

TICK TOCK

A Detective Shakespeare Mystery

Also by
J. Robert Kennedy

Detective Shakespeare Mysteries

Depraved Difference

Tick Tock

James Acton Thrillers

The Protocol

Brass Monkey

TICK TOCK

A Detective Shakespeare Mystery

J. ROBERT KENNEDY

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For my mom, the most avid reader, and mystery lover, I know. Thanks for always being there, for always caring, and for always being a mom when I needed it, and a friend when I didn't.

TICK TOCK

A Detective Shakespeare Mystery

FORWARD

The events in this book occur almost immediately after those in *Depraved Difference*, Book #1 in the Detective Shakespeare Mysteries series. Reading *Depraved Difference* is not necessary to enjoy *Tick Tock* as it is a wholly self-contained novel, however it is recommended to fully understand how many of the characters met, and to understand some of the references made to previous events. Should you choose to read *Tick Tock* first, effort has been made to not reveal too many of the secrets of *Depraved Difference*, allowing you to still enjoy it in the future.

ONE

Today she felt pretty.

Usually she didn't. She was about twenty pounds overweight, okay, twenty-five, but this morning's ritual visit to the scale had shown her down two pounds, adding to the three she had already lost this week since her latest diet had begun. Five pounds was a huge psychological boost, and today she had put on an extra couple of splashes of Estée Lauder Sensuous Nude to celebrate. She always tried to keep herself presentable. Smart outfits, nice faux jewelry as accents, with a couple of real pieces she had managed to buy herself over the years—18 karat gold bangles and a gold-by-the-yard chain from the one trip she had done to Vegas. Her hair was coiffed nicely, her makeup subtle, and she always tried to have a smile on her face, which she found the most difficult part of her effort.

I just want to be given a chance.

She knew she was chubby; there was no hiding or denying that. But didn't she deserve to be happy too? She was like any other young woman. She wanted to *be* loved. She wanted to love. She wanted to be happy. She had never had a boyfriend. In high school a few boys had gone on dates with her thinking she'd be an easy lay since she'd obviously be desperate, but they had left disappointed. She had been too shy to show her body, and now the opportunities had disappeared.

She had friends, and they sometimes set her up on blind dates, but they never worked out. Either they weren't interested in the fat girl, or she would do something to sabotage things from going further. She seemed to be her own worst enemy when it came to rectifying that situation.

Do I want to be alone?

No, she didn't. But it was Friday evening. And she was going home alone. Again.

The elevator chimed and the doors opened. Frank Brata, one of the techno geeks at the lab stepped on. He smiled at her.

He's so cute!

"Hey, Sarah. Working late?"

She knew she blushed. She couldn't help it. Frank was about the only good looking guy that paid any attention to her. She knew he was way out of her league, but he never seemed to judge her. "No rest for the wicked."

He chuckled. "Tell me about it. Vinny has me working on the final cleanup from the Eldridge case." His face clouded over, as if the memory of those events were about to overwhelm him.

"I know, none of us can believe it."

He nodded. "Shakes is taking it really hard."

"I can imagine."

Suddenly Frank turned to face her. "He was such a great guy!" His voice cracked. "He was about the only guy who treated me like I was normal!"

Her chest felt tight. *He thinks he's not normal?* She reached out and touched his arm. He looked down at her hand and she was about to withdraw it when he clasped his other hand over it and gave it a squeeze then let go. She wanted to leave her hand there, to feel the warmth of his touch, the warmth of his arm, but she knew she had to let go.

The bell chimed and the door opened for the lobby. They both stepped off and Frank turned to her. "Listen, there's a place I go every Friday after work for coffee. Would you like to join me?"

She had to stop herself from yelping 'yes'. She made a show of looking at her watch. "Yes, I suppose I've got time."

Right, you've got until Monday 8 a.m.

Frank smiled, as if happy with her response. *Well, why wouldn't he be, he invited you, didn't he?* She knew she had to stop the negativity. Frank was a nice guy. She deserved a nice guy. *And by the sounds of it, he may be just as insecure as you.* "So, how're the ribs?"

"Huh?"

"Your ribs. From being shot."

“Oh! Pretty good now. It’s been a couple of weeks. Still a little tender when I try to work out. I find I can’t take deep breaths without gasping. Doc says it’ll be weeks before I’m completely back to normal.”

“How’d it happen?”

“You haven’t heard? I thought everyone had by now.”

She’d heard it a dozen times. But never from him. “Just the rumor mill, and you know how accurate that is. I’d rather hear it from the source.”

Frank nodded and recounted the incident as they walked to the coffee shop that turned out to be about ten minutes away. By the time they reached there, she had made enough physical contact with him, touching his arm, patting his back, his chest, and any other part she could find an excuse to touch without it seeming creepy, to feel a connection forming. Or was it just her getting her hopes up again? She didn’t know. All she knew was she was having the best time she had had in years.

As they approached, he took her hand and held open the door. She smiled up at him and he returned the smile. A genuine, heartfelt smile.

And she melted inside.

Frank woke, his head pounding. *What the hell happened last night?* He tried to think back. *I left the office. Where did I go? Sarah!* And then he remembered. They went for coffee, were having a great time, then nothing.

But there was something.

He had the vague memory of kissing. It must have been Sarah. *But why don’t I remember?* He opened his eyes and sucked in a breath. He was in a bedroom, but not his, the only light coming through the partially closed drapes. *Where the hell am I?* He checked the bed and was alone. He looked around and found a lamp on a nightstand. He flicked it on. *Definitely a chick’s place.* He lifted the covers. *Naked.* He looked on the floor and spotted his clothes lying in a bundle. He grabbed them and headed toward what he guessed was the bathroom. He flicked the light on and squeezed his eyes shut, the sudden change blinding. He tossed his clothes on the counter, found his boxers and yanked them up. He

pulled his dress shirt from under his pants and shoved one arm in then the other. Looking in the mirror to button it up, he gasped.

He was covered in blood.

His face and neck were splattered with it, his chest clean, but his shirt was stained near the neck, with drops of blood covering most of the front and shoulders. He ripped off the shirt, threw it into the bathtub and jumped back in shock.

Sarah's blood-soaked body sat in the tub, half submerged in the dark red water, her lifeless head laying on the tap, facing the wall away from him, the finger of her right hand resting on the edge of the tub, near the wall. Near the wall that had "Frank Brata" written in blood.

He leaned over the toilet and vomited.

It was a quiet funeral. Detective Justin Shakespeare wasn't sure what he was expecting. Obviously the customary funeral afforded a dead cop was out of the question, and he didn't begrudge the city that. The people he expected to see were there for the most part, including that bastard Vincent Fantino, who had, he had to admit, been a little bit friendlier toward him over the past week. He was shocked to see Aynslee Kai there. *I wonder if she's here in an official capacity.* He looked for a camera crew, but there was none. *Hub, back to a brunette.* He walked over to her.

"Miss Kai."

She looked up from behind a handkerchief. "Detective Shakespeare, how are you?"

He looked at the casket containing his partner of three years. "About as good as can be expected, I guess."

She glanced around. "Not much of a turnout."

"Nope. He had no family except the department, and most of them just don't know what to do, so most 'had plans,'" replied Shakespeare with air quotes.

"I can understand that," said Aynslee. "In fact, I don't even know why I'm here. I feel ridiculous."

"Sometimes you need closure. Perhaps this is it for you."

She looked up at him then at the casket. "Yes," she whispered. "Closure."

The priest cleared his throat and the few in attendance turned to pay their final respects to Detective Hayden Eldridge.

Shakespeare looked around at those assembled.

Where's the kid? And Trace? I thought they said they were going to be here?

Frank sat in a chair in the kitchen of the small apartment, shirtless, pulling at his hair. *What am I going to do?* Working as a tech in the NYPD, he knew what he should do. He should call it in, and let the system do its job. But the evidence against him was overwhelming, and worse, he couldn't even say himself whether or not he was innocent. He had no memory after the coffee shop. Had they been attacked, had he been hit over the head? He reached up and checked his skull for bumps, any evidence of a hit to the head that might explain his memory loss. Nothing. *Then I must have been drugged.* But if drugged, why? And by who? So they could kill Sarah and have someone to blame seemed the logical explanation.

And they've definitely done their job.

He looked about him, at the perfectly appointed small apartment. Everything neat, everything in its place, and everything screamed no struggle. Had the struggle occurred in the bathroom? The kitchen and bedroom were immaculate except for the bed and floor, indicating sex had most likely taken place.

Man, I finally get laid and I can't remember it.

He smacked his forehead with his palm, disgusted at what he had just thought. *Sarah's dead, and you're disappointed you don't remember having sex with her? Just before you probably killed her?*

And that's when it hit him. His chest tightened, his ears filled with the rush of blood as the room narrowed around him. *I killed her. My life is over.* His head dropped into his hands and he sobbed. *But I'm only twenty-six!* He opened his eyes and watched a tear roll off his nose and onto the pristine floor below. It hit, almost as if in slow motion, the perfect circle it formed immediately marred by the splash radiating outward, as if a flower suddenly opened its petals.

What am I going to do?

He grabbed a tissue from a nearby box and blew his nose. He wiped his eyes clear with the back of his hand, and rose.

There's no way I'm going to prison.

Shakespeare made the sign of the cross, said "Amen", and turned to Aynslee.

"Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

"No, that's okay, the station gave me a driver." She smirked. "I guess they don't trust me to drive just yet."

"Perfectly understandable."

"Well, it's been over a week. I'm going back on the air Sunday." She squared her shoulders, took one final look at the casket resting in the ground, and began to walk toward the too empty parking lot. "How are you doing?"

Shakespeare shrugged his shoulders. "Okay, I guess. I still can't believe the first person in my career I shoot is my partner." Vinny walked up and joined them. Shakespeare jerked a thumb at him. "I always figured if I was going to shoot someone, it would be him."

Aynslee leaned ahead of Shakespeare and gave Vinny a slight smile, which he returned.

"I'll give you that one, Shakes."

