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Rusty Nail

1 oz. Scotch

1 oz. Drambuie

Pour ingredients over ice in an old fashioned glass.

Stir.

Prologue

Indiana 1976

The sound begins. Again.

Alex, eyes clenched shut, pillow pressed to face, can't escape the repetitive *slap-slap-slap*; it penetrates the thin apartment walls and saturates the cotton batting.

The wailing starts, the cry of a sick dog, increasing as the slaps come louder and faster.

Father will call soon.

Alex rolls out of bed and tiptoes through the door, every painful squeak of the floorboards hitting like a blow. Slowly, so very slowly, Alex creeps down the hall.

Beyond Father's room is the back door. If Alex can make it outside, there's a chance. Perhaps spending the night in the barn, or at a friend's house to escape the...

"ALEX!"

Alex jumps at the sound, Father's voice drilling in and pinning feet to floor.

"Alex, get in here!"

No choice now. Run, and Father will hear and get angry. Alex doesn't want be the recipient of God's Penance.

The child heads back to Father's room.

As always, the sight is ghastly. Father is kneeling on the floor, clad in dirty jeans and bare from the waist up. His back is glistening with sweat and something else; streaks of blood leaking from angry red welts.

"I'm a sinner, Alex. A terrible sinner."

Alex stares at Father's hand, sees he's using the scourge---a multi-tailed whip with tiny metal barbs on the ends. That one isn't so bad. Father has implements that are worse. The one Alex fears the most is the old brush handle, the bristles replaced with thin nails, rusty from years of use.

"Take the whip, Alex. Show me God's wrath."

Alex hesitates.

"Now!" Father's eyes burn, promising the threat of Redemption.

Alex holds out an eight-year-old hand and takes the scourge.

“You are the instrument of God's vengeance, my child. Give me His Penance.” Father's voice trembles, cracks. “Punish me for my terrible sins.”

Alex swings the whip.

Again.

And again.

And again.

Father's keening grows in volume, and Alex beats him faster and harder, wanting to get it over with, wanting it to end.

Finally, Father cries out for mercy, and then he pulls Alex next to him, down to knees, and they both pray and pray and pray to the Lord for forgiveness and salvation and deliverance from evil.

Father's sobbing eventually softens, then stops.

“Ointment.”

Alex fetches the salve and rubs it into Father's wounds, coaxing whimpers.

“Reject sin, Alex. Reject Satan's ways. Don't end up like me.”

“I won't.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

“Good. Now get the hell out of my room. I don't want to see your ugly face for the rest of the night.”

Alex runs outside, hands pink with blood, brain awash with terrible feelings of guilt... and disgust...

... and something else.

The night is hot, the sticky summer air smelling like garbage, the field behind their house dark and quiet. The tears erupt, and Alex wails, head in hands.

A cat, a stray tabby that hangs around the farm, bumps Alex's leg and purrs. Alex holds the cat close, wiping tears onto its fur.

Next to the barn is a rain barrel, half-filled with foul-smelling water. Four rats, a squirrel, and a possum have all drowned in that barrel.

But never a cat.

A feeling of warmth grows within Alex, extinguishing the fear.

“Let’s go for a swim, kitty.”

Stroking its yellow and orange fur, Alex carries the cat over to the barrel.

Chapter 1

Business was slow, which made me extremely happy.

I sat in my office, the omnipresent paperwork mountain on my desk down to a few small mounds. I could actually see the wood through the files in some places. It was brown, as I'd always guessed it to be.

There hadn't been a homicide in Chicago for four days, which had to be some kind of record. We consistently ranked as one of the top murder cities in America, often hitting the number one spot. Whenever that happened, cops from my District would get *We're #1* t-shirts printed up. I had seven, from previous years.

I whittled away the free time with busy work; filing, reviewing cold cases, cleaning out my desk drawers. I even entertained the notion of painting my nails---something I hadn't done since joining the force over twenty years ago.

All play and no work makes Jack a bit flighty.

My partner, Sergeant Herb Benedict, had been using the free time to catch up on his eating. He wandered into my office, lugging a gallon of chocolate milk. He set the jug on my desk.

"I didn't have anything to do, so I brought your mail."

"Someone mailed me dairy products?"

Herb scowled, his walrus mustache drooping. He had a few years on me, which put him past the fifty mark, but his face was plump enough to retard wrinkles.

"This isn't dairy. It's Golytely. I've got to drink this entire bottle to clear out my digestive tract for my colonoscopy tomorrow."

"Sounds like fun. Shall I come by, take some pictures?"

"Funny, Jack. Be happy you aren't a man and don't have to deal with this stuff."

"I'm thankful for that every day."

Herb removed the bundle of mail he'd tucked under his armpit and dropped it on my desk.

Among the bills and junk was a small, padded envelope. It had *Lt. Jacqueline Daniels*,

Chicago Police Department, Violent Crimes Division typed on the label. No postmark, no return address.

“This was in the mail?”

“No. Someone dropped it off downstairs for you.”

I frowned. Times being as they were, unknown packages were scary things. But hand delivery meant it must have gone through the metal detector and x-ray machine downstairs; standard delivery procedure. I teased open the flap and peeked inside.

Something thin and black.

I threw caution to the wind and shook it out onto my desk. A VHS videotape. No labels or markings.

My apprehension went up a notch.

“Did the Desk Sergeant get a look at the person who left this?”

“I didn't ask. You weren't expecting anything?”

I shook my head.

The VCR sat in the corner of my office, on a cart with a TV. I hit a few buttons and put the tape in.

Herb rested his butt against my desk and patted his expansive belly. He'd lost a lot of weight, but had found it again. His stomach growled, perhaps in response to his patting.

“You know what the worst part of a colonoscopy is?”

“You're going to tell me whether I want to know or not.”

“I can't eat anything for 24 hours.”

I considered it. “That's worse than having a long probe stuck up your unhappy place?”

“I'm under anesthetic for that.” He took a swig of Golytely and made a Mr. Yuck face.

“I'm guessing Golytely isn't a taste sensation.”

“They claim it's chocolate-flavored. More like chalk-flavored. I'd rather drink a gallon of paint.”

I pressed PLAY. After some snow, the TV screen went black. In the upper right hand corner the date flashed. Eight days ago.

The scene abruptly changed to a wide shot of a two story house. Midday, the sun casting shadows straight down. The house was nondescript, a realtor's sign stuck in the lawn. It could

have been any house in Chicago. But it wasn't.

I knew this house.

"Is that--?"

I shushed Herb, nodding.

The cameraperson approached the front door at a brisk pace. A hand, wearing a large black leather glove, came into frame from the left of the screen and turned the doorknob.

