



FUZZY NAVEL by J.A. Konrath. Copyright ©2008 by J.A. Konrath. Available in paperback and hardcover by Hyperion Books, and on CD, MP3, and cassette by Brilliance Audio, wherever books are sold. All Rights Reserved. Unauthorized reproduction or distribution will result in a stern lecture. Does anyone actually read this fine print? Hi, Mom!

Fuzzy Navel

1½ oz. Peach Schnapps

3 oz. Orange Juice

Pour schnapps in a rocks or old fashioned glass filled with ice. Add orange juice.

4:38 PM

Kork

It's quiet in the suburbs. The only sound is from the cab that has dropped me off, making a U-turn at the dead-end, then heading back down the quiet, winding road. Its tail lights quickly disappear, swallowed up by the multitude of trees.

I walk up the driveway and look at the house. It's a ranch, laid out in the shape of an L, occupying half an acre of green lawn speckled with fallen leaves. There's a double car garage, the door closed. I see Mom through the front bay window. She's sitting in a rocking chair and reading a book—how much more stereotypical elderly can you get? I check the front door, and as expected it is locked.

I walk around the side of the house, running my hand along the brown brick, passing windows that should probably be washed. This is a big departure from the Chicago apartment. A lot more space. A lot more privacy. I've discovered that privacy is important. No neighbors for more than a quarter mile is a good thing. With all of the tree coverage, it's like being in the middle of the woods, rather than only five miles away from O'Hare Airport.

I stop at the back porch—a slab of concrete with the obligatory lawn chairs, a wrought iron sun table, and a veranda—and I close my eyes, breathing in the cool autumn air. Somewhere, someone is burning leaves. I haven't smelled that since my youth. I fill my lungs with the scent and smile. It smells like freedom.

The sliding glass patio door is open, and I decide to give Mom a lecture about that. Just because the suburbs are safer than the city doesn't mean the all of the doors shouldn't be locked.

I walk into the kitchen, catch the odor of home cooking. A pot is on the stove. I check the contents. Stew. I pick up the spoon, give it a stir, take a little bite of potato. Delicious.

Mom yells, “Jacqueline?”

I consider answering her, but decide a surprise is in order instead. I take out my gun and tip-toe into the hallway.

“Jacqueline? Is that you?”

I look left, then right, scanning for the psychotic cat that lives here. He isn’t around.

“Jacqueline, you’re frightening me.”

That’s the point, Mom.

I peek around the corner and see that Mom is standing up. She’s in her late sixties, short hair more gray than brown, her back bent with age. She’s wearing a house dress, something plaid and shapeless. Mom’s eyes dart this way and that way. They settle on me, and she gasps.

“Oh my God,” she says.

“Did I scare you? You shouldn’t leave the back door open, Mom. God only knows what kind of weirdoes can get in.”

Mom’s chest flutters, and she says in a small voice, “I know who you are. My daughter told me all about you.”

She reaches for the phone, but I’m on her in three steps, giving her a firm slap across her wrinkled face.

“I’m going to ask you this one time, and one time only. And then I’m going to start hurting you.”

I smile, knowing how it makes the scar tissue covering most of my face turn bright pink, knowing how horrifying it looks.

“Where’s Jack?”

4:57 PM

Munchel

The target is two hundred and eighty three yards away. James Michael Munchel knows all about mil dots, and how to calculate distance with the reticle, but he's using a laser measuring unit instead. This isn't cheating. A sniper can and should use every bit of technology available to him in the field, whether he's on a roof in Dhi Qar, Iraq, or crouching behind some shrubs in the Chicago neighborhood of Ravenswood.

Munchel is sitting on the lawn, legs crossed, the tip of his Unique Alpine TPG 1 rifle peeking out through the leafy green dogwood. He arrived here two hours ago, but had selected this spot three weeks earlier. The house is unoccupied, and Munchel has pulled the *For Sale* sign out of the lawn and set it face-down. Realtors probably won't stop by this late. If one does...well, too bad for her.

Munchel is wearing a camouflage jacket, leggings, and black steel toed boots he bought at the Army/Navy surplus store on Lincoln Avenue. He can't be seen from the sidewalk fifteen feet away. Munchel knows this for a fact, because he's done several dry runs prior to today. He's practically invisible, even if someone is staring right at him.

To avoid arousing suspicion, Munchel didn't walk here in full camo. He came in street clothes—jeans and a blue shirt—and awkwardly changed while crouching behind the dogwood, putting his civvies in the black two-wheeled suitcase he towed along.

Munchel scratches his stubble, then peers through the Leupold scope, which has been zeroed out at two hundred yards. The crosshair is slightly above and to the right of the target's head, to adjust for the wind and the bullet drop. He'll never admit it, but he doesn't understand how to determine MOA—minute-of-angle. He can fake it online, while posting on the sniper

message boards, but he doesn't really know how to calculate the actual degrees. In the forest preserve near his house, Munchel can hit a target from five hundred yards and keep the grouping within a four inch radius. Who cares what the MOA is? It's good shooting no matter how you calculate it.

The target has his back to Munchel. He's in his living room, on the first floor of the two-flat, sitting at the computer. Just like he is every day at this time.

Predictability is a killer.

The blinds hanging in the large, three-section bay window are open, and Munchel can see straight down the hallway, all the way to the back of the house. He nudges the rifle slightly, to check what the target is surfing.

Pornography. Some weird shit with chicks wearing rubber aprons and wielding whips.

Freak, Munchel thinks. *Deserves everything he's about to get.*

Munchel glances at his watch; a Luminex 3007, the same kind that Navy SEALs use. Less than a minute left. Munchel's hands start to shake, and he realizes he's breathing heavy. Not from fear. From excitement. All the training, all the planning, it all comes down to this moment.

The butt plate is snug against his armpit, his face is tight against the cheek pad, the safety is off. The aluminum gun chassis is on the concrete planter behind the dogwood, a hard surface that ensures the gun will stay steady. Munchel takes a deep breath, lets it out through his teeth. His ears tell him there is no traffic coming, which is essential because he's shooting across the street—it would be bad if a car entered his line of fire at the moment of truth.

The target stands up, walks toward the window, seems to look right at him. Impossible, of course. He's much too far away, too well hidden. But it's still unnerving. Munchel chews his lower lip, begins the countdown.

The target turns. Munchel completely empties his lungs and waits...waits...waits...then squeezes the trigger with the ball of his finger, trying to time it between heartbeats like he's read about online.

There's a loud *CRACK*. The target's head explodes, and he pitches forward.

Munchel sucks in some air and lets it out as a laugh. *How ridiculously easy*. He checks to see if anyone around him noticed the gunfire. The sidewalks are clear. No one opens a door and

sticks their head out. Everything is completely normal, just an average fall day in the city.

He reaches for his canteen—also an Army/Navy Store purchase—and sucks down some purple Gatorade. His untraceable prepaid cell phone vibrates, and he stares at the number. It's Swanson. Anxious to see how it went, to meet at the rendezvous point and brag over beer and chicken wings.

Munchel ignores the call. He has other ideas of how to celebrate.

A street light comes on, its sensor activated by a timer. Munchel loads a round, aims, and takes it out. That's two shots now. Still, no one seems to notice. How disappointing.

He takes out his phone and dials 911.

"I was walking down Leavitt and heard someone shooting. I think my neighbor has been killed."

"What is your name, sir?"

"He's at forty-six fifty-two. I think someone shot him."

"Can you give me your name?"

Munchel hangs up, sips more Gatorade, and hunkers down to wait for the police to arrive.

5:32 PM

Jack

My partner, Sergeant Herb Benedict, crams the last mini chocolate donut into his mouth, wipes a hand across his gray mustache, and then tries to heave his bulk out of the less-than comfortable confines of my 1984 Chevy Nova. He has to rock, twice, before he gets enough momentum to break the tug of gravity between his ass and the seat.

“Thanks for not judging me,” he says as we approach the yellow police tape.

“Because you ate two packages of donuts even though your doctor put you on a high fiber diet?”