Shakes. I haven't heard that in years. It had been his nickname throughout his career until the incident five years ago where his diabetes had got the better of him, and he had lost evidence, and in the disgrace that followed Vinny had publicly shamed him, and most of the department shunned him. To this day no one knew his diabetes had driven him to seek food before his blood sugar fell too low, it was his diabetes that had caused him to not think straight and leave important evidence, a murder weapon no less, in the front seat of his car with the window down. Since then, the collegial nickname Shakes had been replaced with things far worse.

"Fat bastard," muttered Shakespeare.

"Huh?" Aynslee looked at him, then at Vinny.

Vinny seemed to trip over his words. "Uh, yeah, well, I'll see you back at the station, Shakes, I mean, Justin." He scurried away, leaving Shakespeare and Aynslee alone in the parking lot.

"What was that all about?"

Shakespeare watched Vinny's car pull away. He turned to Aynslee. "Perhaps I'll tell you some day." *God knows I need to tell someone.*

She smiled and squeezed his arm, then pointed at a man standing near a corporate limo, the door held open. "That's my ride. Don't be a stranger." She pushed herself up on her tiptoes and gave Shakespeare a peck on the cheek, then strode toward the waiting car.

Shakespeare watched her climb in, her stunning beauty not lost on him. *You're old enough to be her father.* He hit the fob for his car, the alarm giving a double chirp in recognition. He opened the door then fished his cellphone from his pocket.

Where the hell is Trace?

Frank had made a decision—an easy one. He wasn't going to prison. Which meant he wasn't going to turn himself in. But his decision had consequences. If he rid the crime scene of any evidence that may incriminate him, any evidence that may clear him and lead to the real killer would be destroyed as well. He stood up and paced back and forth, from the kitchen to the bedroom, but never the bathroom, trying to decide what to do. He knew he was in the system. Everyone who worked for the NYPD was in the system so their prints and DNA could be excluded from crime scenes they accidentally contaminated. His problem was there was no good reason for him to be on the call. When the murder was discovered, the scene would be locked down and there would be no reason for him to be there. There was a computer, but they'd just bag it, tag it, and bring it to him. He could think of no possible reason for him to gain access so his DNA, his fingerprints, could be chalked up to accidental contamination.

Could he process the scene himself?

Yes, he knew enough to do it since he had taken some basic training to be a Crime Scene Tech before returning to his original love, computers. But he didn't have the equipment with him to dust for prints, or take samples.

Think!

He stopped and looked about. There were no signs of a struggle. The killing must have happened in the bathroom, and from what he remembered of the few moments he spent in there, *in* the bathtub. If he

wasn't the killer, which is an assumption he had to make otherwise he deserved anything that happened to him, the killer had gone to a lot of trouble to frame him. *Gloves!* Anybody who went to this amount of trouble, would surely use gloves. That meant there would be no prints from the killer. He could confidently wipe the place down to make sure his prints wouldn't be found.

One hurdle down.

DNA. What are the sources of DNA? Blood, saliva, hair, skin. And semen. *Oh my God! How do I deal with that?* He pulled at his hair then let go, removing his hands slowly and looking for any he might have just yanked free. *Idiot!* He looked about. He had to stop spreading even more of himself about the scene. He returned to the kitchen and looked under the sink, finding a pair of rubber gloves. He slipped them on.

Okay, no more fingerprints.

He headed toward the bathroom and nearly jumped out of his skin when his phone rang. He fished it out of his pocket and looked at the call display. *Fantino, Vincent.* It rang again, his trembling hand almost dropping it. He knew there would be no way to control his voice. It rang a third time, then went to voicemail. *You're off duty.* He knew there was no reason for them to expect to reach him today; it was Saturday.

His heart suddenly thumped in his chest as he realized he had missed the one event scheduled for his entire weekend. The one event scheduled where cops would be. The one event he didn't have a reasonable excuse for missing.

The funeral!

Vinny flipped his cellphone closed without leaving a message. *The kid probably just couldn't face it.* He had lost enough friends over the years to know funerals were hard, especially this one. He and Eldridge had been close, he considered him one of his best friends, and now he was gone, and in such a shocking manner. *Give him the weekend.*

He left the funeral heading in no particular direction and soon found himself at the Detective Bureau. He parked and sat behind the wheel for a few minutes, staring at nothing, his mind filled with images from that night, the night his friend had died. *Hayden, why?*

He pulled the keys from the ignition and headed inside. *Work will help take my mind off of it.* He bounded up the stairs to the fifth floor where the detectives were and strode into the squad room, for what reason, he had no idea. There was a full complement on duty, no rest for the NYPD on a weekend, but as he walked in, the entire squad room went quiet and turned to look at him.

And no one made eye contact.

Lieutenant Gene Phillips looked up from his desk behind the glass separating him from his squad, and motioned for Vinny to join him. Vinny stepped through the maze of desks and poked his head in the LT's office. "You wanted to see me?"

Phillips beckoned him with two fingers. "Close the door."

Vinny closed the door behind him and took a seat in front of the desk.

"So, how was it?"

Vinny shrugged his shoulders. "About what you'd expect."

Phillips nodded. "Turnout?"

"Not many. Me, Shakes, the reporter Aynslee Kai, a few of the guys he went through the academy with, a couple of army buddies."

"Nobody else from here?"

"Brata and Trace said they'd be there, but were no shows."

Phillips leaned back in his chair, the ancient contraption squeaking in protest. "Frank doesn't surprise me, he's young. Trace was on her way but I had to call her back in. You probably passed her on your way up, she just left on a possible homicide."

"Possible?"

"Anonymous tip."

"You should've called me."

Phillips shook his head. "No, not today. You needed to be there and your team can handle it themselves."

He's right. I needed to be there.

"Well, I'm here now. Idle hands, you know."

Phillips frowned for a moment, then sighed. "It's your crew, so knock yourself out. I'm sure they'll love having their boss hanging over

their shoulders on a weekend.” He smiled and Vinny chuckled. “Dispatch has the address.”

A commotion on the other side of the glass caused them both to spin in their chairs. A perp was being led in, screaming at the top of his lungs, “It ain’t no stealin’ if the keys is in the ignishun!”

Detective John “Johnny” Walker pushed the teenager into a seat and handcuffed him to the desk as Vinny and Phillips joined the gathering throng, Walker’s hand beckoning them. “Okay, gents, here’s one for the record books. Anyone got the number for Guinness?”

“What’ve you got, Detective?” asked Phillips.

“Hey, LT, get this, genius boy here”—Walker jerked his thumb at the perp—“decides he’s gonna steal a car.”

“I di’int steal it!”

“In front of a cop no less.”

“I di’int knows you wuz no cop!”

Walker smacked him on the back of the head. “Shut up! So, I’m walking out with my coffee from Eddie’s, and I see this Jag sitting there with the door open, engine lights flashing, you know, typical Jag.”

“Broken down?” offered Vinny.

“Of course.”

“How’s I supposed tuh know?”

“Because you’re a freakin’ car thief!” Walker raised the back of his hand at the perp but didn’t strike him, instead turning back to the squad.

“So, bold as brass, this punk walks up to the car as if it were his own, climbs in, and pulls away.”

“How’d you end up with the collar?” asked Phillips

“I chased him.”

“In your car?”

“Nope, foot pursuit.”

Vinny’s eyes narrowed. “Huh?”

“Yup, car engine was so fucked it was in safety mode and would only do about five miles per hour. I just trotted up alongside, put my coffee”—he held up his cup—“on the roof, held up my badge, and after a couple of blocks he finally gave up.”

“So you’re telling me—“

“That you are looking at the first ever successful foot pursuit of a high performance sports car.”

Walker bowed several times as the squad room erupted in laughter and clapping.

“Next time I won’t steal no damned Jag!”

Walker looked at him. “Next time? You aren’t too bright, are you?”

Vinny shook his head, smiling, and headed to his office to grab his gear.

Never try to make a getaway in a Jag.

Frank, now sporting a shower cap duct taped to his head, his shoes bagged and taped to socks his pant legs were stuffed into, sprayed and wiped every surface outside of the bathroom he may have touched, with a bleach solution to destroy any DNA he might miss. And he was dripping in sweat. He had his shirt collar buttoned up tight, anything that might let a stray hair free was taped, his poor man’s crime scene bunny suit crude, but effective. He knew enough from his forensics training to get the areas people didn’t think to wipe down, like door jambs, cutlery, coffee machines (inside and out), entranceway walls where one might put their hand to balance when putting on a shoe, light switches, bulbs, anything.

He cleaned like he had never cleaned before, and with each wipe, his shame grew. But he had no choice. He couldn’t go to prison. Not for something he was sure he hadn’t done. At least he was pretty sure. He wiped the door frame to the bathroom, and turned to survey the living room and kitchen with a satisfied nod. Done. Wiped down from top to bottom, the floor and every seating surface vacuumed twice, spotless. If there was any DNA left that was his, he’d be stunned.

And now for the gruesome part.

He turned to face the bathroom and stepped toward the vanity, starting at the topmost surface he may have touched, and began to work his way down.

He saw a hair.

Too long to be his, and the wrong color. Sarah was a blonde, and this was brown or black. Could it be a friend of hers? Could he take that risk, to actually destroy a real piece of evidence? He knew the killer had

to have worn gloves, so his cleaning up the living area had most likely not destroyed anything. But here he was, at the scene of the crime. If anything unexpected had happened, it would be here. Here would be where the mistakes were made.

He put down the cloth and headed to the kitchen. Opening the drawers, he soon found what he was looking for—a box of Ziploc bags. He returned to the bathroom, bagged the hair, and looked about for any others, but found none. He resumed wiping down the vanity and spotted a drop of blood on the top of the faucet. One lone drop. Could it be his? No, he was sure it wasn't. Before putting on his homemade bunny suit, he had stripped and checked himself for any cuts, anything that might have left blood evidence, and found none. This meant if he found any he could leave it as is with confidence.

But it could be Sarah's. He looked at it. *I have to know!* It was the only drop. Every other spot of blood in the bathroom was in the bathtub enclosure. There appeared to be nothing else anywhere, except this one lone drop. If he took a sample, perhaps with a cotton swab, he might be able to sneak in a test of his own at the lab, and...

And prove what? He stopped. He knew it wasn't his. It was Sarah's or the killer's. *Leave it; it might be the only thing that leads them to the real killer.*

He looked at the bag with the hair. *What are you doing?* He unzipped the bag and returned the hair to where he had found it. It wasn't his. The blood drop wasn't his. He had to give the CSU guys every chance he could to let them solve the case and find the real murderer.