The camera sailed through the foyer, the living room, and over to the basement door. The hand flipped on the light switch by the staircase and the descent began.

My heart accelerated, the scene before me playing out just as it had so many times in my memories. I held my breath, hoping this was just a prank, hoping the basement wouldn't contain what I feared.

The cameraperson reached the lower level and panned to the right. The auto-focus blurred, then sharpened, revealing a naked white female tied to a chair with twine, a burlap bag over her head. Her whimpering hit me like a blow.

"Jesus." Herb folded his arms across his chest.

I had to fight to keep my eyes open, watching as the camera approached her, watching as the gloved hand pick up a hunting knife from the floor, watching as the knife rise up to her throat...

Herb gagged. I turned away.

When I looked back, she was still alive, arterial blood squirting and splashing down her bare chest. There was a wet, coughing sound, and it took me a moment to understand what I was hearing; the woman struggling to scream through the large slash in her neck.

She didn't die right away. The writhing and twisting and coughing went on for almost a minute. When her body finally stopped moving, the camera faded to black.

I spent a few seconds trying to rally my thoughts.

"I need a Crime Scene Unit ready to go in three minutes, photos, vids, ALS, the works. I'll contact the EPD and clear it with them."

Herb headed for the door, his Golytely forgotten. I hit EJECT on the VCR and grabbed a latex glove from my desk. The tape went into one evidence baggie, its envelope into another.

Then I called the Evanston Police Department and asked them to meet us at the address.

It was one they knew well.

The morning was beautiful for April, sixty degrees, crisp and sunny. I wore a beige Ann Klein pantsuit that I paid too much money for because it slimmed my hips, and a new pair of black low heeled Jimmy Choo boots. Herb had on an ancient gray suit, designed by Montgomery Wards, and a blue tie already stained with Golytely.

As befitting the weather, the streets and sidewalks were packed with people of all races, ages, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Panhandlers and executives, students and sightseers, all commingling in a giant diverse human stew. We worked out of the 26th District, in the heart of downtown, our building a speck among the skyscrapers.

Parked on the sidewalk was a churros cart, which Benedict eyed. After viewing the video, the cinnamon smell repulsed me. We walked around back to the parking lot and climbed into his new Chrysler Sebring---both of us hated my 1988 Nova. Herb rolled down the windows and slowed as he passed the churros, sniffing the air.

“Why can’t they make Golytely in a churros flavor?”

“I’ll make a few calls.”

“Bacon flavor would be good too. Tell your people.”

“I’ll do that.”

“And chili-cheese dog. I’d drink a gallon of chili-cheese dog in a heartbeat.”

“I’m sure you would.”

Evanston bordered Chicago on the west side, blending into it seamlessly. It was a fifteen-minute drive that we made in ten.

“Maybe the tape was one of Kork's old collection.”

Herb referred to the homemade snuff films discovered in Charles Kork's house after his killing spree ended. A task force had been formed to match victims with missing persons, and they'd done a remarkable job, gaining enough accolades to get featured on a *Law and Justice* cable TV special. Having been the ones who tracked down the Gingerbread Man, Benedict and I were asked to head the task force.

After viewing one of Kork's videos, we declined.

“The date could have been faked.” But I didn’t buy it. “Did you notice the front door? It had a security plate on it. That's new.”

I called information and got the number of the realtor whose sign sat in front of the house. After being put on hold for a few minutes, I talked to an agent who confirmed that the house was for sale.

“Can you meet us there?”

“I’m sorry, Officer. I’m in the middle of something.”

“I understand. And I hope you understand that we’ll have to break the door down.”

“I’ll see you in five.”

I hung up and tried to prepare myself. Several deep breaths couldn’t help me control my racing heart, my sweating palms.

The house looked exactly as it had in the video. We pulled alongside the driveway. The CSU had already arrived. I played conductor and set my people into motion.

One officer took samples of motor oil on the driveway near the garage. Another dusted the front door for prints. Two more walked the perimeter, going over every inch of property like a giant grid, bagging cigarette butts and old soda cans.

I cordoned off the route the cameraperson had taken over the lawn to the front door, but the grass didn't hold any footprints. There were several friction ridges lifted from the knob and steel security plate, but I didn’t have much hope for them. The person with the camera wore gloves.

The real estate agent showed up, a plump woman with a hair spray helmet that looked like it could withstand a three-story fall. She was clearly flustered, and it took her three different keys before she could open the door.

I went in first, my .38 an extension of my hand. The shades were drawn and the house was dark, save for streaks of sunlight peeking through cracks.

All of the previous furniture had been removed, and our footsteps echoed on the hardwood floor. A pleasant lemon scent hung in the air, even more revolting than the churros smell. We had the realtor wait outside, and Herb trailed me through the foyer, the hallway, and over to the basement door.

I experienced a serious feeling of *deja vu*, except that it wasn't *deja vu*; I actually *had* been here a few years prior, doing this exact same thing.

It was just as scary the second time.

The basement light had been left on. We took the stairs slowly, stopping every few steps to listen. When I finally reached the bottom I steeled myself, turned the corner, and stared over at the place where the woman's throat had been cut.

The basement was empty. No body, no chair, not a drop of blood on the floor. I gave the all-clear and the team came in, lugging gear.

I holstered my gun under my jacket and frowned, looking around the basement. It had been finished since my last visit, the bare concrete floor replaced with linoleum tile, the walls paneled in faux wood.

"I got blood."

Officer Scott Hajek, a short, stout guy with large glasses and a spray bottle of luminol on his belt, pointed a UV light at the ceiling, revealing several glowing droplets. Before I had a chance to postulate if it was left over from Kork's activities, more droplets were found on the newly tiled floor.

"Lieutenant! We got something upstairs!"

I followed the voice, relieved to be out of the claustrophobic confines of the basement. Benedict kept on my heels, huffing as I took the stairs two at a time.

"In the kitchen!"

Setting on the kitchen counter, next to a mason jar full of peanuts, was a gingerbread man cookie.

I got a closer look. It was different from the ones Kork had left with his victims, taunting the CPD in notes that he'd never be caught. This one was larger, with eyes made out of raisins and peppermint candy buttons.

Under the cookie was a handwritten note.

It's good to BE BACK

The crime scene photographer snapped some shots.

"Why a jar of peanuts?" I asked Herb.

Benedict squinted at the jar. "Those aren't peanuts, Jack."

My breath caught in my throat when I realized what the mason jar contained.

It was filled, to the brim, with dozens of severed human toes.

Chapter 2

“Technically, no crime has been committed in our District.”

Herb and I exchanged a glance.