Herb nods. “Man cannot live on bran alone, Jack. Every day, as a snack, my wife mixes me a high fiber sugar-free weight loss shake. Then she adds even more fiber.”

“Sounds healthy.”

“You want some? I got a zipper baggie in my pocket full of the stuff. It’s like drinking a stalk of wheat.”

Dried leaves in shades of gold, red, and brown blanket the sidewalks. The cool air carries a crisp, woody scent. Spring and summer smelled like garbage and sewage. Winter, like car exhaust. Fall is the only time of year Chicago smells nice.

The setting sun casts long shadows on the street, and ours walk ahead of us. I like September, because the climate is moderate, and because I have brown hair and brown eyes and eighty-five percent of my clothing matches this particular season.

“Does your wife know you’re snacking between nutritious meals?” I ask.

Herb’s basset hound jowls are turned down; his serious face. “She suspects. Last night she found some powdered sugar on my tie. I spent twenty minutes trying to convince her it was

heroin.”

A rookie guards the crime scene, keeping away reporters and gawkers. Young, curly hair, eyes intent. I don't recognize him, and he doesn't recognize us, asking for ID. This is perfectly acceptable. I'm wearing a pumpkin colored Ann Klein jacket with a red chevron pattern, taupe Armani pants, and rust Gucci pumps. He probably thinks I'm a waif runway model looking for my photo shoot. Well, a retired one, maybe. There aren't too many fashionistas in their late forties.

I open my clutch—a Walmart purchase, but hey it matches the outfit—and remove my star, flashing it at the noob.

“Lieutenant Jack Daniels, Homicide. This is Sergeant Benedict.”

The rookie—his nametag reads *Sakey*—doesn't seem impressed with either my rank or my outfit, but he lets us pass. We walk into the first floor of a two-flat vintage brownstone, the space already crawling with cops; uniforms, plainclothes, and techies taking pictures and video. I feel my stomach go sour, something that has been happening more and more whenever I visit a crime scene. Without letting Herb see, I remove a roll of antacids out of my jacket pocket and pop three. Not that I fear showing weakness in front of my partner. My concern centers around the fact that my antacids are mint flavored, and Herb likes mint. I haven't discovered a flavor that Herb doesn't like, even though I've looked. I only have a few tablets left, and I don't want to share.

“She's just trying to look out for you, Herb,” I say.

“I know. But I have a feeling that the extra years this high fiber diet may allow me to live will get cancelled out by the amount of time I spend on the john.”

Herb and I each take some plastic booties out of the box by the door and slip them over our shoes. There are gloves as well, and I snap one on.

The house isn't very well lit, one thrift shop floor lamp and a living room chandelier with two bulbs not working. The CSU has brought in a portable halogen light, which illuminates the space to operating room brightness. There's a computer desk, empty pop cans, fast food wrappers, and CDs randomly strewn over the top. The monitor is a flat screen, and there are speakers screwed into the walls. A red bean bag chair which doesn't match the red shade of the sofa which doesn't match the red shade of the drapes. The TV is an older model, sitting on a

cheap pressboard cabinet. The walls are bare except for a poster of a topless Jenna Jameson.

The victim is a male Caucasian, average build, sprawled out face-first on the floor. He's wearing jeans and nothing else. His blond hair is matted with blood, and a halo of red soaked the beige carpeting around his head. I've seen enough gun shot wounds in my day to recognize the cause of death.

I crouch down, squint at his right hand. In the webbing between his thumb and index finger there is a black tattoo of a tombstone. Written on its face is a number five with angel wings on it.

A bulge in the back of the vic's pocket appears wallet-shaped, and I tug it out with a gloved hand. Driver's license shows me a picture of a man named Robert Siders who resides at this address. The hair seems the same. I pass the wallet to Herb, bend down, and gently turn the deceased's head to the side. No one looks like their driver's license picture, but in this case I can't even make a comparison—the victim's face has been blown off.

The wallet holds thirty three dollars, a check stub from a local oil and lube place, and a wrinkled time card signed by the manager of same garage. No credit cards.

Without prompting, Herb yanks out his cell, calling Dispatch. I stand up, take a few steps away from the body, and let my eyes sweep the room while Herb speaks into the phone.

Sakey—the curly-haired rookie who carded me earlier—walks up next to me and peers down at the body.

“Roommate got angry,” he ventures.

“One bedroom apartment,” I say. “No roommate.”

“Girlfriend, then.”

“No girlfriend. The house is messy, badly furnished, and there's a poster of a porn star on the wall. No woman would live here.”

Sakey folds his arms and puts a hand on his chin. I watch the wheels spin. “Okay, drug deal gone bad. Dealer shot him in the face.”

“No drugs. He's got ink on his hand. Prison tattoo. Did five years, got paroled. There's a signed time card in his wallet—he needs to turn it in to his PO, which means he's getting random drug tests. If he's holding down a job, he's keeping clean.”

He nods. “Fine, we check for former associates. One of them must have come in and—”

“No one came in,” I say.

Sakey raises an eyebrow. “Then who shot him in the face?”

“No one shot him in the face. They shot him in the back of the head.”

“I’ve seen GSWs. He clearly was shot...”

“...by a high velocity rifle in the back of the head,” Herb finishes for him, snapping his cell phone closed. “Higher velocity causes a shock wave in tissue, which makes big exit wounds.”

“Record?” I ask Herb.

“In for ten and out in five. One count unlawful restraint. One count deviate sexual assault. One count aggravated criminal sexual abuse.”

“Our vic is a rapist,” I say, staring down at the body. “Herb, get the information on the woman he assaulted, and her family.”

“You think they hired a hitter?” Sakey asks.

It’s the first assumption he may have gotten right, but he says it to my back—I’m already at the window facing the street, letting my eyes roam back and forth, up and down. I find it at nose-level.

The bullet punched through neatly, leaving a hole the size of a dime. No cracked pane or shattered glass—another indicator of a very fast round. I stand in front of it and face the apartment, looking from the window, to the victim, and then down the hallway. I follow the path, scrutinizing the far wall, and locate the bullet’s final resting place; another small hole, this one ringed with specks of blood.

I scan the CSU officers in the room and see one that I know, Dan Rogers. I call him over.

“Bullet wound up over here,” I tell him. “But before you dig it out, I need to borrow your laser pointer.”

I have no idea if he actually has a laser pointer in his box full of stuff, but he does, one of those thin models the size of a AA battery. I jam it into the depression in the wall, have Herb stand next to the window, and spend a minute lining up the holes.

“Who was first on the scene?” I ask Sakey.

“Beat cop named Rory. Out in back losing his lunch.”

“Do you know when the call came?”

“A minute or two after five. Multiple 911s.”

I nod, then throw him a bone. “Want to help find the hide?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

I point to Jenna. “That poster still has the cardboard backing, so it should be stiff. Take it off the wall and meet us outside.”

He immediately hops to it. I leave the house, put my plastic booties and latex glove into a different box by the entrance, then organize three teams of uniforms to do door-to-doors, checking for wits. When that’s finished I take out a slim notepad from my clutch and jot down: *911 tapes, PO, priors, family, and freelance assassins/ViCAT*. Much as I loathe to get the FBI involved, their database will give me access to similar murders.

Herb and I meet Sakey where we’d originally found him, near the police tape. He doesn’t seem pleased to be carrying a poster of a topless woman. Especially since there’s a crowd of onlookers, including a few members of the press.

“Why did I bring this?” he asks.

“Hold up the poster,” I say.

Sakey does as he’s told, and the TV cameras catch his frown. “They’re filming us.”

“No they’re not,” Herb says. “They’re filming you. You’re the one waving around the giant picture of the naked lady.”

Sakey’s unhappy face deepens, but he keeps the poster raised. “Now what?”

“Follow us,” I tell him.

We push past the crowd, ignoring the questions being shouted at us, and stand on the opposite side of the street. I hold Sakey’s shoulders, moving him left and right until the red dot from the laser pointer appears on Ms. Jameson’s stomach. The TV crews creep closer, capturing our every move.