Turning to the tub, he knew there was one piece of evidence he couldn't leave.

He leaned over Sarah's body and sprayed the wall where she had written his name, silently apologizing to her. As he scrubbed at the dried blood, he began to think about this vital connection to him. *Did she think I did it? Or am I the killer?* He shuddered. *Or did the real killer write this?* He paused. Should he leave it? Could the handwriting experts tell whose handwriting it was?

They wouldn't need to! It's your name! You might have been seen leaving with her! Case closed!

He sprayed some more and wiped, this time with a little more vigor.

Vinny pulled up in front of the apartment building Trace's crime scene was supposed to be at, and was surprised to find his team milling about outside. He parked behind a squad car, and climbed out. Constance "CC" Cruz, one of his senior investigators, walked up to him.

"Hey, boss, wasn't expecting you here today."

"Felt like keeping busy."

She nodded, a slight smile showing she understood why. They all did. All week he knew they had been walking on eggshells, not sure what to say around him, and when he'd enter a room, conversations would suddenly stop and people would busy themselves without making eye contact. Hopefully now with the funeral over, things could start to get back to normal.

"What've we got? Why are you all out here?"

"Haven't got a scene to process."

"Tip didn't pan out?"

"No, they just haven't found it yet."

"Huh?"

"Tip was this building. No apartment was specified."

Vinny rolled his eyes as he looked up at the towering apartment complex. "How many units?"

"Almost five hundred."

"When did they start?"

"Not even an hour ago. Trace is in there with some uniforms going door to door. More are on the way, but it could take a while."

Vinny sighed, then raised his voice so they could all hear. "Okay, let's put everything away, then get in there and help find this scene."

Frank stood back and surveyed his handiwork, not with a feeling of pride in a job well done, but with a sickness in his stomach, and an overwhelming shame at what he had just finished. He stepped toward the bathtub, held out the bottle of bleach, and poured what was left, almost half a bottle, into the water, unable to look at Sarah's body. This was a long shot. If he did have sex with her, then his semen would almost definitely be found. This was more of a Hail Mary pass, a last ditch effort he hoped would work if he

was right about yet another assumption of his. He had found no evidence of a condom anywhere, and in his inspection of himself, he had found no evidence he had had sex, with a condom or otherwise. He was sure he hadn't had a shower, he could tell from his hair and just his general feeling of grunginess. And if he hadn't had a shower, and hadn't had sex, then the worst he had to worry about was saliva, which would be on the surface, and which the bleach should destroy. He looked down at Sarah, her hair and blood matted together, the rest of her head submerged under the water, and poured the last of the bleach directly on her head.

I'm so sorry.

He stepped back and out of the bathroom, turning off the light and closing the door. He put the now empty bottle of bleach in a large garbage bag, and backed himself toward the apartment door, all the while scanning the room for anything he may have missed, but found nothing. The vacuum cleaner was in a suitcase he had discovered under the bed, along with his blood stained shirt. He wore a sweater he had found on the top shelf of her closet, an oversized sweater with I Love New York emblazoned across it, a one-size fits all that fortunately for him, didn't look too ridiculous with his casual-Friday pants.

He picked up the suitcase and garbage bag. All that remained was for him to toss the garbage bag down the garbage chute, go down the stairs a couple of floors, then take the elevator the rest of the way out. With luck he'd make it off the floor unseen, and with even greater luck, he'd make it out of the building. He stepped toward the door and spotted a baseball cap. He grabbed it and pulled it low over his eyes.

He reached for the lock when he heard three rapid knocks on the door.

“NYPD, open up!”

Detective Amber Trace knocked on the umpteenth door of the day. In fact it was the seventy-third according to her list. Luckily it was a Saturday morning, and most people were still home. This had made it easier to strike units off the list. Those who wouldn't let them in were threatened with a possible warrant, and the door always opened. A quick search of each apartment had turned up nothing.

And none probably will.

She hated these calls. They were almost always pranks, but they couldn't be ignored. If someone had been murdered, then they had to find out. And the tip was rather specific according to the 9-1-1 call she had listened to. A young, twenty-something female had been raped and murdered in her apartment at this address. The voice had been disguised electronically, which was why this call was taken seriously. Usually the punks pranking the system didn't go to that much trouble.

She was on the fourth floor, working up with two uniforms in case there was trouble, and more were on the way to start from the top. They could hit the jackpot on this very door, or it could be the 484th door. And what particularly pissed her off about this call was she had missed Eldridge's funeral. She wasn't sure she had wanted to go until she wasn't able to. It was closure to a horrible night she would now never get. *Somebody better have died!* She mentally kicked herself for that one and knocked again.

Still nothing.

She put her ear to the door and listened for a moment. She stepped back and marked a star on the list of apartments.

"We'll come back to this one."

Frank hadn't moved an inch, had barely breathed, for what felt like hours, but had only been minutes. The voice was unmistakable, he had heard it enough over the years to know it was Detective Trace. He heard her say something after the second knock, then moments later, heard more knocking, but this time further down the hall. He slowly let out a sigh of relief, and put the suitcase and garbage bag down.

What now?

He walked over to the window and opened the drapes for the first time and gasped. The view was one he had seen a thousand times before, probably ten thousand times before. It was the same view he enjoyed from his own apartment, only lower. He looked down at the street below. There was no doubt; he was in his own apartment building, just on a lower floor.

His phone vibrated in his pocket with a text message. He flipped open the display and his eyes shot open then looked out the window, searching, but finding nothing. He looked back down at the message.

*TICK TOCK
LITTLE TIME ON THE CLOCK
IF YOU DO NOT LEAVE SOON
YOU WON'T SURVIVE PAST NOON*

Frank grabbed the curtains and yanked them shut. *I'm being watched.* He held his thumb over the power button, but hesitated. *I'm in my own building. I just need to get to my apartment. How hard can that be?*

But who had sent him the text message? And why? It had to be the killer. And for a brief instant he felt a huge weight lift off his shoulders. *I'm innocent! I must be! There's a third person involved!* It must be whoever drugged him—but that could wait. Regardless of whether or not they were in fact helping him now, he knew he needed to get to the eighth floor, with the garbage bag and suitcase. But there was a problem. He knew they had cameras in the elevators. If he were seen getting on at this floor, how could he explain that? But he also knew they didn't have cameras in the stairwells. From the view, he figured he was three, maybe four floors up. Could he make it up four or five flights of stairs without being seen? Would they have uniforms in the stairwells?

He took another quick peak out the window to the street below. He could see only one squad car, but two more pulled up as he looked. *If they don't have people in the stairwells now, they will soon.*

The phone vibrated again.

*TICK TOCK
LITTLE TIME ON THE CLOCK
DON'T WASTE YOUR CHANCE
ON ONE LAST GLANCE.*

This was advice he decided to take. He ran to the door, opened it slowly and looked out. Seeing no one, he stuffed his hand in the sleeve of the sweater and cleaned the doorframe along with the door handle on either side. He grabbed the garbage bag and the suit case, then walked with purpose toward the garbage chute, which he now knew the exact location of. He opened the door to the small room and was about to shove the bag down the chute, when he thought better of it. He reached in and pulled out the empty bleach containers and other items he wouldn't be able to flush upstairs in his own apartment, and shoved them down the chute, all the while careful to keep his hands in the sleeves to protect against fingerprints. Finished, he checked out the door found the hallway still clear, and he walked quickly toward the stairwell.

He opened the door and stepped halfway in, listening for footfalls. Nothing. He stepped inside and took the stairs two at a time. *Fifth floor.* He raced past, grabbing the rails as needed, not worrying about leaving prints here, since he could honestly claim he occasionally took them to keep in shape. *Sixth floor.* He heard the door open one floor below. He couldn't risk it; he kept racing up the steps. *Seventh floor.*

"Hey, you there, police! Stop!"

It was Trace. He hesitated, but for only a moment. He knew they couldn't see him, as long as he kept away from the railing, and kept at least a double-flight of steps ahead of them. He moved to the outside edge of the stairwell and continued to run.

"Stop!"

The urgency in Trace's voice told him he was no longer a curiosity, but a suspect. He raced up the steps, the echo of several sets of boots below him echoing through the stairwell, and he knew they were gaining, as they could hug the inside, and didn't have a suitcase hampering their ascent. *Eighth floor.* He grabbed the handle and pushed, spilling out into his hallway. He raced toward his apartment, fishing the keys out of his pocket as he did so. He skidded to a halt in front of the door, shoved the key in the lock and turned. He shoved himself against the door as the doors at the end of the hallway burst open. He thrust himself inside and closed the door behind him as quietly as he could,

bolting it. He heard the pounding of footsteps down the hall halt near his door.

Think fast.

He raced into his bedroom, shoved the suitcase and garbage bag under his bed, stripped out of his clothes, throwing them all in the hamper, then wrapped a towel around his waist. Somebody hammered on a door, but it wasn't his. *They don't know which apartment it was!* He took a deep breath, checked himself in the mirror, and walked toward the door just as the sound of a fist hammering on it thundered through the apartment.

"NYPD, open up!"

He counted to five then opened the door.

"Detective Trace! What're you doing here?"

TWO

Trace tried not to let her jaw drop. “Frank? What the hell are *you* doing here?” Frank’s face flushed a little more than it already was.

“Um, living?”

“Huh?”

“I live here.”

Trace eyed him for a moment as she processed the information. Her eye wandered down involuntarily, taking in the young, firm body standing in front of her, the bruises from the shooting still evident, but a pale yellowish brown now. *Not bad, kid*. She chuckled inside. *You’re old enough to be his*—. Her eyes flew back up as she realized she was staring at the towel around his waist. *Older sister*.

“Were you just in the hall?”

He shook his head. “No, why?”

“We had a murder reported here.”

“Here”—he swept his hand inside—“in this apartment?”

A little dramatic, aren’t we kid?

“No, in this building.” She pointed at the towel. “Weren’t you supposed to be at the funeral?”

“Weren’t you?”

Trace raised her eyebrows and opened her hands, palms upward, trying to convey the idiocy of his question without saying it. “I got called to a possible murder?”