“We realize that, Captain.”

Captain Bains sat behind his desk, rubbing his thumb and index finger over his gray mustache---a mustache that didn't match the deep black of his hairpiece.

“There's not even a body.”

“The Kork case is ours,” I said.

“This isn't the Kork case. Charles Kork isn't going to commit any more crimes. This could all be a prank or a hoax.”

I folded my arms, then unfolded them so I didn't look defensive. “The jar of toes isn't a hoax.”

Bains leaned forward. “That's for the Evanston PD to pursue, not us.”

“They asked us to come in on this. And we've got nothing else going on.”

The captain indicated some paper on his desk. “There was a body discovered in a transient motel an hour ago, on Webster. Stabbing death of a homeless guy named Steve Jensen.”

“I'll put Check and Mason on it. I want this one, Captain.”

Herb's stomach made an unpleasant noise. Bains stood up and gave us his back. He stared out of his window, which offered a lovely view of the garbage in the alley.

“You've got 48 hours. If you can't turn up any evidence by then, I'm pulling you.”

More strange sounds from Herb's stomach. Bains glanced over his shoulder and eyed him.

“Hungry, Sergeant?”

“That's not my stomach. I think the Golytely is kicking in.”

“Go attend to that.”

Benedict about-faced and waddled to the door, knees pressed together.

After Herb left, I locked eyes with my boss.

“What’s going on, Captain? I usually enjoy some leeway when it comes to picking cases.”

Chicago had five Detective Areas, and I worked as a floater. My reputation allowed it.

Bains didn’t seem swayed by my reputation. He pursed his lips. Not a good sign.

“What aren’t you telling me, Captain?”

“The Superintendent has been getting some flack lately about that TV show.”

“TV show?”

“That series with the PI and that fat woman who plays you.”

I mentally groaned. The show, called *Fatal Autonomy*, featured a supporting character based on me. I never watched it, but from what I heard, the series didn’t display the CPD in a good light. Or me, either.

“I explained this before, I let them use my name because one of the show’s producers helped out with the Kork case.”

Which had been a mistake. Anything to do with Harry McGlade wound up being a mistake.

“The Super doesn’t care. Chicago is buried in crime, and that show makes us look like a bunch of idiots.”

“So what are you saying? The Super is pissed at me, so he’s gunning for my job?”

“I’m saying I don’t want you on anything that might make you look foolish, or anything high-profile. This will all go away, but laying low won’t hurt.”

I leaned closer to Bains and dropped my voice an octave.

“How angry is he?”

“If you see him on the street, turn around and run.”

Ouch.

“You have two days to come up with something solid, Jack. And keep the media out of it.”

Bains dismissed me, dispersing the wind I’d had in my sails. Having to worry about job security at my age was a stressor I just didn’t need.

I looked for Herb, heard scary sounds coming from the bathroom, and chose to leave him alone for awhile.

Evidence was located on the first floor. I took the elevator. The day guy, Bill, greeted me with a grin. He was old enough to have milked Mrs. O'Leary's cow. Bill rescued a previous mayor's family member decades ago, and was allowed to stay on without being forced into retirement. It was a good thing too, because he was the only person who could find anything in the cluttered, unorganized Evidence Room.

"You're like a shot of Viagra, Miss Jack Daniels. I love the boots. Can I lick your heel?"

"No. I thought men lost interest in sex after turning a hundred."

Bill winked. "I'm only ninety-eight. But I make love like a man of seventy-five. What are your plans for later?"

"I'm visiting my mother."

"How is she doing?"

I thought of Mom, the tube in her throat.

"No change."

"How about afterwards? Maybe a little midnight rendezvous? You look like you could use a little TLC."

Bill hit the nail on the head with that one. It had been months since I'd been with a man. But even though I'd passed my prime, I wasn't desperate enough to date someone so old he farted dust. Not yet, anyway. Give me another few months and I might consider it.

"I appreciate the offer, Bill, but right now I'm interested in a closed case. 333871-5."

Bill nodded, tapping his pointy chin. "The Gingerbread Man. Eleven boxes. Anything in particular?"

"I need everything. Sorry. You want some help?"

"Nope. I keep in shape."

Bill held up his right arm and pulled back the short sleeve, flexing his biceps. There was enough extra skin hanging from that arm to upholster a couch. In a liver spot pattern. I kept that to myself.

Bill scuttled off and lugged the boxes out of storage one at a time. I signed the tags and dug in.

The first two boxes were mostly paperwork, much of it mine. I glanced at a few reports, the memories of the case returning. Charles Kork had been a very bad man, torturing women in

his basement in Evanston, prolonging their deaths for hours and lovingly capturing it all on videotape.

The third, fourth, and fifth boxes contained personal belongings from his last three victims.

In the sixth box, wrapped in tin foil and sealed in a plastic evidence bag, was the first Gingerbread Man cookie we'd found. Parts of it were stained black with blood. It had candy hearts for eyes and a mouth, three gum drop buttons on the front, and had been lacquered. The one we'd recently found was almost an inch larger, had peppermint swirl buttons and raisin eyes, no mouth. Not the same source.

There were other cookies in other bags, but I didn't bother opening them. In the seventh box I found what I'd been looking for.

Twelve videotapes.

The chain of evidence tags noted how often they'd been viewed and duplicated, which was often. Each tape had a label, done in Kork's distinctive handwriting.

Tape #1 "Jerry Dies Slowly." Tape #6 "Kids Say The Funniest Things When They're Bleeding." Tape #11 "T. Metcalf Gets a Surprise." Tape #12 "Slipping the Knife to the Wife."

The videos contained graphic footage of Kork murdering his victims. There had been ten of them in all, six women and four children. The task force had identified all but one of the kids.

Seeing the tapes filled me with a dread I normally felt in life or death situations. Herb and I had watched part of #4 "Making Little Belinda Cry." We could only stand it for two minutes, even with the sound turned off.

I hadn't been able to forget it, much as I tried..

After only a small hesitation, I sucked up my courage and pulled out the tapes.

"Would you like a bag?"

I nodded, and Bill produced a plastic Jewel Foods bag from under the counter. I poked through the remaining boxes, taking a handwriting analysis report and some autopsy reports.

In the last box, all by itself, was the murder weapon. A large hunting knife with a jagged edge on the back of the blade. Through the plastic evidence bag, I could see some of Diane Kork's blood dried on the edge.

I put the knife in the bag with the other things. Then I signed everything out, parried

another seduction attempt from Bill, and walked up a few flights of stairs to my office.

Benedict was leaning on my desk, looking deflated.

I patted his shoulder. “Everything come out okay?”

