at assessing Jasper's moods—declined them all.

"We just think the evidence points to a man, with a man's strength," she went on. "I know how sexist that sounds."

"Is biology sexist now?" he asked. "Men are generally stronger than women."

"I could bench-press you." She spoke without hesitation or a trace of boast.

"Oh, so you killed them?"

"Not a chance. I'm just saying: We play the percentages. Most likely a man. But if something seems to point to a woman, I don't think anyone on the task force would ignore it."

"Good to know." He knew the odds, too, and they overwhelmingly predicted a man. Then again, he'd thought the

Crow King would be a man, and it had turned out to be his own mother.

“If you have any particular insight into what might make a woman a more likely suspect . . .” She trailed off into a silence almost as uncomfortable as what she’d just said.

He broke the tension with a short, sharp bark of laughter. “What you mean to say is ‘If any of this is making you think of your mommy, let me know,’ right?”

She fell silent again.

* * *

The crime scenes were familiar to him—he’d seen the photographs and “walked” the spatial video compilations. He had hoped that being within them physically he would notice something that would lead to something else that would lead to something else. But they were just three hotel rooms. Two honeymoon suites, one regular room. Nothing special or extravagant about them. Nothing that screamed, “Hey! I’m a clue! Over here!”

The fourth room was too far away for tonight, down in Portland. They would go tomorrow, *de la Croix* promised him. If he still wanted to, she’d added, half curious, half discouraging.

Jasper sighed and leaned against the wall in the third of the three rooms he’d examined. This one had been occupied, and the visitors had graciously agreed to step outside and let the police take a look. Jasper hadn’t been in the room when hotel management had given them the reason for the interruption, but he imagined the guests would be demanding a new room soon.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. It was a litany and a screed all at once. He had absolutely nothing.

“Maybe the only killers I’m good at catching are the ones I’m related to.”

“What?” said *de la Croix*.

He hadn’t realized he’d spoken out loud. Embarrassed, he waved her away.

Once upon a time, he'd flattered himself that he could think like a killer, that he could penetrate the bloody fog surrounding their consciences and moralities, drill down into the core of their madness. He didn't necessarily like it, but he could understand it.

A few people had been foolish enough to believe him. Jennifer Morales died for her faith. Detective Louis Hughes lost his badge when in desperation he broke the NYPD's rules and got Jasper involved in a serial killer manhunt. And poor G. William Tanner, long-time sheriff of Jasper's hometown, had thought he was helping Jasper get over his father's depredations by letting him see some case files.

And, yes, to his credit all of those killers had been caught. But the price was high, both to Jasper's fragile sanity and to the people who'd trusted him.

He'd never been able to penetrate that fog, he knew now. He'd just been able to recognize it for what it was, to perceive its footprints and track its spoor.

With a sigh of regret, he realized he hadn't called G. William before leaving town. The old man would miss their weekly Scrabble session.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," he admitted. "How about I talk to the husbands?"

De la Croix hesitated only a moment before checking her watch. "It's getting late. I can have someone round up the locals to meet with you at the task force in the morning. We'll do a Zoom with Portland. Or would you rather see them where they live?"

Intruding on grieving men in the tainted confines of their homes held no appeal for him. He told her that the task force office would be fine and then let her drive him to his own hotel, paid for by the Bureau.

It was too late back east to call G. William, so he sent an apologetic, explanatory text. Then he checked to see if Connie had texted back, even though he knew he would have gotten an alert if she had.

Nothing from her. He told himself that didn't mean anything. Their relationship was like the subatomic particles he'd read about once, the ones that scientists had managed to split and then send on different paths. Somehow, despite their separation, they remained invisibly and intangibly connected. When one experienced a change in direction or spin, the other did as well. No one could explain it. Even Einstein had been reduced to calling it "spooky action at a distance." Very scientific.

Separate, yet connected. She was still connected to him. He had to believe that. It wasn't that he couldn't imagine his life without her; it was that he could do precisely that, all too easily.

Spooky.

He fell into bed and sleep took him quickly.

* * *

And that night, he dreamed.