He blushed. “Oh, yeah, well, ummm, I guess that’s as good an excuse as any.”

“And yours?”

He paused, as if thinking up one. *Take it easy kid, nobody blames you for not going.*

“I guess I just couldn’t face it, you know, the body and all, the—“ His voice cracked.

The big sister in her wanted to reach out and give him a hug, but she resisted.

“Don’t worry about it, I understand.” She squared her shoulders, bringing the situation back to business. “Did you hear anybody run past here a few minutes ago, or a door open?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Can’t say I did, but then again, it’s not the kind of thing you listen for—doors are opening and closing all the time in an apartment building.”

Trace nodded.

“Okay, Frank. You take it easy, we’ll see you Monday.”

He gave a weak smile and closed the door.

Trace turned to the two uniforms.

“Did either of you see which door the guy went into?”

The first, an Officer Richards, shook his head. “No, ma’am, can’t say as I saw anyone. Could have gone out the other stairwell door for all we know.”

Trace nodded.

“Possible, but I didn’t think he had that much of a head start.” She pointed at Richards. “You stay here; detain anyone who tries to leave.” She turned to the other. “And you come with me, we’ll continue where we left off.”

She walked toward the stairwell and pushed open the door.

There’s no way the guy got this far.

Frank leaned with his back against the door, listening to his heart hammer in his chest, and Trace talking to the two officers. He forced himself to take slow, deep breaths, each one sounding so loud he feared they would be heard on the other side of the door. He heard the stairwell door open, then close.

They’re gone.

TICK TOCK

He pushed himself off the door then looked through the peephole and nearly swallowed his heart as it leapt from his chest. One of the uniforms was standing directly in front of his door. He quickly stepped back, then tiptoed deeper into the apartment. He turned the television on to make some background noise, then went into his bedroom, sitting on the edge of the bed.

He closed his eyes, and breathed in through his nose, out through his mouth, trying to calm himself. After a few minutes the pounding in his chest had eased, and he was able to focus. He moved his heels back and felt them touch the suitcase from Sarah's apartment. He had to get rid of the evidence there, he knew, but for now, there was no way to get it out of the building. As if to reinforce the point, he heard another siren out on the street.

His phone vibrated. He searched for where he had tossed it in his mad rush to get undressed, and found it still in his pants pocket, in the hamper. He flipped it open and hit the button to read the newly arrived text message.

TICK TOCK

LITTLE TIME ON THE CLOCK

WHAT WILL YOUR POLICE FRIENDS THINK

WHEN THEY DISCOVER YOUR DRINK?

What does it mean?

Then he knew. They would retrace Sarah's last movements, and he would be seen on the security cameras leaving with her, to go get the coffee.

Frank's mouth filled with bile as he rushed to the bathroom.

Trace stood impatiently waiting for the building maintenance man to open the apartment. It had taken hours of knocking door to door fruitlessly, and then hours more waiting for the warrants to search the apartments they hadn't gained access to. The warrants were specific. Enter, search for a

body of a woman meeting the description, then exit, leaving the place exactly as it had been found, even if they found a different body. She'd done this before, and hated the part where she couldn't act on what they saw. They almost always found something in any building they did this type of search. But the law was the law.

No matter how flawed.

The super unlocked the door and she motioned him aside.

"NYPD, executing a search warrant!" she yelled at the door, then turned the handle and pushed. The door opened into a darkened apartment, the lights all out, the drapes closed shut. She reached a gloved hand out and flicked the light switch nearest the door. The light in the entranceway blazed, and Trace quickly found a panel of several light switches. She flipped them all on, lighting the open concept kitchen and living room.

The incredibly clean, nearly gleaming, kitchen and living room.

And reeking from bleach.

The hairs on the back of Trace's neck stood up and she motioned to the two uniforms to follow her in. She cautiously stepped across the threshold and into the entranceway. She quickly glanced behind the door to make sure no one was there, then slid the closet door aside. Empty, save for a few jackets and other expected items.

She cleared the kitchen, then living room, and stepped into the bedroom. She motioned to the uniforms to check the closets and under the bed, while she stepped out and entered the bathroom. She flicked the light switch, and frowned.

In the tub lay their victim.

And sitting on the bathroom vanity, a photo showing two naked people lying under bed sheets together, two circular swirling patterns obscuring their faces, as if someone had stuck their thumb in wet paint and twisted.

Vinny grabbed the last of the gear from the back of the Crime Scene Unit truck and headed for the lobby. By now a large crowd had gathered, the flickering lights of the squad cars drawing them like moths to a flame. Yellow police tape cordoned off the area, and pedestrians were redirected to the other side of the street unless they lived in the building. He turned to use his shoulder against the glass door when he saw Shakespeare's

distinctive mint condition 1959 Cadillac Eldorado Seville pull up, its bright red with white soft top screaming to be noticed. *For a fat guy, he doesn't seem to mind drawing attention to himself.* He made momentary eye contact and nodded, then pushed the door open and entered the lobby.

As he waited for the elevator to arrive, Shakespeare waddled through the door and walked up to him, slightly out of breath. *How the hell can you be out of breath from just two minutes of walking?*

"Hi, Shakes." He eyed his severely overweight colleague. "You okay?"

He nodded. "Fine, but I'm definitely going to start hitting the treadmill. This is getting ridiculous."

Maybe if you lay off the damned Krispy Kreme's, you wouldn't be in such shit shape.

An elevator chimed and they climbed aboard along with several other members of his team. They rode to the fourth floor in silence. Shakespeare held the door open for Vinny's team, then took up the rear. An officer noted down their badge numbers and let them enter the apartment. Shakespeare immediately headed toward Trace, who didn't look happy to see him. Vinny didn't blame her. He didn't like Shakespeare. As a matter of fact, for years he had despised the fat bastard, but he had to admit the past couple of weeks Shakespeare seemed to be back to his old self, if not form. *Maybe some good can come from Hayden's death.*

"In the bathroom, Vinny!" Trace thumbed at a room to the left as she turned back to Shakespeare. He entered the bathroom as he heard her say, "Jesus Christ, how am I ever going to get my gold shield if the LT keeps handing off my cases?"

Vinny looked at the tub and whistled. *Is this place ever clean!*

He looked at the photo on the vanity and pointed at it.

"CC, dust and bag that. It'll be key, I'm sure." He leaned in and looked at the two swirls over the faces. "And you better call Frank. I think we may need his computer talents on this one."

Shakespeare splayed his hands, palms up. "Sorry, Trace, but the LT wanted more experience on this." Trace wasn't making eye contact, and

Shakespeare knew she was biting her tongue. He wouldn't want to give up a case to him either. Not with the reputation he'd managed to garner for himself over the past few years. Lazy. Sloth. Pig. Unreliable. Incompetent. And those were the polite words he had heard said about him. But he was determined to change people's opinions of him, to get his reputation back. There was a time when he was considered the best detective in the Bureau. People *wanted* to work with him. People *wanted* his opinion.

Not anymore.

"Listen, Trace, you're still on the case, I'm just lead."

She nodded her head, still not making eye contact.

If she bites that lip any harder she'll draw blood.

He looked around. "Okay, tell me what you've got."

This seemed to snap Trace out of her funk, and to her credit she became all business.

"At 9:32 this morning we received an anonymous tip with a computer distorted voice, phoned in from a throwaway cell phone, that the body of a young female would be found in this building, but no apartment number was given."

"Distorted, eh? That's unusual."

Trace nodded. "We went door to door, narrowed it down to a couple of dozen units, got warrants, and started executing. We found the vic in the bathroom about an hour ago."

Shakespeare slowly spun on his heel, taking in the living room and kitchen area. "This place is spotless." He sniffed. "Bleach?"

"It was really strong when we first arrived. I don't think they're going to find anything except maybe in the bathroom. This place has been cleaned top to bottom, by a pro."

Shakespeare's right eyebrow shot up at the conclusion. "A pro? What do we know about the vic?"

"Nothing yet. White female, mid-twenties, blonde, dead less than a day I'd say. ME can tell us more when he gets here."

"No ID?"

"Nothing that I've found."

"Name?"

"According to building management, Larissa Channing."

Frank stood over the toilet, flushing wad after wad of paper towel and Kleenex he had taken from Sarah's apartment. He couldn't risk putting anything in the trash disposal as that would certainly be searched. As he waited for the tank to fill again, his cellphone rang. He pulled it from his pocket. *Cruz*. He knew he had to answer it now that Trace knew he was here. He pressed *Talk*.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Frank, it's Connie Cruz, how are yah?"

"Fine."

"Listen, we need you at a crime scene."

He knew CC would be the primary CSU criminalist today since Vinny would have taken the day off for the funeral. That meant she was almost definitely in the building. *Should I play dumb?*

"The one in my building?"

"Huh?"

"Trace was here earlier, going door to door."

"You live here?"

"Yeah, eighth floor. What apartment number?"

"Four-oh-four."

"Okay, I'll be down in a few minutes."

Best not to play dumb.

He hid everything away in the suitcase again, got dressed, and took the same stairwell he had used earlier to the fourth floor, making certain he touched everything he could reasonably touch, just in case they decided to dust it for prints.

He pushed open the door and slammed it shut, making certain the officer manning the crime scene entrance saw him exit the stairwell. Now he had established a witness. He took a deep breath as he approached the apartment. He hadn't even realized Sarah lived in his building. In fact, he found it nearly impossible to believe they hadn't bumped into each other, but maybe she was new, maybe she had just moved in. He showed his ID to the officer and entered the apartment. It was eerie. Almost as if in a movie. He had been here only hours before, cleaning like a mad man, after a night of God only knows what, and

now, here he was on the job, the apartment filled with his colleagues, hell bent on capturing him. He wanted to cry out he didn't do it. To tell them everything he knew. To tell them how ashamed he felt at what he had done. And how terrified he was.

Trace nodded at him.

Shakespeare turned to him. "What are you doing here?"

Frank gulped and he was sure he had turned several shades paler. "CC called me to look at something."

Shakespeare's eyebrow shot up.

That can't be good.

Trace pointed to the left. "Hey, Frank. CC's in the bathroom."

He hurried toward the bathroom before the conversation could continue, and stepped inside to find Vinny and CC leaning over Sarah's body. He looked away. "You needed me for something?"