He grimaced. “They should put a warning label on the Golytely, something about violent explosions. I think I just lost ten pounds.”

I gestured at the jug on my desk, still half full of liquid.

“Looks like you have a little bit more to finish.”

Benedict glared at the bottle. “I can’t do it. If I finish that, I’ll have to attach a seatbelt to the toilet.”

“Maybe an airbag, too.”

I sat down and reached for the door-to-door reports on the top of my IN box. A quick scan gave me the gist.

“Neighbors didn’t see anything.” I tossed the reports onto my desk, annoyed. “Why doesn’t someone ever commit a homicide next to a nosy busybody with some binoculars who spies on people all the time?”

Benedict didn’t answer. He was staring at the bottle of Golytely.

I left him to face his nemesis, and dove into the Realtor’s statement. She’d shown the house to over a hundred people since it went on the market last year. Apparently, the stigma of the previous owner had prevented any sales. No one wanted to dwell where a serial killer once had.

There had been talk of bulldozing it, but Diane Kork had insisted on selling. She inherited it from her ex-husband, shortly after he’d tried to murder her.

Herb’s stomach made a noise. He said, “Gotta go,” and ran for the door.

“You forgot your jug!” I called after him.

I checked my watch, saw it was creeping up on five, and I decided to call it a day. The reports went into my Jewel bag, which I lugged down to my car.

The engine coughed twice, then turned over. The lion’s share of my paycheck went to supporting my aging mother. When Mom had lived in Florida, her condo had cost slightly more than the gross national product of New Zealand.

She’d sold the condo last year, to move in with me. That should have freed up some of

my financial obligations, but Mom's current condition cost even more than her condo had.

Mary Streng was in a coma, and her insurance only covered partial treatment. The condo money was almost gone, and soon the debt monster would come a'calling.

It was a burden I gladly accepted. My father died when I was a kid, but Mom had showered me with enough love to make up for the loss. A former Chicago cop herself, she was more than a mother to me; she was a hero.

And now my hero lay in a coma.

And it was all my fault.

Chapter 3

Mom resided in a long-term acute-care facility called Henderson House, on Chicago's north side, not too far from my apartment. She was classified PVS---permanent vegetative state, and received artificial hydration and nutrition, though she could breathe without assistance.

I stopped by on the way home.

“Good evening, Ms. Daniels. Would you like to visit your mother?”

The secretary, Julie something or other, already had the phone in her hand to call the nurse station. Normal procedure meant for me to schedule my visits, or to phone ahead of time. That gave the staff time to clean my mother up before I saw her. For what this place cost, relatives tended to get angry if the loved ones they were visiting had a dirty diaper.

“Any change?” I asked when she hung up the phone.

Julie flipped through a chart. “Still Level 1 on RLA Cognitive functioning. But her Glasgow went up two points. She spontaneously opened her eyes today.”

That got my attention.

“When?”

“Chart says this morning. There's a notation that we called you at home.”

“Why didn't you call my cell phone?”

“I'm sorry, Ms. Daniels. Would you like me to put down your cell phone as your primary contact number?”

“My cell phone should already be the primary contact number.” My voice got louder. “I don't understand why you wouldn't have tried it since you couldn't reach me at home. Or you could have tried work. I do work for a living.”

I set my jaw and felt my ears burn.

“I understand, Ms. Daniels. I'll make sure we use the cell next time. Did you want a glass of water? It will be a few minutes before your mother is ready.”

I declined, and sat in a relentlessly cheery waiting room, walls painted bright yellow and adorned with framed prints of rainbows and sunrises. I thought about the Glasgow coma scale. Mom's Glasgow scores fluctuated all the time. While she hadn't spoken since her injuries, her

response to stimulus and her eye opening were on-again off-again. Her doctors told me that a PVS patient might have a low score one day, and then the next day she could suddenly be awake and aware. So much for Glasgow.

After a few minutes of sitting and staring at a dusty silk flower arrangement on the magazine table, a man I recognized walked in.

“Hi, Tony.”

He brightened when he saw me. Tony Coglioso was tall, in his forties, and had classic Italian good looks. His father had been in a coma for three years.

“Hello, Lieutenant. Any change?”

“Up two points. How about yours?”

“Down a point.” He smiled, but it seemed forced. “It sounds like we’re talking about the stock market, not our parents.”

Tony and I had seen each other many times over the past few months, exchanging little swatches of conversation in hallways and waiting rooms. Like me, he was divorced, but unlike me he had two adult children. I enjoyed his company, and he wasn’t hard to look at. I wondered why he never asked me out. I still fit comfortably into a size eight, and just last week, on the street in front of my apartment, a homeless man told me I had a nice ass.

“How are the kids?”

“Too busy to visit Papa. My oldest says it doesn’t matter, that Papa doesn’t hear anything anyway.”

“He hears,” I promised him. “He hears every word.”

“Yeah. Well. You on your way up?”

I glanced at Julie, who’d been watching our conversation. Julie nodded.

“Go ahead, Ms. Daniels.”

I smiled at Tony. “I guess I am.”

“Would you like to share an elevator with an old paisan?”

“I’d be honored.”

We didn’t talk during the elevator ride. Though some of the cops in my District would label me as aggressive, I wasn’t that way with men. It didn’t make sense. I could bust down a door and handcuff a murderer, but I’ve never asked a guy on a date. Not once. In all of my

romantic encounters, I'd been a follower rather than a leader.

Even worse, I was crummy at dropping hints. Perhaps if I said something like, "Gosh, it's been a really long time since I got laid." Would a guy pick up on that?

I didn't have a chance to find out. The elevator stopped, and Tony went left, without a word or a wave.

Of course, he was off to visit his PVS parent, so I couldn't really fault his manners.

My own PVS parent was lying peacefully on her bed. A cotton bandage covered the hole in her neck, where the feeding tube went in. Her eyes remained closed, even when I shut the door extra loudly, as I always did.

"Hi, Mom. Still napping, I see."

I sat in the rocking chair next to her, held her withered hand, and told her about my day.

We talked for an hour or so. I tried to remain cheery and upbeat. Regardless of what I'd told Tony, I had doubts that Mom even knew I was there. But on the slight chance she did know, I didn't want to depress her.

When I was all talked out, I stood up, stretched, and then did my poking and prodding. I checked her diaper. Examined her for bed sores. Tickled her feet and pinched her arm, hoping to provoke some kind of response.

"You know, Mom, you're only supposed to sleep for one third of your life. You're using up your allotment, here."

After a pillow fluff and a kiss on the cheek, my attention drifted and I wondered if Tony were still here. A kind, good-looking, single man my age was a rarity.