“Man,” Sakey groans. “My Mom watches the news.”

Herb waves at the cameras and says, “Hi, Mrs. Sakey.”

I tap Sakey on the back. “Just keep the dot on the poster and keep walking.”

Sakey marches on, though he doesn’t seem thrilled about it. Like many beat cops, he’s probably fantasized about getting into Detective Division, working a major homicide. I guess I’ve deglamorized it for him.

We continue walking, following the sidewalk about a hundred yards down, then hop over a waist-high wrought iron fence surrounding a duplex. A slight breeze with a pinch of winter chill tussles my hair. Sakey's blows around as well, then springs right back to his original curls. I wonder what conditioner he uses.

"What's a hide?" Sakey asks. He holds the poster in front of his chest, the dot now at waist level.

"Where a sniper shoots from," Herb answers. "Now the problem is finding the catway."

"What's a catway?"

"About eight pounds."

Sakey doesn't laugh. Neither do I, having heard that joke several dozen times during the years Herb has been my partner. He also can't pass a cemetery without quipping, "People are dying to get in there." I never laugh at that one either.

We walk along the front of the building, up to a cluster of evergreen bushes. They're thick enough to hide a man. My gun comes out, a .38 Colt Detective Special snubby, my sights locking on the plant. A quick peek inside finds the bush to be devoid of snipers.

"Found brass," Herb says. He grunts, kneeling down on the lawn, teasing a spent cartridge into a clear plastic evidence bag with his fingernail. It's gold, shiny, almost three inches long.

"Three oh eight?" Herb guesses.

"I don't think so. Read the bottom."

Herb squints at it, peering down the front of his nose and making a farsighted face.

"The writing is scratched out."

Sakey nods his head and says, "Smart."

I've corrected him enough today, and he spared me the indignity of walking down the block with a nude porn star, so I don't give him a lecture. Instead I tell him to tape off the area and find out where the homeowners are so they can be informed their house is now part of a crime scene.

"You sure they aren't home?" Sakey asks.

I point. "Morning paper is still on the porch."

He looks at me with what might be admiration, then goes on his way.

“Don’t forget your date,” Herb calls after him.

Sakey picks up the poster and takes it with, making sure Jenna faces him rather than the press. I turn my attention back to the bush, not expecting to find anything else, and being surprised when I see a white business card on the ground. I ask Herb for another bag and use the barrel of my Colt to nudge it inside. The front reads:

ONE MORE DEAD PERVERT

COURTESY OF

TUHC

The ink on the card is slightly smeared, and the edges have a fine perforation to them. The killer probably printed it himself using his home computer and those blank business card sheets available at office supply stores.

I frown, not liking this at all. In my experience, killers who leave messages aren’t likely to stop anytime soon. I have a bad feeling that there’s more to this than hiring a mercenary to avenge a rape.

I stare back at the apartment, viewing the line of site. Perhaps two hundred yards. With the proper rifle, not a difficult shot at all. My mom, a former Chicago cop herself, used to have a Winchester Model 70 she’d inherited from her father. During my teenage years we’d go on afternoon excursions down to southern Illinois farmland and regularly hit ears of corn from four hundred yards, and probably further, with thirty aught six rounds. She’d sold the gun decades ago—not much use for long arms in an urban environment.

Herb gives the card the same treatment he gave the bullet, holding it at an arm’s length to read it. Glasses are in his future.

“*TUHC?*” His voice registers the same displeasure I feel. “I hate it when they leave us notes.”

My cell buzzes. I free it from my inner jacket pocket and slap it to my face.

“Daniels.”

“Lieutenant? This is Bobalik, Homicide from District 20, Ravenswood. Heard you got a sniper.”

“News travels fast.”

“Let me guess—one shot to the head, through the window from a few hundred yards away, vic was a sex offender?”

News must travel even faster than I thought.

“Yeah. How did you know?”

“I’m at a scene on Leavitt,” she says. “Victim’s name is Chris Wolak. Same MO.”

“Got a time of death?” I ask.

“Call came at a few minutes after five.”

Ravenswood is a Chicago neighborhood about five miles away from us, but Bobalik’s victim died at the same time ours did. I frown at the obvious conclusion.

“It gets better,” Bobalik says. “Guess what happened in Englewood at the same time?”

“One more dead pervert,” I say, quoting the card.

I fill Bobalik in on the details, then hang up and relate everything to Herb.

“Three snipers,” he says. “Jesus. Why don’t we every get the normal cases? A guy gets drunk, shoots his neighbor for playing his radio too loud?”

I look at the business card again and wonder the same thing.

6:12 PM

Jack

On the car ride to Ravenswood my phone rings again. I inwardly cringe, hoping it isn't another sniper death. The fates smile; it's my fiancée.

"Did I catch you at a bad time?" Latham asks.

I picture him in his office, wearing a snazzy suit. Red hair. Green eyes. Boyish smile. Broad shoulders and trim waist. That leads to me picturing him without the suit. I almost say something dirty, but don't want Herb to hold it over my head for the rest of my life.

"Your timing is perfect," I say into the phone. "Are you calling to accept my mother's kind invitation?"

"I'll do my best to cram in as much of Mom's home cooking as I possibly can."

I live with my mother in the suburb of Bensenville. That's a big no-no for Chicago cops (living outside the city, not living with your mother.) But the mortgage is in her name and so far I haven't been caught. I love Chicago, but Mom wanted a more laid back lifestyle and I wanted to keep an eye on her because she's getting up there in the years. So we bought a cute little ranch house in a woodsy area and I braved a daily one hour car ride to and from the Job.

It's about as much fun as it sounds. To make up for the commute, I get to experience the joy of weeding, painting, home repairs, cutting the lawn, tarring the driveway, cleaning the gutters, and countless other homeowner tasks that I so enjoyed living without when I had an apartment in Wrigleyville.

But at least Mom is happy.

Since Latham proposed, Mom has been inviting him over more and more, foisting food, drink, and conversation on the poor guy. It isn't easy for Latham. Not just the travel back and

forth from the city, but he had a bout with botulism earlier this year and hasn't fully recovered. He still retains some residual paralysis in his legs, and an aversion to food in general.

Thankfully, the paralysis doesn't extend to his other parts.

"It will be a few hours," I say. "I'll be tied up until at least seven or eight. Can we eat at nine?"

"That's fine. I'm on my way there now. I promised Mary we'd play some rummy."

"Mom guilted you into coming early?"

"Not at all. I enjoy spending time with your mother. Besides, we play for money. I've already won her pension, now I'm going for her Social Security."

I smile. "Mom told me she was up sixty bucks."

"She cheats, Jack. She looks all cute and harmless, but she's a wily one. I think she deals from the bottom of the deck."

Can a woman ask for anything more than her future husband hanging out with her mom? Plus he's caring, funny, attractive, and he puts up with me. Good sex sealed the deal.

"See you later," I say. "I love you."

"Love you too, Jack."

"Love you more."

"No, I love you more. See you tonight."

He makes a kissing sound and I grin and make a kissing sound back, then we hang up. I glance at Herb, who does a good job of ignoring me by occupying his mouth with a chocolate power bar. Herb insists he snacks on these for energy, even though he has more than enough energy already stored in the extra eighty pounds of fat he carries around.

"That probably doesn't have much fiber in it," I offer.

Herb licks some chocolate off his fingers. I once asked Herb what the difference was between power bars and regular candy bars, and he told me that power bars had more calories.

"For energy," he'd said.

When he had his heart attack a while back, he was the only one that seemed surprised.

"I thought we had an unspoken agreement, Jack." He's taken on a superior tone. "You don't question my eating habits, I pretend to ignore it when you make kissy-face on the phone."

"I don't make kissy-face into the phone."

“Yes you do. And for your information, this power bar does contain fiber. It’s in the caramelized peanuts.”

I snort. “The wrapper has more fiber.”

“I’m eating that next.”

This long-dead horse has been beaten many times, so I change the subject. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking about the last crime scene?”