Vinny looked over his shoulder at him. "What's wrong with you, you look like you've seen a ghost?"

Frank wasn't sure what to say.

"Hey, give the kid a break, last time he was at a crime scene he got shot."

Vinny grinned at him and jerked a thumb at Sarah. "Don't worry, kid, she's unarmed."

CC shook her head. "You've got no couth, boss."

Frank stayed quiet, wondering why they needed a computer tech at a crime scene. "Ummm, you, ah, wanted me for something?"

CC pointed at the vanity counter. "Check out that photo."

Frank's eyes darted to the counter and he gasped. *That wasn't there when I left!* He stared at the photo, the two bodies entwined, their faces obscured with a Photoshop Swirl he instantly recognized. He felt the world start to close in on him. His heart hammered in his chest, his ears filled with the rush of panic, his vision began to lose focus, and go dark. He felt himself collapse to his knees, and Vinny's concerned voice, as if thousands of miles away, too faint to understand. Something gripped his arm, and he tried to pull away, but it wouldn't let go.

Then everything went black.

Shakespeare spun toward the commotion in the bathroom and covered the distance in three quick steps. What he found shocked him. The kid was lying on the floor, blood coming from a small gash in his forehead, Vinny was holding him by the wrist, and CC had one hand over her mouth, another hand stuck in the water with the victim.

“What the hell is going on in here?”

“The kid fainted!” Vinny let go of Frank’s wrist and glared at Shakespeare. “What’s he doing here anyway?”

Shakespeare returned the glare. “Don’t look at me, I didn’t call him. He’s a computer geek, not Crime Scene.”

“I’m amazed you know the difference.”

“Blow it out your—”

“I called him.”

They both turned to look at CC.

“You told me to call him to process the photo.”

Vinny sighed. “In the lab, not here.”

“But he lives in the building, so—“

“He lives in the building?” interrupted Shakespeare.

Trace poked her head in the crowded bathroom. “Yeah, I ran into him today. We chased someone earlier that refused to stop in the stairwell. Could’ve sworn he went into the kid’s apartment, but obviously not.”

Shakespeare looked down at the kid who began to stir. “Obviously.” He looked around. “So, where’s this photo?”

“On the—“ Vinny stopped as he looked at the counter. “It was on the counter here a minute ago.”

Shakespeare bent over and pulled the kid’s other hand out from under him.

In its tight grip was the evidence bag containing the now crumpled photograph.

At first he heard murmured voices, then light followed by blurred images. *What happened?* As things slowly came into focus, he realized he was lying down, and his head was killing him. He reached up to touch the source of the pain.

“He’s coming around.”

He saw a shadow fill his vision, and someone touch his shoulder.

“You okay, kid?”

It was Vinny. *The bathroom! The photo!* Reality rushed back, and the room snapped into focus. Vinny was leaning over him, CC was perched on the side of the tub, and Shakespeare’s huge frame filled the doorway.

And he was holding the photograph in his hand.

“Are you okay to stand?”

Frank looked at Vinny and nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

Vinny hauled him to his feet then held him by both arms. “You sure?”

Frank took a deep breath and nodded. “Yeah. What happened?”

“You fainted,” said CC.

Frank felt himself flush.

“Don’t worry about it, kid,” said Vinny. “First time you’ve seen a body up close?”

They don’t know why I fainted! Run with it!

He nodded, making sure to avoid looking at the tub.

“How about you give me that?” said Shakespeare, pointing at the photo. Frank nodded and handed it over. “Now, get yourself a drink of water in the kitchen,” said Shakespeare, stepping from the doorframe.

Frank stepped out and headed to the kitchen. He opened the cupboard and removed a glass, filling it with water from the tap. He took a few sips, then turned to face the room. All eyes were on him. *Do they know?*

“Feeling better?”

“Yes, Detective, I’m okay now.”

Shakespeare nodded, then held up the photograph. “Any reason why you grabbed this?”

Frank’s heart pounded and he screamed inside his head. *Keep it together!* He shook his head. “No, I guess I just reached out for something to grab onto, and it was on the counter, so, you know...”

“Hmmm.”

If Frank didn’t know better, he almost had the impression Shakespeare wasn’t buying it.

“What do you make of it?” Shakespeare held the photo out for Frank. He took it, and looked at the two people, obviously in the heat of passion,

the computer generated swirl obscuring their faces. “Do you think you can do anything with it?”

Should I lie? He knew he could reverse the swirl. It had been done before, and with the right algorithms, and some trial and error, he’d be able to show the faces of the two lovers. The face of Sarah. And himself. He would be the investigator to prove he committed the crime. *You deserve it.*

“Listen, kid, if you don’t think you’re up to it, I can assign it to someone else.”

“No!” Frank yelped. “Sorry, I’m okay, I can do it. It’ll just take a few days.”

Shakespeare frowned. “Okay, make sure you sign your name to it. I don’t want some damned lawyer claiming a chain of evidence violation. This just might be our only clue.”

Yeab, to my guilt.

“Work on the guy first; we’re pretty sure we know who the girl is.”

Frank gulped. “Wh-who’s the girl?”

“We think it’s the occupant, Larissa Channing.”

“What?” exclaimed Frank. “Who?”

Shakespeare’s eyes narrowed. “Larissa Channing. Did you know her?”

“N-no. No I didn’t.” He took a deep breath. “I guess I’m just still messed up from earlier.” He held up the photo. “I’ll go get to work.”

“You do that.”

Frank went to find Vinny to update the evidence log, his mind racing.

If that’s not Sarah, then how the hell did I get here last night?

And where’s Sarah?

Shakespeare watched the kid as he walked toward the bathroom. *Seems awfully excitable.* He knew they were all upset over Eldridge’s death, but this was something else. *There’s something he’s not telling us.* Could he have known the girl? Perhaps. Even likely since they lived in the same building. Then again, he lived in an apartment building for years and never knew any of his neighbors. This was modern day New York. Who wanted to know their

neighbors? If you did, they're liable to start coming over and visit. And he valued his privacy. Too much at times. It had kept him mostly single for decades, until he had met Louise several years ago. Her and her son Tommy had filled a void inside him he hadn't realized was there. It had restored his will to live, to be the man he once was, rather than the pathetic excuse he had allowed himself to become.

It had taken years, but he now realized he had used his diabetes as an excuse, rather than a crutch. At least a crutch was used to get somewhere—an excuse used to get out of going to that same place. He had spent many nights feeling sorry for himself, even crying in his pillow, asking a God he had long stopped believing in why it had to happen to him. His form of acceptance finally came, but in the ugly veil of self-loathing, of a desire to commit suicide through neglect, to give the finger to the world, and to die on his own terms, with nothing to live for, and nothing to leave behind. No family. No legacy. No pride. No self-respect.

But Louise changed that. Why she had ever taken an interest in him he'd never know. She was a waitress at a thirties style diner he frequented, one of those retro style ones with more chrome and glass block on the outside and stainless steel with checkered tiles on the inside, than the genuine article. *The Chrome Worx Diner*. He went for breakfast every Sunday and ordered the same thing. Three eggs over easy, brown toast buttered, sausage and bacon, side of home fries, coffee and orange juice. *Heart attack special*. She'd been his regular waitress, and loved to chit-chat to whoever would listen. And he would listen. Especially over the past couple of years when he had really withdrawn from the world. He had no one to talk to at work, he didn't want to worry his folks as they were getting up there in years, and he had no friends—his loner lifestyle and living the job had taken care of that. Once he was disgraced, he had lost the few work friends he had had.

So he listened.

And she fell in love with him for it.

She would talk about her son, and the problems she was having raising him as a single mother. He would listen, and occasionally venture some advice. Over the months the conversations became more and more two way, and she had asked him out. She said she wasn't going to wait for him

to ask her, because she knew he never would. He was stunned to hear the answer come out of his mouth.

Yes.

One word, to save a life. His own.

The next week it was two eggs, poached, ham and brown toast, with a side of sliced tomatoes.

She had smiled at him. And he knew she understood what he was trying to tell her.

I care.

They were inseparable ever since.

He watched Frank scramble out of the apartment, seeming to avoid eye contact with everyone.

Definitely something up there.

“Hey, Shakes, whadaya got for me?”

Shakespeare smiled at Miles Jenkins, one of the city’s Medical Examiners, and one of the few who had never given him a hard time over the stolen evidence. He would almost consider him a friend, but for the fact they did nothing together beyond work. He sometimes caught Jenkins eyeing him, as if assessing him medically, and wondered if he had figured out the truth he was hiding, that he was an out of control diabetic. If he had, then he would have seen right through the “I was hungry” explanation to the stolen evidence, and cut him the very slack he had shown.

“DB in the bathroom. See if you can give us an approximate TOD and preliminary COD as well.”

Jenkins nodded and headed to the bathroom Shakespeare was pointing to. “I’ll see what I can do.” Stepping inside, Shakespeare heard him yell, “Okay, everybody out! I need some room to move.”

CC and Vinny appeared a moment later.

“Anything?”

Vinny shook his head. “Not much. The whole place has been wiped down and bleached. We’re not finding prints on anything. We found one strand of hair, doesn’t look like the vic’s, and one drop of blood we’re hoping to get some DNA off of, but other than that photo and the body itself, we’ve got nothing. Once MJ is finished with the body,

we can take a look in the tub, see if we find anything, then of course we'll go over the body with a fine-toothed comb back at the lab, so maybe we'll find something."

Shakespeare held up his hand. Vinny was rambling, most likely because he was uncomfortable not spitting insults at him. "Okay, I'm going to try and run down the background on the tenant. You get back to me if you find anything, and if you get a positive ID."

Vinny and CC nodded as Shakespeare leaned into the bathroom. "Hey, MJ, call me with time and cause as soon as you have it."

Jenkins was leaning over the victim and didn't turn. "Will do!"

Shakespeare strode from the apartment, nodded to the scene officer who logged him out, and pressed the button to call an elevator. He leaned against the wall, taking a deep breath and wiping his dripping hairline with a handkerchief. He knew his blood sugar was acting up again. And he was so out of shape just standing for the past hour had exhausted him.

His stomach growled.

He patted it.

Time to feed the beast.