How hard could it be to ask a guy out for a cup of coffee? What's the worst that can happen? He tells me no? On several different occasions, men have tried to kill me. Getting rejected had to be easier than that.

"See you tomorrow, Mom." I leaned down, whispered in her ear. "I think I'm gonna ask him out."

I closed the door behind me, gently this time, and wandered down the hallway.

Tony had left his door open, and when I poked my head in I saw him holding his father close, his face buried in the prone man's chest.

He was sobbing. Great heaving sobs that shook his whole body.

Before I could back away, he noticed me, his face a mask of rage and tears.

“Leave me alone, for crissakes!”

“I... uh... sorry.”

I backpedaled, not able to get to the elevator quick enough.

In the car ride home I second, third, and fourth-guessed myself. My conclusion: a coma clinic isn't a smart place to pick up men.

I lived in an apartment in Wrigleyville, a stone's throw from where the Cubs played. The rent was outrageous and the neighborhood younger than me by two decades. I parked next to a hydrant on the street and lugged the evidence bag up the stairs and to my door.

After disarming the alarm, I went into my kitchen and discovered the cat had been playing his favorite game; toss the kitty litter out of the litter box.

I hated that game, but preferred it to his second favorite; crap on Jack's bed.

I decided to leave the mess until tomorrow. There was a lump of solidifying catfood in the bowl, and I couldn't remember if it was from this morning or yesterday. I scraped it into the garbage and opened a fresh can.

Mr. Friskers leapt onto the counter upon hearing the can opener.

“You don't greet me when I come home, but you come running when I give you food.”

He didn't reply. I dumped the food into his dish and he sauntered over and sniffed it. Then he looked at me, his face the picture of utter disappointment.

“How about a thank you?”

The cat ate without thanking me.

I plodded into the bedroom, took off my outfit and judged it unsmelly enough to hang up, and washed off my make up in the bathroom sink. I followed that up with a careful mirror examination of my face, studying the wrinkles and deciding I needed nothing short of spackle to fill them in. My roots were showing, too. No wonder Tony wanted me to get away from him.

After dunking my head into a bucket of Oil of Olay, I put on one of Latham's old t-shirts and crawled into bed.

Latham was my ex-boyfriend. I loved him, but messed up the relationship by being me.

I reached across my blanket for the remote, and made an unpleasant discovery; Mr. Friskers had indulged in his second favorite game after all.

“Dammit, cat!”

I curbed a desire to toss him out the window, a desire I often had but never seriously considered because Mom loved the damn cat. Ten minutes later I’d cleaned up Mr. Friskers’s gift, microwaved a chicken parm Lean Cuisine for myself, and got under the covers to watch TV.

The videotapes from the Kork case called to me from their bag.

I ignored them, sticking with sit-com reruns and zany late night talk show antics. But the jokes weren’t funny, and my mind wouldn’t let me relax. I brought those tapes home to watch them. And I only had 48 hours to find some kind of lead.

But I didn’t want to watch videos of people being tortured to death.

But this was my job.

But they might not even help the case.

But they might.

But but but.

Finally, when the only thing on was infomercials and pay-per-view porn, I crawled out of bed and went for the Jewel bag.

I told myself I could handle it. I told myself that the people on those tapes had been dead a long time. They were beyond my control. They weren’t in pain anymore. I was strong. I could handle it.

I could handle it.

I picked out a tape at random and shoved it into my VCR.

Snow. Then an image.

A little girl. Tied to a chair. Crying.

“Hi, Betsy.” Charles Kork’s voice, low and straining to be seductive. “*We’re going to play a game. It’s called Please God Make it Stop. You see all of these nails? I’m going to hammer them into you, one at a time, and you’re going to beg God for it to stop. Are you ready?*”

This happened in the past. I could handle it. I was a police Lieutenant.

“*Look at how big this nail is, Betsy. I bet it’s really going to hurt.*”

I could handle it.

“*Here it comes!*”

Kork put the nail on the little girl's knee.
I forced myself to watch.

Chapter 4

“My father would... do things. To himself. To us.”

“What kind of things, Alex?”

Alex shifts on the shrink’s couch, stares at a small water stain on the ceiling. The office is too bright for Alex to get comfortable. It’s like being scrutinized under a microscope.

“Father’s a very religious man. A member of Los Hermanos Penitentes. Are you familiar with the group?”

“Flagellites. They lash themselves to atone for their sins.”

“They’re a Christian sect dating back to the sixteenth century, extremely strict, focusing on redemption through pain. They kneel on tacks. Rub salt and vinegar into their wounds. Mutilate themselves to absolve their sins. They also whip their children. Or make their children whip them.”

“Your father would whip you?”

Alex’s eyes close, memories flooding in. “Among other things.”

“How often did this occur?”

“Sometimes a few times a month. Sometimes every day.”

“And where was your mother during all of this?”

“Dead. When I was just a kid.”

Alex wonders if revealing the next part is wise. But what good is therapy without a little disclosure?

“My mother died of cancer, after I was born. Father took up with different women after that. Bad women. I remember one of them who wasn’t so bad. Father killed her. He beat her to death and buried her in the basement.”

Alex turns to assess Dr. Morton’s reaction. The good doctor remains composed, sitting in his high back leather chair. Probably fancies himself Sigmund Freud.

“Were the police ever involved?”

“No. Father claimed she ran away, and ordered us never to speak about her.”

Dr. Morton leaned forward. “Sometimes, when something traumatic happens to small

children, they create events to help them deal with the trauma.”

“You mean maybe I imagined her death, and blamed my father for it? Because he abused me and she was missing?”

Dr. Morton makes a non-committal gesture.

Alex considers. “That’s interesting. But not true in my case. I watched Father murder her. He tied her to a beam and flayed all of the skin off her body with a cat-o-nine-tails.”

“And you saw this?”

“Father made me help.”

Dr. Morton jots something down on his notepad.

Alex smiles. “You don’t believe me.”

“I believe this is what you believe, Alex. In our last session, you mentioned your father is still alive.”

Alex thinks of Father. “Yes. He is. If you can call it living.”

“It’s difficult to believe he was never arrested.”

“Isn’t it? I wonder about that sometimes. How different I’d be if someone had stopped him. How many cats would be alive.”

Dr. Morton’s pen stops on the paper. “Cats?”

Alex yawns. It’s been a long week. Not much sleep.

“I kill cats. I get them from animal shelters, and drown them in a bucket of water.”

“Why do you do this, Alex?”

“It makes me feel better.”

“How often?”

“When the need arises. Does that shock you, Doctor?”

Alex meets Dr. Morton’s gaze. The man doesn’t bat an eyelash.