Herb’s turn to snort. “Yeah. Welcome to amateur night.”

I drum my fingers on the steering wheel. “What kind of shooter grinds the engraving off the bottom of his bullets? Think about the misfires.”

“He should be more worried about shooting himself in the face while he’s filing it down. A pro would simply pick up his brass.”

“A pro would also know we would find the slug. Hell, anyone who watched TV knows the word *ballistics*.”

I left the cartridge with Rogers to take to the crime lab. He IDed it by sight, without needing to use acid etching to bring out the markings. A .338 Lapau Magnum. A caliber specifically designed for sniping, and hopefully unique enough to be able to track. I have a team doing just that.

“And did you see his hide?” Herb shakes his head. “Can you imagine the guy, squatting in a bush, facing the sidewalk?”

If you want someone dead, it’s relatively easy to ring his doorbell and shoot him in the chest when he answers. Much easier than shooting him from two hundred yards down the street at a scheduled time.

“This isn’t just about the death,” I say. “This is a game. A bunch of knuckleheads playing soldier, getting their kicks shooting sex offenders long distance.”

I leave the next part of my thought unspoken—that a knucklehead could kill you just as easily as a pro. In some cases, they’re even more dangerous. Soldiers are taught patience and discipline. An amateur takes unnecessary chances and makes big mistakes, exposing more people to risk. This TUHC group might be easier to track down than an expert hired gun, but they might also hurt a lot of innocents before that happens.

My phone rings again. I find it on my seat without taking my eyes off the road.

“Daniels.”

“Is this Jacqueline Daniels?”

A female voice, rote and professional.

“Yes. Who is this?”

“This is the Heathrow Facility, you’re on the list of people to inform.”

The Heathrow Facility is a maximum security center for the criminally insane. I’ve sent a few people there over the years. The arresting officer is always called if one of the inmates dies. They’re also called when an inmate is released, or escapes.

“Who is this regarding?” I ask.

“Alexandra Kork.”

A feeling overwhelms me, like the shower has gone from hot to cold. Kork is one of the most dangerous people alive. I’d met her under another name, and her entire family consisted of psychopathic killers. She almost murdered me, and several people I cared about, in horrible ways.

“What about Kork?” The words are hard to get out, sticking in my throat like chicken bones. A dozen thoughts run through my mind at once, the most pressing being *please don’t tell me she escaped*.

“Alexandra Kork died this morning.”

I blow out air through my mouth, and my shoulders sag.

“It appears to be a suicide,” the woman continues. “She set herself on fire with some aerosol spray.”

That sounds like Kork. She’d kill herself in a horrible way like that.

“Are you sure it’s her?” I ask. “One hundred percent sure?”

“The body was badly burned, but we confirmed it with dental records.”

I picture Alex’s face, pretty as a model’s when I met her. Not pretty at all after we tangled. She’d gotten close, fooled me completely, made me doubt myself unlike I ever had before.

One of the things I’ve learned as a cop is that everyone considers themselves the hero in the story of their life. Even bad guys who killed children and blew up hospitals believed they were good guys. Everyone can justify their actions. Everyone believes they’re in the right.

Kork was different. She knew she was the bad guy, that her actions were evil. It didn't bother her at all. Or maybe it did. Maybe she finally realized what an awful person she was, and couldn't cope with it.

"Ms. Daniels? Are you still there?"

"Yeah."

"There's no next of kin listed. Would you like us to release her remains to you?"

"No. The state can bury her. Thank you for calling."

I hang up and pop a few more antacids.

"Are those mint-flavored?" Herb asks.

"Alex Kork is dead," I tell him. "Suicide at Heathrow."

"World is a better place without her in it. Gimme one of those antacids."

I pass the roll to Herb, thinking about the last words Alex had said to me.

"You beat me this time. But it isn't over."

It's over now, Alex. You've haunted me in countless nightmares, but you won't haunt me anymore.

Not ever again.

6:21 PM

Mary

“Where’s that psychotic cat you have?”

Mary Streng stares hard at Alex Kork. The woman who broke into their house is taller than Jacqueline, with broader shoulders. Her body is angular rather than curvy, and Mary can see the muscle striations in her bare forearms. Alex has straight black hair, shoulder length. She might have been pretty once, but the left side of her face, from her chin to her missing eyebrow, is a knot of pink scar tissue, puckered with patchwork skin graft zig-zags and pock marks from countless stitches.

“At the vet,” Mary answers. “Bitten by a dog.”

Alex winces. No—it only looks like a wince, because the ruined half of her face stays immobile. It’s actually a smile.

“That’s a shame. Such a cute kitty, being mauled by a big, bad canine.”

“He’ll be fine,” Mary says. “The dog isn’t expected to recover.”

Alex sits on the sofa next to Mary. She’s tucked her gun—a small caliber revolver—into the back of her jeans, which rankles Mary.

I’m an old lady, and she doesn’t consider me a threat, Mary realizes.

It’s true, and it hurts. Sharp as her mind still is, her body has grown old and weak. Osteoporosis is shrinking her. Rheumatoid arthritis has turned her hands into agonizing claws. Her figure, once a perfect hourglass, is now shaped more like the box the hourglass came in. What she would give to be young again, just for a minute, to show this young punk—

“Are you sizing me up?” Alex asks.

Mary lowers her eyes.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you, Mom. Or I’ll start knocking you around.”

Mary stares at her, projecting defiance instead of fear. Alex's face twitches into a half-smile. Up close, the scars are white and look like rubber.

"I know you used to be a cop," Alex says. "I bet this really makes you feel helpless."

Mary doesn't answer. Jacqueline has told her all about Alex and her nightmarish family. Like most cops, her daughter kept her fears hidden away. But Mary knew that Jack feared Alex. And now she could see why. This scarred woman sitting next to her doesn't have a soul. Something, some vital part, is missing from Alex. The part that makes her a human being.

Mary had only seen it once before, more than forty years ago, on the Job. A homeless man had killed his friend over half a bottle of wine. Mary had hit the offender with her billy, over and over, but he wouldn't go down. He just continued to stare at her with those black, bottomless eyes. Eyes without a trace of humanity. Eyes that dared her to kill him.

The same eyes Alex has.

"I bet it hurt," Mary says, "when my daughter tore your face off."

Mary doesn't see the blow coming—it's too fast. But she feels it, the fist connecting with her mouth, the explosion of pain in her lips, her head snapping back. She had been punched before, in the line of duty, but never so hard or so viciously.

Then Alex is standing over her, running a hand through Mary's gray hair in a warped parody of kindness.

"Maybe later I'll show you how much it hurts," Alex says.

And Mary Streng realizes she's going to die.

It isn't as scary as she thought it might be. She's lived a long, full life. She's done everything she ever set out to do. She's made some mistakes, of course. Some big ones. A failed marriage. A child out of wedlock, put up for adoption when she was still a teenager. A feud with her mother, that never got resolved before she died. But Mary managed to forgive herself, to learn from her errors, to keep on going. She knew she could meet death—even an unpleasant death—with grace and dignity and no regrets.

But this isn't just about her. Alex also wants to kill Jacqueline.

That scares Mary to the core. Mary would die for her daughter. She'd also want to die if her daughter were killed. Parents aren't supposed to outlive their children, and Jacqueline is too good a person to be murdered at the hands of this lunatic.

She has to warn Jacqueline. Has to make sure Alex can't get her.

"Do you bake?" Alex asks.

"What?"

"I know it's a stereotype, that all old women bake. But do you?"

"Yes," Mary says.

"What do you bake? Cookies? Bread?"

Mary doesn't like these questions. They seem to intimate. She forces herself to say, "I make pies."

"What kind of pies?"

"Peach. Cherry. Apple. I was going to make an apple pie today, for after dinner."

"You've got all of the ingredients?"

Mary nods.

"Okay, let's do it," Alex says. "Let's make a pie."

Alex takes Mary's hand, leads her into the kitchen. Mary doesn't understand where this is going, what Alex's ulterior motive is. But she has no choice other than to let it play out.