Frank stared at the crumpled photograph. He hadn't grabbed it on purpose; he had genuinely passed out and was just reaching for something to hold onto. Unfortunately, if anything, this made him look more guilty. Because guilty was exactly how he was going to look once the photo was enhanced and the swirl reversed. He knew he could do it; it would just take some time, but not enough time. This time tomorrow his face would be there for all to see.

Unless he stalled.

Or...

No, he couldn't do that. Or could he? Could he live with lying? No one would know if he said the swirls couldn't be reversed. But then they might just send it to the FBI, and it would all be over.

What if...?

He could reverse one of the swirls, and then blur the one of him, saying the image was too degraded. That, they would buy, that they would be—

No!

TICK TOCK

No, he wasn't that type of person. He would have to face up to what he had done. *Or hadn't done.* And that was what was driving him crazy. He was sure he hadn't committed the murder, especially now that he knew the victim might not even be Sarah. He looked up, as if through the many floors of concrete and steel, through the clouds and into Heaven, and prayed Sarah would show up for work Monday as if nothing had happened.

Maybe she knows what happened last night?

He was tempted to look up her number and call.

But what if something did happen to her? What if I did it?

"Aaargh!"

He slammed his fists against the elevator wall.

What if she's in trouble?

He looked at the photo. It was clearly two people, in bed, covered to their necks by a white sheet that clung tightly to their intertwined bodies. But other than that, he couldn't even be sure it was him or Sarah under the sheets. It could be a photo of anyone for all he knew.

He had to know.

The elevator doors opened to a lobby filled with police.

Soon they'll be coming here to arrest me.

His cell phone vibrated with a text message.

TICK TOCK

LITTLE TIME ON THE CLOCK

WHAT WILL YOUR FRIENDS SAY

WHEN IT'S YOUR TIME TO PAY?

He stood frozen in the elevator, staring at the message, as the doors closed.

Shakespeare descended the elevator and exited into the bustling lobby. To his right was a door with "Tenant Services" written on the brass nameplate. He strode over and opened the door. Inside were two women, sitting

behind their desks, their chairs turned toward each other, speaking in hushed but excited tones. They both turned their heads to look at him as he entered.

“NYPD, Detective Shakespeare”—he held up his badge—“I have a few questions about the tenant of apartment four-oh-four.”

One of the women nodded and pushed her tiny frame up from her chair. “What do you need to know, Detective?”

“And you are?”

“Marlene Morrison. I work for Bridlewood Property Management.”

“I need anything you’ve got on her, previous addresses, next of kin, anything.”

Morrison nodded and held her hand out to the other woman who passed her a folder. “We pulled the file, figuring somebody would eventually come down here. This is everything we’ve got on her.” She handed the file to Shakespeare who flipped it open.

He frowned and pointed at the folder. “*This* is the tenant in four-oh-four?”

Morrison nodded. “Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Does she live alone?”

“Yes.”

Shakespeare flipped open his phone and dialed.

“Yes,” answered a shaky voice.

“Frank? This is Shakespeare. Forget what I said before. Concentrate on the woman in the photo.”

“Wh-why?”

“Our ID just went to shit. Unless the woman in the bathtub was drowned in Botox, there’s no way she’s seventy-two years old.”

THREE

Samantha Alders checked her makeup in the vanity mirror then flipped it back up. Stepping out of her Mercedes SL350, a gift from her sugar daddy, she nodded to the valet and strode into the Waldorf Astoria, the doorman rushing to hold his charge open lest it interrupt her glide down the runway. She didn't head to the front desk—there was no need. Richard would already be here, he would already have the champagne chilling, and he'd have already popped his little blue pill.

I'm a tramp.

Her large sunglasses and the high collar of her Versace jacket hid the shame she felt from those gawking at her model good looks. *No, I'm a gold digger.* Was that any better? She tried to convince herself it was. It was an arrangement, made over the Internet on one of the many sites designed to hook up young girls with older, rich men. Someone she trusted convinced her to register herself on one of the sites, and she had figured, why not? Why not earn some money? A real relationship wasn't possible at this time, and she didn't know when she might have another chance at taking advantage of her current situation. Richard's profile had arrived in her inbox within hours of registering. He sounded intriguing, so she forwarded it to her confidant, and was urged to go for it. She had heard of these sugar daddy websites, and knew most of the men turned out not to be rich, just wannabes who rented a hot car, blew their week's pay on a fancy restaurant, then expected sex in a cheap hotel room.

But not Richard.

Definitely not Richard.

He was the real deal. Real estate mogul, worth tens if not hundreds of millions, and married to a shrew of a woman (if he was to be

believed), who withheld sex every time he did something wrong, which, again according to him, he'd done nothing but for many years. They had lost interest in each other, and she refused a divorce since she knew she'd lose the glamour and lifestyle she had become accustomed to. Yes, she'd probably milk him for half, but she would no longer be the wife of Richard Tate, wealthy developer, patron of the arts, philanthropist extraordinaire. She wanted the limelight.

Samantha had thought Richard was adorable when they first met. He was early fifties, in good shape from all Savile Row clad appearances, was a good conversationalist, had exceptional taste in food and wine, and his story had touched her. They had come to an arrangement. He would pay her two thousand dollars a week, provide her with a car, and she would be available whenever he *needed* her. She convinced herself it wasn't prostitution. There were no pimps involved, no multiple partners, nothing kinky. Just straight sex, and not all that great sex, in exchange for some cash she used to pay off her student loans. It was a symbiotic relationship. Besides, his wife cost him far more than two thousand a week, and really, wasn't dating just legalized prostitution anyway? Men take girls out for dinner and a Broadway show, and expect something in return. What, nice conversation? No, they expected a roll in the hay for the three hundred bucks they just shelled out. Hell, a prostitute was cheaper, so if they knew they would never get anything out of it, why bother dating?

What have you become that you are so cynical?

She sighed as the elevator doors opened to the 42nd floor.

I am a tramp. But a tramp with a purpose.

“What's up?”

“Huh?”

“You look like you've seen a ghost. Bad news?”

Frank shook his head and looked in the side view mirror, avoiding eye contact with the officer who was driving him to the lab. “No, just the victim isn't who we thought it was.”

“No shit? Man, you detectives have the life. As soon as I'm eligible, I'm taking the exam.” He stuck out his hand. “Scaramell. Call me Steve.”

Frank eyed the hand and shook it weakly. “Frank Brata.”

“Nice to meet you, Frank. How long’ve you been a detective?”

“I’m not. I’m a computer tech. I investigate the electronic side of things, set up electronic surveillance, stuff like that.”

“You’re the one who got shot a couple of weeks ago, aren’t you?”

Frank’s ribs winced in remembrance. “Yes.”

Scaramell nodded. “Man, that must have been something. Haven’t been shot yet, hope never to be obviously, haven’t even had to fire my weapon yet.” Scaramell cranked the steering wheel and descended into the underground parking at the lab. “Here you go, Frank. Good luck!”

Frank nodded and rushed from the squad car and into the stairwell, racing up the few flights of stairs and into the sanctuary of his deserted lab. He sat at his computer and logged in, quickly scanning the photo. His fingers hammered away at the keyboard as he configured the software to try and reverse the swirl. He selected the swirl obscuring the face of the woman with his mouse and clicked. The computer began to process the swirl, slowly reversing the process.

Soon he would know just who was hidden in the photo.

And he prayed it wasn’t Sarah.

Or him.

Shakespeare knew he had to eat, and he wasn’t far from the diner in Hell’s Kitchen where Louise was working. He had rarely seen her the past few weeks since he had recommitted to the job, and missed her. They didn’t live together, she had said she didn’t feel right living in sin with a teenage son, and she wasn’t ready to remarry. Hell, marriage had been a four letter word to him until recently. But now he found himself considering it. Not anytime soon, but at least it was something he could see for himself before he met his maker.

Remember to visit the Father.

He had promised to drop in after the funeral and visit Father O’Neil who had just been released from hospital. He secretly felt it was the Father’s way of trying to get him back to church on a regular basis, but what had happened two weeks ago was just too fresh, too raw, too evil, to rekindle any type of belief in God at this moment.

Then why do you pray to him nightly?

He didn't know why. But he found himself doing more and more praying. Not hands and knees praying, just silent prayers to himself, more than anything else. His diabetes and its myriad of related health problems were a constant source for prayers along the lines of repeated "God help me" pleas when climbing stairs, or getting off the couch and feeling a tightening in his chest.

I have to start taking better care of myself.

He pulled his Caddy up in front of the diner and climbed out, his hand caressing the driver side fin as he walked around it and into the diner. He loved that car. It had been his dad's, and he had "pre-inherited" it, as his dad called it, when macular degeneration had claimed his father's eyesight a few years ago. He had grown up with that car, and now it was his. Mint condition, and he had sworn to keep it that way. Blind or not, he knew his dad would tear him a new asshole if he let anything happen to it.

He stepped into the diner and waved at Louise behind the counter.

"Hey, hon!"

"Shakey!"

He blushed slightly at the nickname as she pushed herself over the counter to give him a kiss, her feet no longer touching the ground. He returned the kiss and sat down at a stool near the cash register. It was nearly five, too early for the dinner rush, so the place was fairly quiet, with only the regulars who spent the better part of their lives here drinking coffee and arguing politics or the news of the day. Lately it was nothing but solutions to the financial crisis.

"How's business?"

"Quiet now, but steady all day. Good thing you didn't come in here earlier, it was hoppin'. And my puppies are barkin' right now."

"That's cuz you wear those damned high heels. You should wear comfortable shoes in your line of work."

She swatted him on the arm. "You know very well that every inch of heel adds five percent to the tip, especially with these dirty old men!" She raised her voice so a table of half a dozen vets could hear.

"Don't you dare stop wearin' them, darlin'!" yelled Phillip "Flip" Johnson, a World War Two vet who had landed on Utah beach on D-Day. "If you do, I'm goin' across the street for my coffee."

“Oh you know very well you don’t like their coffee,” replied Louise. She returned her attention to Shakespeare. “So, what can I get yah?”

“The usual.”

“Right away, darlin’.” She turned around and yelled into the kitchen. “One Philly with the runs, easy on the wax!”