“No. I don’t judge, Alex. I listen, and try to help. When was the last time you killed a cat?”

“A few days ago.”

“Do you think that hurting animals is a way to release some of the pain you endured as a child?”

“Yes. Plus...”

“Plus?”

Alex grins. “It’s funny to watch them struggle.”

Dr. Morton stands up, walks to the window, his hands clasped behind his back.

“You’re in control of your own fate, Alex, not a victim to it. At an early age, we all create unique ways to deal with life. With determination and effort, we can change. I don’t think you believe that killing cats is therapeutic, or beneficial, and the pleasure you gain from the act isn’t substantive.” The doctor turns around, raising an eyebrow. “We’ve talked about setting goals before.”

Alex knows where this is headed.

“You think I should quit killing cats?”

“What do you think?”

“Yeah. I could probably do that.”

Dr. Morton nods, playing the mentor role to the hilt.

“How are your other goals? You seem more at ease since the last we spoke.”

“I’m getting all of my ducks lined up,” Alex says.

“Any ducks in particular?”

“Tying up loose ends from my past. Working to get over it. Taking small steps, instead of large ones, like you said.”

“Glad to hear it. How about that person you’ve fallen in love with?”

Dr. Morton flips through his notebook, but Alex mentions the name and saves him the trouble.

“Everything is going perfectly. Exactly according to plan.”

“And this love---it’s reciprocated, right?”

Alex wonders about this often.

“That’s an interesting question, Doctor. Can you ever truly know if love is being returned? You wear a wedding ring, so I assume you’re married, and I assume you love your wife. But even if she says she loves you, you can’t crawl around in her head and feel it for yourself. You can’t ever truly know.”

“I feel loved, and that’s reassurance enough. Do you feel loved, Alex?”

Alex thinks, really thinks hard.

“Sometimes. Sometimes I do.”

A gentle beeping sound comes from Dr. Morton’s desk. The doctor walks over and presses a button on the alarm, silencing it.

“That’s our time today, Alex. See you tomorrow.”

Alex stand up, stretches. “Absolutely. This is really helping me a lot. I appreciate you fitting me in.”

“That’s good to hear. And remember your goal.”

“Don’t kill any cats. Got it.”

They shake hands, and Dr. Morton shows Alex to the door.

Outside the office, Alex smiles big. Leaving cats alone for a week will not be a problem. Not at all.

The next thing Alex plans on killing isn’t a cat.

Chapter 5

I didn't sleep.

Slumber and I were old adversaries, and on an average night I spent six hours doing the toss and turn, with only one or two hours of actual REM.

But last night I had trouble even closing my eyes.

I managed to get through the Kork tape, right up to the sad, sickening end. I kept the sound on, so I heard all the begging, all the screams. All the laughing and grunting.

Cops tended to be more cynical than the average citizen, but I tried to err to the side of neutrality when it came to human nature. I'd seen good, and I'd seen evil, and mankind exhibited both.

Watching the tape changed that for me. I showered, slapped on some make-up, dressed quickly in generic flats, some black Kenneth Cole pants, and a beige turtleneck sweater from the Gap, and drove to work with absolute tunnel vision. There were no depths to human cruelty. The knowledge burned in my stomach like a hot coal.

We were told to be careful of the *us against them* mentality, but when I finally got to my office, fighting rush hour traffic, watching the honking and the swearing as humans cut each other off, I truly hated my fellow man. I tried to bury my feelings in work. After a cup of vending machine coffee that tasted slightly worse than it smelled, I began going through reports.

The CSU had lifted several dozen prints from the Kork house, which were being run through the database. No prints on the toe jar, or the note. The video that had been dropped off was a Sony brand, available everywhere. The envelope manufacturer still wasn't known, but it looked like an average padded mailer, and was probably sold at thousands of stores.

The Desk Sergeant had used an Identakit to put together a composite of the man who dropped off the video. He was average height, thin, in his thirties, with a full blond beard. He wore reflective sunglasses, a Cubs baseball cap, and a hooded sweatshirt. The picture had an eerily similarity to the much-circulated artist's sketch of the Unibomber.

No prints on the tape. Prints from Herb and the Desk Sergeant were lifted from the envelope, along with a white powder residue that smelled like cleanser, such as Ajax or Comet.

It was an old burglar trick. Scrubbing your hands with detergent will temporarily strip your hands of their natural oils, making it impossible to leave prints.

I called 411, looking for a last known address of Diane Kork, the Gingerbread Man's ex-wife. Couldn't hurt to question her again, if someone had picked up where her husband had left off. I found her in Bucktown, unlisted. I gave the operator my badge number and a minute later he called me back with her address and phone number.

I called, got a machine, and left a message. Then I called the County Morgue.

"Hughes."

"Morning, Max. Jack Daniels."

"Hi, Jack. Here's what I got so far. Sixty-eight toes, from nine different bodies. They've been preserved, and I'm guessing they might be anywhere from twenty to fifty years old."

Max was an assistant Medical Examiner, and he considered small talk a mark of unprofessionalism.

"Preserved?"

"Packed in salt. There are still some grains left. The skin is completely dehydrated, no biological activity present."

"Is that why they're so small? They shrunk?"

"There's been some shrinkage, yes, but they toes are tiny because they came from children."

My mind catapulted me back to the video.

Hughes went on. "Age range seems to be from five to nine. I've got a forensic anthropologist friend named Coran who's taking a look at the X-rays---she'll be more specific. I'm a soft tissue guy, not a bone guy."

"Could they have come from corpses?"

"You thinking a grave robber?"

"Or an undertaker who keeps souvenirs."

"Possibly. But several of the toes have slices along the toenails, and along the underside."

"Hesitation marks?"

"They're more consistent with defense marks. If someone were trying to cut off your toes, you'd struggle. Wouldn't be easy to do, even to a child. I don't think I can test for

histamine in a dried specimen, but I'd bet my house they were removed while the children were still alive."

Pleasant thought. I concentrated on the age. If the toes were twenty years old, they could have come from some of Kork's early victims. But anything older would have been impossible.

"One more strange thing, Jack---each of the toes has a tiny hole running through them, through the bones."

"Any idea what that means?"

"None."

"Thanks, Max. Call me when you know more."

I hit the computer, searching for missing children reports going back to 1950.

The number was in the millions.

I added restrictions to my search, confining it to the Midwest, children between the years of five and nine, ruling out family abductions, runaways and throwaways, and sticking to the years of 1970-1996.

Millions became tens of thousands. Still too many to conceivably go through. I backburnered the idea for later and spun through my Rolodex, looking for an old number at the UIC.