"What do we do first?"

"There's some dough, in the refrigerator."

Alex opens up the large, stainless steel door and takes out a bowl with a wet towel covering the top. Mary stares at the gun in the back of Alex's jeans. She needs to get closer.

"This the dough?" Alex asks.

Mary nods. "Yes."

"It's done rising, or whatever?"

"Yes."

"What else do we need?"

"Apples. Brown sugar. Lemon juice. Flour."

"You want to lend a hand here, Mom? This pie isn't going to make itself."

It's silly. Mary has been slapped, punched, and threatened, and she stayed stoic. But a simple act of baking makes her eyes well up with tears.

Maybe it's the perversion of a normally enjoyable activity. Mary loves to bake. It's one of the simple joys of life. But being forced to by this murderer makes the whole experience seem

tainted, dirty.

Alex acts normal the whole time. She rolls out the dough. She slices the apples. She's chatty and cheerful and asks many questions about the process. But she never lets down her guard and gives Mary a chance at the gun.

Jacqueline loathes baking, has no patience for it. Mary hasn't baked with her daughter since she was twelve years old. That fact makes this experience even worse. Mary should be bonding with her daughter, not with a psycho.

"Why do you bake if it makes you so sad?" Alex asks.

Mary wipes her face with the back of her hand, furious with herself for showing weakness.

"Or are you just upset because this is the last pie you'll ever make? There's a last time for everything, Mom. At least you can savor it, knowing it's the last time."

"The oven is done preheating," Mary says. "Put the pie on the bottom rack."

Alex obeys. Then she pats the excess flour off of her shirt and laughs at the cloud it makes.

"You never baked with your mother?" Mary asks.

"I might have. I don't remember. When I was small, Father tied her to a beam in the basement and whipped her until she died." Alex pops a stray apple slice into her mouth. "He made me help him, made me beat her."

"I'm sorry. That must have been horrible."

"Not really. He let me rest when I got tired."

Alex turns away, looks past the living room, out the large bay window facing the street. "Does Jack still drive that shitty Nova?"

Mary doesn't answer, sees a car coming up the driveway.

Not Jacqueline's.

Oh, no. It's Latham.

Mary takes a deep breath, ready to scream out a warning, but Alex is on her, tearing at her house dress, pulling off a sleeve and shoving it past her split lips, wadding it into her mouth. Then the gun is out again, pressed up against Mary's temple, and they both wait in silence for Latham to come in.

6:42 PM

Jack

Leavitt Street buzzes with activity. As in the previous crime scene, cops and onlookers surround the house, a walking, talking wall. The media already arrived, two news vans sending live feeds to their networks. I park in the center of the street, since nothing is getting through anyway. Herb extricates himself from my car with much grunting, but I refrain from making any jokes involving power bars or extra energy.

It's dark now. Dark and cold. The street light in front of the house isn't working, but there are enough emergency vehicles with their headlights on to provide adequate illumination.

We push through the crowd, duck under the cordon, and head for the house. This one is bigger than the two-flat we just left, a single family home with a giant bay window in front. Through the open blinds I can see cops milling around inside. Herb and I don our booties and go in, seeking out Detective Bobalik to get an update.

She directs the crime scene from the front room, standing a few feet away from Chris Wolak's body on the floor. I pause, taking everything in. Ten, maybe twelve police officers in the room, most of them CSU. Decor is retro Norman Bates, stuffed ducks and pheasants and animal heads adorning the walls and shelves. A computer desk, the monitor showing porn. A large leather sofa. A framed picture, of a smiling man holding the antlers of the buck he'd shot. An entertainment stand, TV, DVD, stereo. I examine the bay window, find the bullet hole, see the crowd outside looking back at me.

Bobalik is short, wearing glasses, and has really good hair, the kind that moves when she moves.

"I want ALS done before the ME arrives," she says to her team. "Bruen, organize the

door-to-door. Let's move, people, I don't want to spend the rest of my life here."

I walk to her, my hand extended in greeting, and then her head explodes.

It looks a lot like someone kicking a pumpkin. The top of her scalp comes off, spins through the air, and bounces off the TV. A fine mist of blood rises up around her shoulders and hangs there even after she crumbles to the floor.

"DOWN!" I yell.

A tug, at my waist. Herb tackling me even as I dive for the carpet.

Another shot.

The bullet rips through Bruen's chest, blood erupting from the exit wound, splashing the wall several feet behind him.

Screaming. From in the house. From the street outside.

I look right. Herb on the floor, between me and the window.

The carpet below me is cold and damp.

Another shot.

A CSU member falls, the round slicing through the sofa he hides behind, taking a hunk out of his neck.

I look left. The victim, Chris Wolak, face-to-face with me, except there isn't much face left. A white male, in his thirties, missing the back of his head, just like Rob Siders.

I'm lying in his blood.

Another shot.

A detective. On the floor next to me, only a few feet away. The bullet enters his hip, exits up through his neck. A long way for a slug to travel through tissue.

We're not safe on the floor.

I scream, "Get away from the window!"

A uniform stands up, runs for the hallway.

Another shot.

A miss.

He makes it to the end of the hall.

Another shot.

He dives to the floor.

No—he doesn't dive. Blood volcanoes out of his back.

Herb gets to his feet, attempting to make the same run.

“Herb!” I yell.

He gets two steps down the hall.

Another shot.

The bullet smacks the wall, stripping off wood paneling.

Two more steps.

Another shot.

Over Herb's head, destroying a dome light.

Two more steps, and he's next to a door.

Another shot.

Herb falls through the doorway.

“HERB!”

Silence.

I roll, away from the vic, hands tucked to my chest.

Bump into Bobalik. Roll over her.

Another shot, tearing up the carpet where I was a second ago.

I continue rolling, angling toward the window.

Then I ram into the wall. The wall the window is on.

Out of the line of fire. Safe.

I reach up for the turning rod on the blinds, twist it, closing the slats on the window nearest to me, blocking the sniper's vision.

Another shot. Through the window.

Then another, higher up.

The blinds fall off the wall, clatter to the floor.

“HERB!” I yell with everything I have.

Herb doesn't answer.

Another shot.

Then another.

The gunfire isn't hitting the house. I open up my clutch, remove a lipstick, one that has a

tiny mirror on the case. My back to the wall, I angle the mirror so I can see out the front window.

Most of the gawkers and media have fled. Cops are behind cars, weapons drawn. Handguns and shotguns, nothing long enough to hit a shooter two hundred yards away. Some are shrugging on bulletproof vests—Type IIIA—which won't offer any protection against high velocity sniper rounds. A .338 will punch through them like they're tissue paper.

Another shot.

I watch a patrolman's head snap back—he's behind the trunk of the patrol car, and the bullet slices right through the metal.

I turn back to the room. Five cops down in here, plus the original victim. Five more cops tucked into corners and behind furniture. Plus me. And Herb, if he made it.

I know it will take a minimum of ten minutes for the Special Response Team to gear up and arrive. They'll have rifles, and heavier body armor.

But in the meantime, we're ducks in a pond.

I try again. "HERB!"

A second passes.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Then, "Jack!"

I blow out a pent-up breath, a million kinds of relieved.

"Are you okay?" I yell.

"Yeah! My wife called, hysterical. Saw us on TV. She said she'd hold you personally responsible if I'm killed."

I wonder if I should call Latham. Perhaps I won't have another chance.

I push back the maudlin thoughts, focusing on how to escape. I glance at the door, so far away. Then I lock eyes with a stag head, hanging on the wall.

Chris Wolak is a hunter. He'll have long guns.

"Herb! Check to see if there are any rifles in there."

"Hold on." The pause lasts forever. Then, "Found a gun locker. Need to break it open."

Another shot.

A crime scene techie, crouching behind the entertainment stand, wails like siren, clutching the remainder of his foot. The pain must be unimaginable.

“Keep your head down!” I order the techie.

His keening cry goes on and on, and he rocks back and forth with his knee pressed to his chest, his head peeking out over the coffee table.