He dreamed of the Impressionist. Fredrick Thurber. The first serial killer he'd ever caught. Thurber had harrowed Lobo's Nod with a series of murders that replicated Billy's own. Jasper had been convinced that everyone in town would assume he was the killer, given that his father had made a life of murder. So he decided that he had to find the killer in order to prove them all wrong. He'd shamelessly manipulated G. William into violating all sorts of protocols and gotten access to some of the case files. Eventually, he and his friends had stopped the Impressionist. But not before more people died.

Howie, Connie, even G. William—they all told him that those people would have died anyway. Most likely along with even more. But Jasper would never allow himself to believe them. If he had kept out of it, if he had let the police do their jobs, maybe those people—Helen Myerson and Virginia Davis—would still be alive today.

But Helen and Virginia did not feature in his dream. Only Thurber. He was aware it was a dream, so even as Thurber

approached him, Jasper knew that the man was actually sitting on death row at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, waiting for his appeals to run out, waiting for a ride to Nashville and an appointment with a needle.

Thurber grinned at Jasper and spoke with Jasper's mother's voice. "This is where we always end up."

"I don't want to go there," Jasper said. It was a dream. He was aware it made no sense and yet the words seemed hamstrung by some unknowable imperative.

He was in school, at Lobo's Nod High. Ginny Davis told him he was late for play practice, and even though she was dead, he figured he should listen to her. But he couldn't remember how to get to the auditorium. Every hallway he walked down, he could hear the sounds of play rehearsal, but every time he turned, the noise seemed to come from behind him.

Billy strolled out of a classroom. Jasper's nuts tightened in fear, and Billy laughed. "Don't fear me, boy. I'm the one who loves you."

He ran down the hall. If he could get to play practice, everything would be all right. Connie was in the play, too. She would be there. She would help him.

"Someday you're gonna marry that girl," Billy prophesied, keeping pace. He grinned and then disappeared. Jasper kept running, his breath coming faster and faster.

He turned a corner and found himself in bed, on his back. There were severed fingers strewn around him, and Thurber was back, tilting his head back and forth, singing a song that Jasper couldn't quite make out but that he knew he knew.

"You're going to be mine," Thurber said, climbing onto the bed and turning into Jasper's mother, dressed in an ornate white wedding gown.

"No." He was being held down. Something was holding him down. "I'm not yours. I'm going to marry Connie. Even Billy said so."

His mother hiked up the gown and straddled him. When had he become naked? Had he been naked the whole time?

This is only a dream, he reminded himself. Dream or not, though, he didn't want this.

"Yes, you do," she said. "Do you even remember our first time? You were such a little boy."

"Let me go!" he screamed, and looked, and saw that nothing was holding him down, that he was here of his own free will, that he wanted it.

"I don't want this!" he cried as she moved on him. "I'm going to marry Connie!"

"Of course you are," his mother murmured, her hands on his chest, her rhythm increasing. "See?"

And he looked over. There was a bathtub there and Connie in a wedding gown, her throat slit, the gown gone black-red with her blood and his mother intensified her rocking and he couldn't breathe he was choking choking he couldn't breathe and

5

HE SHOT BOLT upright in bed, clutching at his chest. “No.” His voice was strangled, his breath a hard-fought victory. “No. Damn. No.”

According to the clock, he’d been asleep only an hour. He fumbled for his phone and tapped on Dr. Cyrus McCutcheon, his therapist. He hated McCutcheon with a passion, but all of the important people in his life—Connie, her parents, Howie, G. William—had come together and informed him that if he didn’t get into therapy and stay in, they would have nothing more to do with him.

He’d believed them. He still did. It was for his own good. Didn’t make it any less unpleasant or hateful.

But right now . . .

“I’m sorry,” he said when McCutcheon picked up. “I’m sorry to call you so late.” He added three hours to the bedside clock. “So, so late. I’m sorry.”

“Jasper, it’s all right.”

“Tell Maria I’m sorry.”

“She’s still asleep. I’m heading downstairs. Can you give me a second?”