"You've reached the office of graphologist Dr. Francis Mulrooney. Please leave a message at the beep."

"Dr. Mulrooney, this is Lt. Jack Daniels of the---"

A click. "Lt. Daniels? How delightful to hear from you! I apologize for not picking up. I've been forced to screen my calls lately due to some unpleasantness. How can I be of service?"

"Do you still have those handwriting samples from the Gingerbread Man case?"

"Of course."

"I've got another note. It looks similar, but I'm not the expert. Any chance of you coming by sometime this week?"

"Let me check my schedule."

I could picture him, reaching a delicately manicured hand into his tailored vest pocket for his appointment book. Mulrooney was short, thin, with a slight blond mustache, comically thick glasses, and a fetish for bow ties. Academics normally intimidated me, but this one I liked. He was both helpful and unpretentious, two traits most professors lacked.

“I’m free tomorrow, late afternoon. But if you’d like a fast and dirty opinion, you can fax it to me.”

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

Mulrooney read off his fax number. I had a photocopy of the recent Evanston note, and managed to feed that into my fax machine on my third try.

“It’s coming though now. Will you pardon me for a moment, Lieutenant?”

“Take your time.”

I trimmed my thumbnail with my teeth, imagining the petite man going over the writing sample with a magnifying glass.

“Very interesting. Very interesting indeed. Is the original in marker?”

“Yes.”

“Clever.”

“It’s clever to write in marker?”

“One of the things graphologists look at is pressure. Felt tip pens disguise that. Tell me, the fax you sent, is this the original size, or did you enlarge it?”

“The real sample is half the size.”

“I see. I look forward to seeing the actual note. This is a very interesting sample. We don’t see this too often.”

I bit. “See what, Doctor?”

“It appears to be a forgery. Someone who has seen Kork’s original handwriting and has done their best to imitate it. The descending t-bars. The slant. The capitalization. But there are some obvious differences. First of all, Kork’s writing is heaviest in the lower zone. This person is an upper zone writer, an indicator of high intelligence. Also, there are some feminine characteristics at work here.”

I blinked. “A woman wrote this?”

“It’s impossible to determine sex from a handwriting sample, and men can have feminine qualities in their script, just as women can have masculine qualities.”

Mulrooney went into a lecture about the differences between male and female traits in handwriting, but my attention was drawn away by a very unpleasant surprise standing in my doorway.

“Dr. Mulrooney?” I interrupted. “Something just came up. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

“Hmm? Oh, yes, of course. Until then, Lieutenant.”

I replaced the receiver on the cradle and turned to face my demons.

Chapter 6

“Hello again, Lieutenant. I hope you remember us. I’m Special Agent Dailey, this is Special Agent Coursey.” He leaned forward a fraction. “From the Bureau.”

They had matching crew cuts. Special Agent Jim Coursey wore a gray suit. Special Agent George Dailey, the same height and build as Coursey, also sported a gray suit, but his buttons were squarish compared to Coursey’s roundish buttons. That must be how their handler could tell them apart.

“Can I see some ID?” I asked.

Dailey reached for his pocket, but Coursey stopped him with a look.

“She’s kidding. She does that.”

“Didn’t you read my profile?” I asked Dailey.

He dropped his hand back to his side and concentrated on looking Federal. Dailey and Coursey were ViCAT operatives from the Behavioral Science Unit. ViCAT stood for Violent Criminal Apprehension Team, which used high-tech suspect profiling techniques and state-of-the-art crime detecting computers to waste the time of local cops like me.

“We have some exciting news,” said Coursey.

I couldn’t pass that up. “You’re quitting the Bureau and joining the traveling cast of Riverdance?”

“No. The Evanston Police Department has invited us in on the new Gingerbread Man murder.”

Here was proof that God hated me.

“We’ve obtained a copy of the video. It contains some similarities to the previous Kork murders.

“Gentleman,” I began, “while it makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside that you’re---”

“We’ve had Vicky do a profile,” Coursey talked over me while Dailey removed a thick packet of paper from his briefcase and plunked it on my desk.

“Vicky is what we call the ViCAT computer,” Dailey added. “She’s a comprehensive compiled database of criminal activity committed throughout the United States.”

Every time they dropped by, they again explained Vicky to me. Perhaps I had a sign around my neck that said, "Tell me again, I'm an idiot."

"Though we haven't had enough time to fully analyze the videotape of the murder, Vicky postulates that this is the work of a copycat," said Coursey.

"A copycat," said Dailey.

"A copycat," said I. "Was your first clue the note, or the fact that it took place in the same house as Kork's murders?"

Sarcasm was wasted on these guys, but that didn't stop me from making an effort.

"If you'll look over the profile, you notice that this crime took an extraordinary amount of planning and organization," said Coursey.

"So much so, that Vicky doesn't believe this is the work of a single individual," said Dailey.

"The facts point to the perpetrator being a group of individuals," said Coursey.

"A group?" said I.

"An organized group of at least three people. Perhaps members of a club or organization."

I took a stab. "Like the PTA?"

"Actually," Coursey lowered his voice an octave. "We've been informed by Homeland Security that three members of a subversive Brazillian band went through Customs at O'Hare Airport eleven days ago."

I held up a palm. "Guys, while being sent a videotape may have been meant to inspire terror, I really don't think this was a terrorist act."

"They're not terrorists," said Dailey. "They call themselves the Samba Kings."

Coursey added, "They're musicians."

I took a moment before saying, "You think the murderer is a Brazilian samba trio?"

Dailey held up his right hand and ticked off fingers. "They're organized. Focused. Motivated. And are in excellent physical condition, by the looks of the pictures on their CD."

I checked my neck for the "I'm an idiot" sign. I didn't have one. But I was considering getting two of them made, with matching gray letters.

"Gentlemen..." I began.

“There’s more,” Dailey interrupted. “According to Interpol, both the drummer and the lead singer have priors. And there have been several dozen instances of mutilation in Brazil recently.”

Coursey leaned in. “Cattle mutilation,” he said.

“Maybe their maraca player is a chupacabra,” I offered.

Dailey and Coursey exchanged a glance. “You don’t seem to be taking this seriously, Lieutenant.”

I sighed. “Sorry, guys. It’s been a rough day. Why don’t you let me memorize this report you gave me, and I’ll get back to you, say, next week?”

Another look passed between them. I wondered if they had some kind of telepathy thing going. Probably not, as that would require a brain.

“How about tomorrow?” said Coursey.

“How about November?” I countered.

“How about on Thursday?” said Dailey.

“How about the first of never?” I returned volley.

“Next week it is,” Coursey said. “We’ll see ourselves out.”