“Keep your—!”

Another shot.

The techie slumps to the ground, bleeding from the shoulder. A bad wound, gushing fast. He won't live until the SRT arrives. He needs medical help now.

I'm not the type who prays, but I beg the universe for Herb to find a rifle.

6:46 PM

Munchel

Munchel pauses to add another hash mark to the butt of his rifle, using a black permanent marker. That makes nine total. The number pleases him, but he's angry at himself for missing that fat cop, the one who came late to the party. Moves pretty fast for a porker. He arrived with that good looking split-tail who parked in the middle of the street. That pisses Munchel off. Why should cops be able to park wherever the hell they want to? It's bullshit.

Munchel checks his watch, figures he has a few more minutes before reinforcements arrive. Maybe he'll have another chance at Fatty, and the double-parker.

His cell rings. Swanson again. Munchel picks up.

"What the fuck are you doing!" Swanson is yelling, his voice high-pitched and girlish. Not a soldier's tone at all.

"Hi, Greg. You at the rendezvous point, sucking down a cool one?"

"You asshole! You're live on CNN!"

"Cool."

Munchel pulls the bolt back, ejecting the empty cartridge, then jams it forward to force another round into the chamber of his TPG 1. He peers through the Leupold scope. All the cops in the street are hiding or have run off. Of course they have. An entire platoon is no match for a single skilled sniper. Munchel can shoot the petals off a daisy at three hundred yards. Killing cops at less than two hundred is child's play.

"What if they catch you?" Swanson whines like a baby.

Munchel's voice is pure Stallone. "If they take me, it won't be alive."

Munchel puts his face against the cheek pad. Aims. Fires. Another head shot. He rubs his

shoulder—it's getting sore, even with the built-in recoil damper—then he uses the marker to draw the tenth kill line on the stock.

“We're going after perverts, not cops!”

Munchel looks down, sees he's dropped the cell phone. Swanson is still bitching. He picks it up.

“You say something, Swanson?”

“You're going to ruin it for us!”

“Relax,” Munchel purrs. “I'll make sure I kill all the witnesses.”

“You dumb son of—”

Munchel hangs up. He doesn't need Swanson, or anyone else, telling him what to do. James Michael Munchel *knows* what to do. No matter what anyone else thinks. No matter who they are.

The memory comes, unbidden, and Munchel frowns.

“Military bastards,” he says to himself.

He doesn't like to dwell on his rejection by the armed forces, but he dwells on it every day. All those stupid tests he had to fill out, being told by the recruiter that there were no wrong answers. A bald-faced lie. Obviously there were wrong answers, or else he'd be in a foxhole in Baghdad right now, killing insurgents.

Munchel chambers another round, imagines it's Osama in the crosshairs, not some stupid pig.

BANG!

That makes eleven, plus the original target. He doubts any marine sniper could do better. Another hash mark on the rifle. Pessolano will probably have a shit-fit when he sees how he marked up his precious gun. Maybe Munchel can buy the rifle from him. He respects Pessolano, because Pessolano actually toured, saw combat in Desert Storm. Pessolano always wears yellow shooting glasses, those high contrast ones that block out blue light. Pessolano is hard-core, but he needs to lighten up. Him and Swanson both.

Munchel looks in the suitcase, finds the pair of yellow glasses he bought from that late night infomercial. He slips them on, but they make everything too bright and give him an eyestrain headache. He takes them off again. Real snipers don't need fancy sunglasses.

Another glance through the scope, and Munchel grins.

Fat Boy is back. And it looks like the cop found a rifle. Some dinky little model, but a rifle nonetheless.

This might be interesting.

Munchel works the bolt, takes aims, and squeezes the trigger.

6:49 PM

Jack

My partner's leg crumples beneath him when the bullet hits. He cries out, pitching forward, the rifle slipping from his grasp and taking flight.

Herb tumbles to the floor. The gun remains airborne, spinning like a frisbee, the barrel aiming my way.

I bunch up my shoulders and cover my face—not much protection against a dropped weapon, but a reflex action.

The rifle bounces off the floor without going off. But it's ten feet away from me, directly in the line of fire.

So is Herb.

I tug out my .38, aim where I'd seen the muzzle flash over a hundred yards away, and fire twice.

My bullets won't hit the mark. A snub nose revolver isn't accurate beyond twenty feet. But Herb needs time to crawl back into hiding, assuming he can still move.

I press my back against the wall again, not wanting to leave my head exposed longer than necessary, and see Herb dashing across the carpet on all fours like a coked-up squirrel. Maybe those power bars have something to them after all. He makes it back through the doorway, leaving a spotty trail of blood.

"How bad!" I call to him.

"Calf! I'll be okay! Did you get the rifle!"

I stare at the weapon. Ten feet away might as well be a hundred.

"I'm working on it!"

I survey the room. Other than the injured techie who is rapidly bleeding out, only four people are still alive; two uniforms, two plainclothes. I'm ranking officer, but I'm not about to order any of them to go after the rifle. Especially since I'm the closest one to it.

I imagine the sniper. Probably crouching in a bush, as the other had. Peering through a scope, his sites locked onto the fallen rifle, waiting for someone to try for it.

I've used scopes before. At distances longer than fifty yards, the slightest movement by the shooter throws them off target. If I distract him, then move quickly, I'll have two or three seconds before he finds me again.

Theoretically at least.

Or I can sit tight and wait for the calvary to arrive. But I don't know if the injured cop can last that long. And I've had enough of people dying on my watch.

I look to my left, see a small end table. Metal, solid, manageable. I kick off my heels and holster my gun. Then I lift the table above my head, aim at the window where the last bullet went through, and heave it hard as I can.

Before it hits the glass I'm in motion...bending down for the rifle...hearing the window shatter...grabbing the barrel and hugging it to my chest...digging my bare heels into the carpet to change direction in case the sniper was tracking me...skidding...

Falling onto my ass.

The pain travels from my coccyx straight up to my neck like a lightning bolt, prompting instant tears and an immediate surge of panic.

I'm sitting directly in the sniper's sights. And he has an even clearer view of me now, because the window sports a large hole where the table broke though.

Though I don't remain still for longer than a second, it feels like a week, and my ears burn and my forehead gets hot where I imagine a bullseye to be, where the shot is going to hit.

The shot doesn't come.

I pull the gun closer to my body, drop my right shoulder, and quickly roll back to my original hiding spot alongside the window.

Herb says, "I had seven heart attacks watching you do that."

I look down the hallway, lock eyes with Herb in the mirror reflection of a music CD he's holding out the doorway. He's using it like I'd used the lipstick, to see around the corner.

Rather than respond, I do a quick inspection of the weapon. A Dakota rifle. Fixed sights. A twenty-four inch barrel. Bolt action. I check the magazine. Three .458 rounds, plus one already chambered. I tuck the butt into my armpit and sight through the scope, aiming at the ceiling.

The lens is cracked, and bent to the left side.

“Scope’s dead,” I call to Herb. “Any more back there?”

A pause. Then, “No.”

“Bullets?”

“I didn’t see—”

The *CRACK* of the shot makes me flinch, and the CD disintegrates in Herb’s hand. I look around the room at my men. They’re hunkered down, terrified. I need to get them out of here. But I can’t if they’re too scared to move.

“Looks like our sniper isn’t a music fan,” I say. The joke sounds forced, mostly because it is.

“I can’t blame him,” Herb says. “I don’t like John Denver either.”

I unscrew the scope from its mount and toss it aside. Then I swing the barrel around, toward the street.

“Hold up another one.”

“I could only find his greatest hits album.”

I suck in air, blow it out hard, my cheeks billowing.

“How about Neil Diamond?” I yell.

I rest the tip of the barrel on the window sill, an inch away from the glass. Not the best way to steady a rifle, but all I can manage given the situation.

“No Neil. Is Jim Croce okay?”

“That’s fine.”

“*Time in a Bottle*, or *You Don’t Mess Around With Jim*?”