“Comin’ up!” yelled the chef and owner Mitch. He leaned through the opening where he plated the food. “That you, Shakey?”

“Hey, Mitch, how’s it goin’?”

“Can’t complain!”

“Cuz’ no one will listen!” yelled Flip.

The table of old timers roared with laughter, then surrendered in a spate of coughing.

Louise lowered her voice and leaned in as she poured him a cup of coffee. “So, how was it?”

Shakespeare knew what she meant. *The funeral*. “About as good as you could expect, I guess. Not a very good turnout, but at least a few of us were there.” He shrugged his shoulders and took a sip of the bitter brew. “I don’t know, hon, it was just strange. He was my partner for three years, but I never really got to know him until those last few days, then—“ He stopped. He had relived the shooting enough over the past two weeks, what with Internal Affairs grilling him, and non-stop questioning and whispers among his fellow officers.

She patted him on the hand, as if she knew what he was thinking. “It’s okay, dear. It’s over now.” She forced a smile. “So what’s going on? I expected you earlier.”

“Caught a new case. Weird one. Woman found dead in a bath tub, but it wasn’t her apartment. No ID yet, but we’re working on it.”

“Sounds kind of routine. What’s weird about it?”

“Well, someone left a photograph of two people bumpin’ uglies, but hid the faces with some computer tricks.”

“That is weird. Sounds more serial killer to me than a regular crime of passion or drug hit.”

Shakespeare smiled. “We’ll make a cop of you yet!”

She grinned. “Tell me more.”

That was one of the many things he loved about her. She loved reading mysteries, watching mystery TV shows, and hearing about his cases. She acted as a sounding board to his ideas, and he loved talking shop with someone who genuinely found it interesting. “Well, remember Frank?”

“The one who got shot?”

“Yup. Well, he lives in the building.”

“Quite the coincidence.”

“Yeah.” Shakespeare took another sip.

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“Well, there’s something I can’t quite put my finger on.” He counted off with his fingers. “One, Trace says she chased somebody onto his floor. Two, he was very jumpy, even passed out when he saw the body. And three, he never showed up for the funeral when he said he would.”

“Well, there’s your answer, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“Order up!” yelled Mitch.

Louise turned around and grabbed the plate Mitch had pushed through. She placed the Philly melt sandwich in front of him, and removed the small bowl of au jus gravy and placed it beside the plate. “Bon appetite.”

Shakespeare smiled and sliced into the sandwich, taking a bite. His stomach rumbled in appreciation. He motioned with his knife. “You were saying?”

“Well, you said it yourself. He was supposed to go to the funeral. He was probably embarrassed about not going, he’s pretty green from what I remember you telling me, not a crime scene guy, probably saw his first body, and coming off of the shooting and Eldridge’s death, it all just caught up to him.”

Shakespeare swallowed another bite. “Maybe.”

“Humph. I know that tone. You think he’s involved somehow.”

“Perhaps, but how for the life of me I don’t know. I just can’t see the kid being a murderer.”

Then again, did you ever see the past two weeks happening?

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out, dear.”

“Hey, sweet cheeks, howsabout some more coffee over here?” yelled Flip.

“Excuse me for a minute while I teach an old timer some manners.”
Shakespeare smiled and turned to watch the show.

“Oh, darling, how I’ve missed you.”

Samantha threw her arms around Richard and kissed him passionately. She had to admit, though the sex wasn’t the greatest, the man knew how to kiss. For several minutes they just stood in the entrance, their hands exploring each other’s bodies, their mouths expressing the growing passion, then he pushed her up against the door, grinding his hips into hers, and she knew what he wanted. She gave herself to him, completely, shutting her eyes, imagining someone else, but careful to call Richard’s name, and when she felt him release, she faked her own, and spent, Richard let her go, leaving her on the entrance floor as he left to clean up in the bathroom.

I am a tramp.

She picked herself up, straightened her clothes, kicked off her heels and looked about the suite. It was huge. The light yellow and gold wallpaper on the walls was offset by floor to ceiling royal blue curtains, trimmed in gold, the light sheers covering the nearly suite-wide windows letting plenty of light in from this height. A checkered royal blue and white wall to wall carpet was wonderful to the touch, her bare feet enjoying the extra underlay. She perched herself in one of the regal looking chairs scattered about what could easily be mistaken for some millionaire’s living room.

This is the life.

A life she knew she wasn’t really living. Once or twice a week she’d live like this, occasionally, like today, she’d get a weekend of luxury—trapped in a palatial room, hiding from the servants, as he couldn’t risk being seen with someone other than his wife. She was sure the help knew what was going on, but as long as he had his “plausible deniability” as he called it, he was okay.

But she did live a decent life beyond that of a monogamous whore. The money he paid her allowed her to live in a good apartment in a good building. He showered her with gifts, which meant she was able to deck out the apartment with beautiful fashions, and if she needed

anything, the mere mention of it usually had delivery men showing up within a week. Last week it was a new Panasonic 65" 3D television she had heard about and mentioned in their idle chitchat over dinner.

I wonder what I'll ask for tonight.

She disgusted herself. But was what she was doing really wrong? There were no pimps, no drugs, no disease, no children. She was sleeping with one man, who treated her extremely well. Yes he was married, yes he was paying her, but who was getting hurt?

The wife?

From every indication she had, the wife had brought it upon herself, and what she didn't know couldn't hurt her, right?

She shook her head. She didn't want to think about the wife. Every time she did, she felt queasy. Which is what told her, deep down, what she was doing was wrong, but also that she was a good person. Surely a bad person wouldn't feel guilty?

Richard walked into the room in a housecoat, slightly flushed, with a huge smile on his face. He leaned over and gave her a peck on the forehead. "Thanks, Darling, I needed that." He sat down in a chair across from her and put his feet up on a table worth more than the annual salary of some.

She smiled at him. It was a genuine smile. She did actually like him. She did actually care for him. She felt sorry for him in some ways, and realized she was not only filling a sexual need that went unanswered at home, but also one of companionship. He needed a friend that wasn't involved in his work. And she was happy to be it. "Tough day?"

"Tough week."

"Drink?"

He nodded. "Scotch on the rocks, please."

She got up and went to the fully stocked liquor cabinet. She tossed a few ice cubes in the crystal glass and poured him an eighteen year old Dalmore scotch, the lush liquid surging over the ice, turning them into a golden kaleidoscope of relief. She poured herself a vodka on ice and brought the two drinks over to where Richard sat, his head leaned back, his eyes closed. She shook the glass slightly, the ice chiming against the sides. He opened his eyes and smiled, taking the proffered glass. She sat down beside him and

crossed her legs under her as he took a long drink followed by a satisfied sigh.

She drained half her own glass, put it down on the table, and stretched. "I'm going to get out of these clothes and into something more comfortable."

He nodded as she grabbed her bag and headed into the bathroom. She quickly stripped, then put on a simple Victoria's Secret pushup bra and high-cut lace panties. Lifting one of the bathrobes from the hook behind the door, she pulled it on and wrapped it around her, the rich, soft terrycloth enveloping her near naked body.

This is what I should ask for.

It was small, but it would be wonderful. A nice little luxury for the evenings alone in her apartment. She tied up the robe then thought better of it. Better to leave it open so he could get a glimpse of what he was paying for. She untied the belt, and let the robe slip open, revealing her tanned, tanned body.

I may be a tramp, but he's one lucky bastard.

She flicked off the light and returned to the living area where she found Richard struggling to keep his eyes open, his nearly empty glass perched on the arm of this chair, gripped lightly by his hand. She smiled and sat down beside him, curling her legs up. Yawning, she picked up her glass and took a sip as Richard's head lolled over to the side, looking at her.

"Tired, dear?"

"Something's wrong," he whispered, as the glass fell from his hand, bouncing lightly on the carpeted floor.

Shakespeare pulled into a vacant spot in the lab parking lot and spun his legs out the door, then pushed-pulled himself upright. Slamming the door shut behind him, he pressed the fob to activate the alarm, the only aftermarket piece of equipment he dared add to the vehicle. And one he never told his dad about, his naïve argument that no one would dare steal a work of art like a 1959 Cadillac perhaps applying to days gone by, but definitely not modern New York City.

He took the elevator down to the basement where Vinny's crew lurked, and made his way to the morgue. He found MJ at the autopsy table, hosing what looked like their victim from earlier. He looked up when Shakespeare stepped through the double swinging doors. "Hey, Shakes, what's shakin'?"

"Two cheeks too many. You heard about the ID?"

"Yup. She doesn't look seventy-two to me."

Shakespeare nodded as he approached the table. Clearly a young woman, maybe mid-twenties, slightly overweight, blonde. "Anything yet from your end?"

MJ shook his head. "I've got her prints running now. I'll get dental x-rays and a photo once I've cleaned her up." He pointed at her fingernails. "This is no drug addict. She's clean, well groomed, manicure, pedicure, good teeth. Someone will notice her missing."

Shakespeare nodded. "Cause of death?"

MJ pointed at her skull, deformed at the back from some sort of impact. "Looks like a blow to the head, or more likely, repeated blows to the head from behind, incapacitated her, then"—he motioned for Shakespeare to help him flip her over onto her back—"they slit her throat from ear to ear."

"Jesus. TOD?"

"The bathtub didn't help—no way of knowing how hot or cold the water was. I give it anywhere from twelve to twenty-four hours before my initial examination."

"Okay, keep me posted."

MJ nodded and started spraying the body again. "Will do."

Shakespeare headed to the door when MJ stopped the spray.

"Forgot. Vinny wants to see you."

Shakespeare's shoulders slumped. "Ugh, what does *he* want?"

MJ shrugged his shoulders in an exaggerated manner and turned his palms upward. "The pleasure of your company?"

"The day that bastard enjoys my company is the day I do my first triathlon."

"Never say never!"

Shakespeare chuckled and walked down the hall to Vinny's lab, knocking on the door frame. Vinny looked up and waved him in, a momentary frown replaced by a slight smile.

“Hi, Detective, I see you got my message.”

Shakespeare nodded. “What’ve you got for me?”

“Not much.” He held up an evidence bag. “One hair, not belonging to the victim”—he held up a vial with a swab inside—“and one drop of blood, not belonging to the victim.”

“So they could belong to our killer.”