Jasper sank against the pillows. He was painfully, embarrassingly erect. He told McCutcheon he could wait, then lay there, hating himself.

Just a dream, he told himself. Dreams are just dreams. But how many men dreamed about having sex with their own mothers? How many dreamed about wanting it?

How many of them actually had?

It was a mark of progress that he no longer vomited when thinking of his mother's revelation that she'd taken his virginity at age six—a memory he'd blocked out. A chill wracked his body and, shivering, he pulled the covers higher.

"Tell me about your dream," McCutcheon said abruptly. He must have made it downstairs.

Jasper didn't ask how he knew it was a dream. The man could read a clock. He didn't want to talk about the dream. It had taken seven tortuous months of thrice-weekly sessions before Jasper had finally revealed to McCutcheon that his mother had raped him as a child. It had taken even longer to progress to the point that he could actually use the word *rape*.

When he closed his eyes, Jasper could picture McCutcheon settling into a chair in his home office right now, his shaggy gray hair pulled in different cotton candy directions, his bifocals roosting at the very tip of his misshapen nose. McCutcheon had the look of a retired prizefighter, one who stepped down not voluntarily, but rather because no one would let him back into the ring to hurt himself again. He had a bulldog's mien and the forbearance of an angry nun.

"It's your dime," McCutcheon said after a long silence.

"Sometimes it's just nice knowing someone is listening. Even if I'm not talking."

A grunt squeezed its way through the ether between them.

"Fine, then," Jasper said, and proceeded to tell him about the dream. Unfurling the banners of his secrets and fears had become

more palatable, but no easier over the years. It took him a while to get through it, with much back-filling and explication.

“Tell me what it means, Doc,” he cracked at the end.

“Let me bust out my dream translation dictionary,” McCutcheon said with the sort of dry wit that only comes at a roused three in the morning. “Look, believe it or not, I think this is a good thing.”

“Oh, sure.”

“You’ve made progress. A year ago, if you’d had that dream, you would have called the Institute to make sure your mother was still in a coma.”

“Permanent vegetative state.”

“Right. But you didn’t.”

Someone shuffled by his hotel room door, sending alarm signals through his extremities. A moment later, he heard a drunken giggle, followed by an audible, but incomprehensible slurry of words, then a door unlocking down the hall.

“There’s more,” he told McCutcheon, and proceeded to tell him about Bridekiller, de la Croix, the trip to Seattle. “I know—it’s bad, it’s stupid, it’s reopening old wounds, but—”

“Actually, I’ll surprise you and tell you that I think this is good for you. It’s a way of confronting some things you’ve been burying for a long time.”

“I hate when you do that.”

“When I say the opposite of what you expect me to say?”

“And when you do *that* and say exactly what I expect you to say.” He shifted the phone to his other ear. He was wide awake and the dream seemed like a movie he’d seen once and mostly forgotten. He felt ridiculous for calling McCutcheon. Every time they spoke, he remembered again that he didn’t like the guy, something McCutcheon knew and accepted with annoyingly gruff equanimity.

“Normally therapy encourages a cordial if not friendly relationship,” he’d said to Jasper during one session. “In your

case, I'm OK having you hate me. You don't respect people you like."

Jasper had responded with the sort of heat only possessed by the truly affronted: "You're full of it. I like Connie and Howie."

"And you defy them and ignore their advice at every turn."

If it hadn't been true, Jasper wouldn't have sulked for the rest of that session.

Now, thinking back to that, he wondered how he'd come to this pass, tethered to a man he disliked intensely because, paradoxically, that same man was the only one he could actually listen to, the only one whose advice he considered. The love of his life and his best friend since childhood would face gunfire for him. They had both been grievously injured during and by his teen foolishness; they literally bore scars of that time. Yet he couldn't heed them, only this man he hated.

"So I stick around and help the FBI? Or have I already confronted enough demons that I get to go home?"

"I can't tell you which road to walk. I can only walk it with you."

With that helpful *bon mot*, they wrapped up the call. Despite himself, Jasper had to admit he felt better.

Still, he did not sleep the rest of the night.