I’m about to tell Herb I don’t care, but I reconsider. “*Time in a Bottle*,” I yell.

I was never a fan of sappy love songs.

I stare down the street, waiting for it. The sniper’s muzzle flashes before I hear the shot. The CD explodes.

“I couldn’t save *Time in a Bottle*,” Herb says.

I line up the sights, fixing them slightly above my target, knowing the bullet will travel in a parabolic arc.

“I’m going to fire four shots, four seconds apart,” I tell the room. “So you have between twelve and sixteen seconds to get the injured, and yourselves, out of the house. There’s an ambulance on the corner of Leavitt and Leland. You can get there using parked cars for cover. Understood?”

I count five *yeses*, including a weak moan from the injured techie. One voice is conspicuous in its absence.

“You too, Herb.”

“No way. I’m liking this CD collection too much. When was the last time you heard *The Kingston Trio*?”

“That’s an order, Herb.”

“I’m not leaving.”

Goddammit. If Herb died his wife would kill me.

“Fine. Hold up the other Croce CD, then stay hidden. We go after I fire my first round. Everyone get ready.”

I hold the rifle tight against my armpit and rest my chin on the stock, sighting down the barrel. I test the trigger pull, apply enough pressure to barely move it. Then I wait, breathing slow and easy so it doesn’t throw off my aim.

It doesn’t take long. The killer can’t resist showing off his marksman skills, and he blows away the second Croce CD.

“Go!” I tell the room.

Then I squeeze the trigger.

6:53 PM

Munchel

Munchel grunts in satisfaction after the CD shatters, and then he moves the scope ever-so-slightly to watch the split-tail. He's ready for her to fire back. Hell, he *wants* her to fire back. That's why he didn't kill her when she went for the rifle, even though he had a bead on it. Confirmed kills are great, but real snipers must also contend with return fire. The cops in the street, they're all too far away, their guns not powerful enough to reach him. There's no threat or danger.

He wants a little danger. And the ultimate danger is when you go up against another sniper. An anti-sniper.

Munchel doesn't expect her to come close to him. Her rifle is a toy compared to his, and she doesn't even have a scope. But this will be a much better story to tell Swanson and Pessolano if the cops send a few rounds his way.

"Show me what you got, baby," Munchel says, baring his yellow teeth in a grin.

When her first bullet connects with the concrete planter he's resting his gun on, Munchel jerks like he's had acid thrown in his face. He drops the TPG 1 and ducks down.

How the hell did she make that shot?

"Lucky," he says aloud. His voice cracking.

As the word leaves his lips, another shot blasts into the planter, tossing up stone chips, burrowing a hole into it.

Munchel backs the hell away. He checks his clothing. Why isn't the camouflage working? Is she using night vision?

A bullet zips over his head, its wind practically parting his hair before burying itself into

the building behind him. He hunkers down even lower, thinking he should be returning fire, *knowing* he should, but too scared to move.

One more shot, and the planter shatters, large chunks falling to the ground, a puff of dirt forming a cloud that settles in his eyes and on his lips.

Munchel holds his breath, waiting. His bladder feels like a water balloon being squeezed in a vice. Sweat pops out of his body in places he didn't even know he had pores. He doesn't dare move, convinced that she can see him.

A full minute passes.

He wonders if she's out of bullets, or simply toying with him. Maybe she has the shot, has him all lined up, and is enjoying watching him squirm.

Sirens, in the distance. Munchel knows that must be SWAT. He needs to break camp, get the hell out of here. His heart is thumping. His mouth is dry. His palms feel like he just soaked them in water. He's more scared than he's ever been in his life.

But he's also exhilarated.

This is what combat is like, he thinks.

The feeling is intoxicating.

Munchel knows the news cameras are rolling, knows that the split-tail can see him, knows that what he has in mind might be suicidal. But he decides to go for it anyway.

No one expects a pinned down man to charge. So Munchel charges

The suitcase in one hand, the TPG 1 in the other, he sprints across the sidewalk, across the street, daring the woman cop to shoot him. He knows to zig-zag, to make himself a harder target. He maybe even yells a little, an animalistic war-cry, the sound of a hero facing certain death.

No bullets hit him. No one even shoots at him. Munchel pauses behind a car to catch his breath, marveling at his own bravery. It's dark, and the streetlight he shot out earlier helps him hide in the shadows. But if the cop has some sort of optical enhancer, it's possible she can still see him.

The sirens are getting closer. He needs some kind of distraction, something that will confuse the night vision goggles the woman cop must be using.

He unzips the suitcase, removes one of two whiskey bottles. Inside is kerosene mixed

with laundry detergent. Poor man's napalm. Munchel would have preferred real napalm, or a grenade, but he couldn't get those. He tried to order some, on the Internet, and the prick took his money and didn't send him shit. Hopefully, the homemade stuff will be good enough.

Munchel unscrews the bottle cap and shoves in a braided wick from a camping lantern. He uses a Zippo to light the wick, and then shouts, "Semper fi!" as he throws the flaming bottle at a parked SUV. It bounces off the hood and shatters on the sidewalk, soaking someone's lawn with liquid fire.

He doesn't stop to acknowledge his handiwork. He's on the move again, tugging the suitcase behind him in a crouch, changing direction several times, making it to the Chevy Nova parked in the center of the street.

The split-tail's car. He considers using his last Molotov cocktail to set it ablaze, to teach her a lesson, but changes his mind and reaches for something else instead. Something electronic, that Pessolano let him borrow.

This woman is a worthy opponent. It isn't enough just to destroy her car. Munchel wants to best her. To beat her. And he's already formulating a plan on how to do just that.

He turns on the device and attaches it to the underside of her rear bumper. Then he lights the second bottle of napalm, yells, "Recon!" and chucks it at a patrol car.

Munchel runs back the way he came, slipping between houses, making it to his car a block away. It had taken him almost forty minutes of circling to find that parking space, and even though he was clearly the required twenty feet away from the fire hydrant he still got a ticket. Assholes.

Rather than dwell on it, Munchel throws the suitcase and the rifle into the back seat, hops behind the wheel, and beelines for the rendezvous point, imagining Pessolano and Swanson watching his heroics on CNN and cheering him on.

6:54 PM

Kork

Jack's boyfriend Latham is kind of cute. Red hair, a strong chin, broad chest. He doesn't cry out when I crack him in the nose with the butt of my revolver, and doesn't beg for his life when I stick the business end under his chin.

"On the sofa, next to the old lady."

He complies, but takes his time, fixing me with what he probably thinks is a cold stare. He's about as menacing as a teddy bear. If he wanted to learn cold stares, he should have grown up in my family.

"When's your girlfriend getting home?" I ask.

He reaches out, holds the woman's hand. Doesn't answer. Which pisses me off.

I've lost track of how many people I've killed, but I know I've killed men for annoying me less than Latham is doing right now. But I don't want to do anything permanent until Jack gets home and is able to watch. So I settle for smacking him with the gun again.

I hit him pretty good, opening up a cut on his cheek, and he refuses to meet my eyes. So much for the tough guy act.

"I don't like repeating myself," I say.

"She told me nine." His voice is soft, dull. "She's on a case."

I check my new watch. Heathrow didn't allow watches. Or jewelry. Or make-up. Or bras. Or shoes. We had our unisex cotton pants and top, and slippers with flimsy rubber soles. I could understand them keeping security tight. A few of the women in there were crazy. But my minders confused *insane* with *feeble-minded*. Big mistake.

My watch tells me I have almost two hours left before Jack arrives. I'm hungry. Maybe I

can get Mom to serve me some of that stew she's making. I also haven't gotten fucked in forever. The last time was with my so-called husband, and he was as ineffective in bed as he was at everything else. I eye Latham's broad shoulders, trim waist, then move my eyes lower, to his crotch. I wonder if he is up for the job. I knew from experience that a man sometimes has problems getting it up when a gun is jammed in his mouth.

But when they can manage, the sex is mind-blowing.

Later, I decide. One more thing that Jack can watch.

"Who else is hungry?" I ask.