“Or the old lady who’s supposed to actually be living there.”

Shakespeare nodded. “Anything else?”

“Beside the photo, which is obviously a plant, there’s nothing. That apartment was wiped down clean from top to bottom. I swabbed all the usual places, plus our secret”—he signaled the significance with air quotes—“places, and still nothing. Even door jambs were wiped down. This guy knew all our tricks.”

“A cop?”

Vinny’s jaw dropped slightly. “God, I hope not. Not after—“

Shakespeare held up his hand. “Any chance at DNA?”

“I’m working on it, should have results tomorrow.”

“Okay, keep me posted.”

“Will do.”

Shakespeare left the lab, never having fully entered, one foot the entire time in the hall. He took the elevator to see the kid. As he stepped out, he saw a vending machine beckoning him like a desert oasis. *Don’t*. His stomach rumbled. *Are you kidding me? You just ate*. He stopped, hesitating. *Something small, but you have to take the stairs for the rest of the day*.

Rationalized, he headed to the machine, fishing out his wallet.

He punched B3 into the machine and frowned as his reward for a future effort yet to be completed dropped to the bottom, and the sense of guilt momentarily filled him.

You’re pathetic.

He opened the Snickers bar and took a bite, finding momentary solace in the carbohydrate laden treat.

Completely pathetic.

Frank stared in stunned silence at the nearly perfect image before him. The descrambling process on the swirl hadn’t taken long. Whoever had created

the swirl had taken the generic settings of the program and used them with no variations. This was always used as the starting point when unswirling an image, but it never worked—most criminals disguising their faces like this were smart enough to randomize the settings, causing law enforcement to use brute force techniques to descramble the image, and that assumed they hadn't done something else to the image—one swirl could be undone. Two or more, with some other alternation, and there was no hope. Unfortunately many times law enforcement had to rely on the overconfidence of the offender, usually a pedophile. The cockier they were, the less effort they seemed to go to hide their identity.

But not today.

Today it was as if whoever had altered the photograph had wanted it to be unscrambled with ease, and alacrity. It had only taken a few hours, almost unheard of, but there it was. A woman's face. Beautiful, young, blonde.

And not Sarah.

Frank continued to stare, not sure what to make of it. If it wasn't Sarah, then who was with this unidentified woman in the photo? And if this wasn't Sarah, was the victim in the tub Sarah, or this woman? And if it wasn't Sarah, then why the hell was he in the apartment?

If only I could remember!

He smacked his palm against his forehead.

"Something wrong, kid?"

Frank nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of the voice, his head twisting rapidly toward the entrance of his lab.

Shakespeare stood in the entrance, chomping on a chocolate bar, frowning.

"Ah, no, I mean—"

Get it together!

He took a deep breath and pointed at the screen. "Look."

Shakespeare walked over to his workstation and looked at the blown up image displayed there. "Is this the woman in the photograph?"

Frank nodded. "Yes. "

"I thought you said it would take a few days?"

Frank bobbed his head up and down, a little too quickly. He stopped. “Well, you see, it was too easy!”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, whoever did this, didn’t try very hard. They left everything at the defaults, like either they didn’t know what they were doing, or—“

“Or they wanted it to be easy so you’d be guaranteed to identify her.”

Frank nodded.

“What about the man?” asked Shakespeare.

“I’ve got him running now, but preliminaries look like he might be harder to identify, the default swirl pattern didn’t work.”

“Okay, print me off that photo, and run it through facial recognition, see if you can find a match. Make sure you hit missing persons.”

Frank nodded and hit a few keys. A color laser printer nearby powered up, spitting out a perfect copy within seconds.

Shakespeare grabbed the photo and left the lab, leaving Frank trembling at his keyboard.

He had just lied to a cop, to one of his fellow co-workers who were supposed to uphold the law, just as he was. He had just lied for the first time in his career, and he was nearly sick over it.

He clicked a few keys, starting the analysis of the man for the first time, not, as he had told Shakespeare, for additional analysis. He had yet to try the “out of the box” reversal. Instead, he had told Shakespeare what he needed him to hear, just in case the photo did turn out to be him. He would know in a couple of hours if the analysis proved as easy as the first.

And if it was him, it would give him a day or two to decide what to do.

Shakespeare made a bold decision; he took the stairs. It was only six flights, down, not up, but it was the first time he had voluntarily taken the stairs in years.

Baby steps.

It still winded him slightly, and he stood in the stairwell catching his breath for a few moments. His racing heart calmed, he opened the door

to the CSU labs and stepped into the hallway, nearly mowing Vinny down.

“Jesus!” exclaimed Vinny, his jaw dropping slightly when he realized who it was. “You took the stairs?”

Shakespeare frowned. “What’s it to you?”

Vinny shrugged. “Nothin’.” He made a show of looking down both ends of the hallway. “But if I see four horsemen, I’m outta here.”

Shakespeare chuckled as Vinny walked toward his lab.

Me taking the stairs is one of the signs of the apocalypse. Now that’s funny.

He pushed the double swinging doors open to the autopsy room and saw MJ sewing closed the chest of their victim.

“Shakes, you still here?”

Shakespeare had to admit he always felt good when dealing with MJ. He always seemed happy to see him, unlike most of the others. Shakespeare held up the photo, a smile on his face.

“Hey, MJ. Our young computer whiz has the first face from the photo. Thought I’d see if we have a match, now that you’ve got her cleaned up.”

Jenkins reached up and focused the overhead light on the young woman’s face, now cleaned of any blood, her hair neatly combed back from his search for trace evidence. “Let’s have a look.”

Shakespeare held the photo beside her face and raised his eyebrows.

“That’s definitely not her,” said Jenkins, echoing Shakespeare’s thoughts.

“Well, if this isn’t her”—Shakespeare shook the photo—“then who the hell is she, and why the hell was her photo left at this one’s murder scene?”

Jenkins shook his head. “You’re the detective, Detective. That’s above my pay grade.”

Shakespeare grunted. “If I had your money, I’d burn mine.”

Jenkins stretched. “Hah! I think you have this poor public servant confused with a brain surgeon.”

“Gotta have a brain to be—“

“Get your ass outta here before I open you up to see what’s inside!”

Shakespeare laughed and headed to the door.

“Have you sent her to facial yet?”

Jenkins nodded.

“Yup, a few minutes ago. Hopefully they can find her in missing persons.”

Shakespeare nodded.

“Once the kid figures out who the other person is in the photo, that might help.”

“You never know.” Jenkins held up a curved needle, examining it under the light, then leaned over, plunging it through the skin on one side of the chest cavity, then pulling it up and through the other side, yanking it tight, closing the wound a bit more.

Shakespeare grimaced.

I sure hope he gets paid more than me.

Trace stood in the center of the apartment, her trained eye going over every square inch, finding nothing. The body was gone, the CSU team had finished, the canvassing of the neighbors had proved fruitless, and Shakespeare had the lead. She couldn't believe it. Case after case over the past few weeks had gone to Eldridge, and now that he was gone, they were going to Shakespeare. *So much for getting my shot.* She knew it was a shitty way to get ahead, over the body of a fallen comrade, but sometimes that's the way things had to be. It wasn't like *she* killed him.

There was a knock on the door.

She spun on her heel and quickly walked toward the entrance, opening the door.

A young woman on the other side jumped back, her eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

“I-I'm sorry, I must have the wrong apartment.”

Trace pulled her badge off her hip and showed it to the woman. “Detective Trace, Homicide.” She noted the woman's face turn a shade paler. “And you are?”

“Jackie, Jackie St. Jean.” Her eyes darted to the apartment number on the door. “Did you say Homicide?”

Trace nodded. *Uh oh, this won't be pretty.*

“Is, is Angela okay?”

Trace pulled out her pad and noted down the woman's name. “Did Angela live in this apartment?”

“Yes. Is she okay?”

“What was her last name?”

“Henwood. Would you please tell me what’s going on?”

“Can you describe her for me please?”

“I don’t know. Blonde, your height, I guess.”

“White?”

“Yes.”

“A little, shall we say, plump?”

Jackie frowned. “A little.”

“Did she live here alone?”

She hesitated. “Yes.”

“Who’s Larissa Channing?”

“Who?”

Don’t play dumb with me kid. “Larissa Channing.”

“Oh, that was her Grandmother.”

“Was?”

“She passed away about six months ago.”

“And why was her name still on the lease?”

Jackie looked at the floor.

“Look, you’re not going to get your friend in trouble.”

Jackie looked up. “Well, you know, its rent controlled, so, when her Grandmother died, she just didn’t tell the landlord.”

Trace nodded, having heard it dozens of times before. If you could get a rent controlled apartment in New York City, it was something you held onto for dear life. She pulled out her cellphone and flipped to the picture of their victim, sent over by Jenkins earlier.

“Is this your friend?” She held the phone up so Jackie could see.

She gasped, her hand flying to her mouth, nodding. “Oh my God. What happened to her?”

“Is this your friend?”

Her head bobbed rapidly. “Yes!”

“And this is Angela Henwood?”

Again, her head bobbed. “Yes.”

Trace waved Jackie into the apartment, motioning to a nearby chair. “Have a seat, I’ll need to take a statement from you.” She dialed

Shakespeare's number and waited. His gruff voice answered on the second ring.

"Shakespeare."

"Hey, Shakes, it's Amber. I've got an ID on our vic."

"Excellent! Who is it?"

"Angela Henwood. She lived here with her Grandmother, Larissa Channing, who passed away a few months ago."

"Let me guess, rent controlled?"

"Yup."

"Okay, I'll run her name through the system and see what we've got."

"Okay, I'm gonna get a formal statement from the vic's friend who just showed up here, and then I'll see you at the station."

"10-4."

She hung up and sat down beside a now visibly shaken Jackie. "Let's start at the beginning."

Jackie nodded. "Can I get a drink?"

Trace gave a by-your-leave wave.

Jackie rose from her chair and opened several cupboards before finding the glasses. Removing one, she filled it with tap water, then sat back down when Trace suddenly twigged on something.

"You didn't know where the glasses were."

"Huh?" Jackie shrugged her shoulders. "I guess Angela always got the drinks."

But Trace wasn't listening to the explanation, her mind fixated on one burning question.

How did Frank know where to get the glass from?