I smile, not the easiest thing to do when you've lost most of the nerves and muscles in half of your face. Mom grimaces. Latham stares at the floor.

"Both of you, stand up. Slow and easy. If you move too fast, or if I get the feeling you aren't going to behave, I'll shoot your knees."

They stand, and hero boyfriend puts his arm around Mom's shoulders. It's touching, the warmth. Really. When the time comes, I don't know which one I'll kill first.

No need to think about that now. We have all night. And what a night it will be. These aren't the only guests I'm inviting to this party. With some duct tape to keep everyone manageable, and some delivery pizza, we could keep this going for a few days.

First things first, Mom can serve some dinner. And I can warm loverboy up for our floor show later on. He looks to be the loyal type. Tough to break.

But I'll break him. When I was growing up, Father used the stove for more than just cooking. He used it for punishment. Showed me up close and personal all the ways a stove can make a person scream.

And I'm more than happy to share the knowledge.

6:56 PM

Jack

While I fire at the sniper the cops in the house clear out, carrying their injured team member. Herb comes up behind me, and we watch through the window as they make their way down the street. They join the others who were lucky enough to have gotten away, to the end of the block where the ambulances are.

We also watch our perp run around in jerky patterns, dragging a suitcase behind him and holding a huge sniper rifle, occasionally yelling something incoherent. He stops twice to throw homemade bombs at cars. Each one bounces off and causes a small fire on the sidewalk.

“This might very well be the world’s stupidest criminal,” Herb says.

I’m out of rifle ammo. Herb and I pull our service pistols, keeping the perp in our sights. Though he keeps zig-zagging and ducking down, he would have been a cinch to shoot if he came within our range. We could have even nailed him without looking, because he kept whooping like a drunken sports fan, giving away his location. Unfortunately, he stays at least fifty yards away the entire time, and eventually disappears between two houses, running off into the night.

Herb and I meet the Special Response Team in front, and I send them in the direction the sniper had gone. By that time the small fires have almost extinguished themselves, and the cops who’ve been in hiding come out and attend to the dead.

The sniper might have been an idiot, or a lunatic, or both. But he still managed to kill ten of my men. I maintain a brave face for the TV cameras, but each time I see a body bag being loaded into an ambulance my throat closes up.

My boss, Captain Bains, arrives in a patrol car. He has his dress blues on, ready to make a statement for the press. Deputy Chief Crouch, the Superintendent’s right hand, is also present,

setting up interviews with everyone involved. I'm first in line.

I'm bone tired, but I knew I'll be debriefed over and over again for the next few hours, and there's no way to postpone it. I go back into the house and use the bathroom, doing a mediocre job washing off the blood. Then I call home, get the answering machine. Leave Mom a message that I won't make dinner tonight. I also call my long-suffering fiancée to let him know he's welcome to stay the night, and I'll make it up to him by cooking breakfast in the morning. I get his voice mail. Perhaps he and Mom are in a heated match of rummy.

Internal Affairs shows up—a bystander had been nicked by police crossfire. It wasn't by me, but they take my gun anyway; standard operating procedure so ballistics can rule out my bullets as the lethal ones. I'm too numb to argue. My phone rings, and I excuse myself for a minute.

"Jack, it's an emergency." Mom sounds frazzled. "You need to come home."

"Mom? Are you okay? What's going on?"

I'm talking to a dead line. I call back. Get the machine. Call again, get the same results. Try Latham once more, go directly to voice mail.

What the hell?

"I need to check on my partner," I tell the IA guys. Then I catch up with Herb as two paramedics assist him into the ambulance. The assistance involves a lot of lifting and grunting.

"I need a favor, Herb."

"No problem. I'll make a copy for you." He taps his jacket pocket, which held the *Kingston Trio* CD. "And yes, it's got Tom Dooley on it."

I lean closer. "I need you to cover for me, for a few hours. The Deputy Chief wants answers. The Feds are coming, probably to compare this to every other sniper incident in the past seven hundred years. Plus I'm going to have to tell the same story again for IA."

"Are you going to tell them I stole folk rock?"

"No. I'm going to tell them to talk to you first. I just got a weird call from my mother, and something's not right. I have to run home. And as you're well aware..."

Herb finishes for me. "You live in the suburbs, even though you'd be fired if they found out, and even though there were many perfectly nice single family homes in my neighborhood."

"I'll be two and a half hours, tops. Just make sure they don't go to my old apartment."

Because then they'll know I don't live in the city anymore.

"Take three hours," Herb says. "I use a lot of adjectives when I tell stories."

I pat his shoulder. "Thanks, Herb. Good luck with those stitches."

"If my wife asks, I didn't get shot. Tell her I was bitten by a monkey."

"Sure. She'll buy that."

"She's terrified of monkeys."

"Wouldn't a dog be more realistic?"

"She loves dogs. If it's a monkey, I'll get sympathy sex."

I speak to the Deputy Chief and inform him I have a family emergency, but he can debrief my partner at the hospital. I promise I'll be back within an hour. Which is an outright lie, because I live an hour away.

During the ride to the suburbs I obsess about my mother. If something happened to her, why hasn't Latham called? Or perhaps the emergency has to do with Latham, and Mom is too shocked to go into details.

I'm overwhelmed by mental snapshots of death; car accidents, strokes, heart attacks, earthquakes, floods. Are they en route to the ER? Is that why they couldn't pick up the phone? It can't be a fire, because the answering machine keeps going on—a fire would destroy the line.

Is it something to do with my father? Mom never forgave Dad for leaving us, and while I've been trying to rebuild a relationship with him, she refuses to acknowledge his existence. Maybe Dad had shown up at my house, which would cause Mom to go supernova.

Or is this something more insidious?

I look at my cell, find the call from the Heathrow Facility. The caller ID indeed reads *HEATHROW*, but maybe that can be faked. I dial 411, get the same number, and let them patch me through. I speak to three different people, all who confirm Alexandra Kork is dead as dead can be.

Okay. I'm being paranoid. Even if Alex were alive—and she isn't—she still didn't know where I live.

Maybe Mom saw the sniper shootings on television and is simply worried about me. Not picking up the phone is a guarantee I'll rush home.

Or maybe Latham has some sort of surprise planned. I think of the Mariachi band he

hired when he proposed, and a smile breaks through my mask of worry. He truly is a sweetheart.

I get off the expressway on Route 20, heading for York Road. Whatever the emergency is, I'll find out soon enough.

My thoughts momentarily shift to the shooter. Finding sex offenders is a snap—thanks to Megan's Law, anyone can log onto the Internet and access the National Sex Offender Registry and get their names and addresses. But if this is some sort of warped vigilante group, why kill cops? Did the sniper simply get carried away? Or is he truly out of his mind? And are his two partners just as unbalanced?

I turn left down my twisty road, heading home. I hear the dead leaves crackling under my tires, see glimpses of the moon through the canopy of trees, and wonder what Mom loves about this neighborhood so much. Can it even be called a neighborhood? We've never met our nearest neighbor, who lives a quarter of a mile away. Come Halloween, I wonder if parents drive their children house to house for trick-or-treating. If I had kids, I'd drive them—to the city.

Thinking of children makes me think of Latham, and I get sort of gooey inside. I pull into the driveway and park next to his car, convinced that this *emergency* probably has to do with Mom fudging points in their card game, or burning the apple pie. I do a quick mirror-check, finger comb my hair, and hop out of my Nova.

The front door is locked, and the front room is dark. I notice a light in the kitchen through the bay window. I unlock the door and go in.

"Mom? Latham?"

I smell food. Stew, and some sort of baked goods. Maybe I'm right about the pie after all.

Mom is in the kitchen, sitting at the table. It takes me a second to realize she has duct tape over her mouth and around her arms, and then something appears in my peripheral vision, something blindingly fast.

I duck, but not quickly enough, and get knocked to the floor, my vision all lopsided and swirly.

"Welcome home, Jack.."

I can't focus, but I recognize the voice.

Alex was alive.

And that meant we're all going to die.