“Please do. And I’ll put out an all-points bulletin, asking my people to pay special attention to anyone speaking Portuguese.”

The Special Agents gave me a blank stare.

“That’s what they speak in Brazil,” I said.

“We knew that,” said Dailey.

“We went to Harvard,” said Coursey.

“Thanks for stopping by, gentlemen.” I held up their report. “I’ll get started on this right way.”

They left, and I placed the report in the circular file, on top of my empty coffee cup. A quick check of my watch---a Movado that Latham gave me---showed me it was nearing lunch time, and Herb was probably done with his procedure. I gave him a call.

“Hello?” His voice was groggy.

“How’d the colonoscopy go? You eating a big plate of nachos yet?”

Long pause. I heard hospital sounds in the background. A nurse talking. A doctor being

paged.

“They found something. A tumor.”

I momentarily ran out of words.

“Jesus, Herb.”

“Took a biopsy. Won’t know until later.”

“Are you okay?”

“No. I gotta go.”

He clicked off.

I stared at the phone, unsure of what to do. Go visit him? Herb, though cuddly on the outside, was a classic stoic. Dropping by would cause embarrassment, and possibly anger. But still, a tumor was a serious thing.

I closed my eyes. I’d had partners prior to Herb, but never one I’d cared about. Benedict was like a big brother. If Herb died...

The phone rang. I screwed a cap over my feelings and answered, hoping it was Herb.

“Did the Feebies just drop by?”

Bains.

“Yes, Captain. Evanston brought them in.”

“I want you off this.”

“You gave me 48 hours.”

“I said to keep a low profile. With those two involved, it’s only a matter of time before the *Weekly World News* is camped outside the station. You’re off.”

“Captain...”

“Off.”

I hung up the phone and took a deep breath. That didn’t do a damn thing, so I took another, and another.

Something inside of me, some little internal switch, had been flipped, and I wasn’t sure who I was. I thought about Herb, and my mom, and my ex-husband Alan, and Latham, and my job, and my life, and where I’d been and where I was headed.

I thought about how hard I tried to remain in control, and what little good it did. Control didn’t matter. Fate didn’t care about how hard you tried, or how well planned you were, or how

much you wanted something.

Fate had its own agenda.

I was forty-six years old. My job, the thing I devoted my life to, was in trouble. My best friend might be dying. My mother was in a coma. And I had screwed up the one thing that I did have some control over; I loved a great guy, and I blew it. And if I wanted to admit it, to take the hard inward glance that made me ask why, I knew the answer.

Deep down, I wanted to be miserable. I wanted to be miserable, because that's what I deserved, because I hated myself.

Which was a pretty crummy way to live. And not something I wanted to continue.

I picked up the phone, dialing from memory.

"Hello?"

"Hi Latham, it's Jack. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for hurting you. I know a lot of time has passed, and I'm sure you've moved on, but I haven't. I still love you. Can I come over?"

"Who is this? Do I know you?"

The voice wasn't Latham's.

"Ah, hell." I disconnected and tried again, dialing more carefully.

"You've reached Latham Conger, I can't come to the phone, please leave a name and number and I'll get back to you."

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

Say something, Jack.

The silence stretched.

Open your mouth.

Dead air, each passing second like a kick in the gut.

Dammit, woman, do you want to be miserable your whole life?

"Latham, it's Jack. I'm sorry for everything. I love you. I'd like to see you again. Please call."

There. I did it. I actually did something for myself. It brought a small smile to my face.

But my shoulders bunched up again when I realized I'd be up all night, waiting for him to call.

Once again, control was out of my hands.

Chapter 7

I stopped by Henderson House on the way home from work, but there had been no change. Mom hadn't opened her eyes again. I sat with her for an hour. No talking this time, just holding her hand.

Twice I checked my cell phone, to make sure it was on. It was.

After a pillow fluff, I turned to leave and had a good startle seeing Tony Cogliosio standing in the doorway. His eyes seemed glazed, far-away.

"Tony?"

"Hi, Jack. How's she doing?"

"The same. How about your dad?"

"The same."

I wondered if I should apologize for barging in on him yesterday, and then thought that maybe he's the one who should apologize for being so rude, and finally accepted that neither of us needed to say the 's' word because, hey, our parents were dying.

"You look nice," Tony said, not quite focusing on me.

I figured I looked like hell, but thanked him anyway.

Tony smiled. "See you soon." Then he walked off.

Strange. Maybe he was drunk, or high on something. Or maybe he stopped by to ask me out, checked out the merchandise, and decided to pass.

I fluffed Mom's pillow again, gave her a kiss on the cheek, and headed to the elevator. No Tony in the hall, no Tony in the lobby, and no Tony in the parking lot. It didn't matter. My mind was on Latham, not Tony, so I didn't dwell.

After a quick check to make sure my cell phone hadn't accidentally switched off during my walk to the car, I headed home.

Mr. Friskers gave me a warm welcome, howling and running away when I walked through the door. I disengaged the alarm and turned the deadbolt. Time to plan my big evening.

I made dinner, maxing out my culinary skills with a BLT. Then I fed the feral cat, plugged my cell into the charger, set my .38 next to my bed, swapped my outfit for a t-shirt and

fresh panties, scrubbed my face, ate my BLT, brushed my teeth, and switched on the TV. Network drivel was better than brainwashing when it came to clearing a woman's mind. I hopped on the bed, content to play station roulette.

Next to the TV, still in the Jewel bag, were the Kork videotapes.

They might as well have been blinking like a beacon.

You were pulled from the case, Jack. You don't need to watch more children being tortured. You've got enough on your plate as it is.

I put on a game show, but stared at the bag. I switched to a cooking show, but kept looking at the bag. I tried a sit-com starring the stand-up comedian du jour.

That damn bag kept demanding my attention.

I crawled out of bed. Picked up the bag, and carried it into the kitchen.

Mr. Friskers had his face crammed in his bowl. He hissed at my interruption of his gluttony. I hissed back and set the bag on the counter, next to the sink. The cat ran up and swiped a claw at my leg.

I jumped back, knocking the bag over and spilling files onto the floor. My ankle sprouted three shallow cuts, not too far from the other set of shallow cuts that had already healed, but lower than the fresh cuts a few inches higher.

"Dammit, cat!"

It was always my left leg, too. He'd clawed me a dozen times, but never on the right leg. Sadism, with an agenda.

I tore off a paper towel, dabbing it at the blood while picking up papers with my free hand. My fist closed around the Diane Kork file, and I paused.

An image, unbidden, flashed into my head, of the first time I'd seen Diane Kork, half-naked and bleeding in Charles Kork's basement. I remembered her pleading, crying face. Her ugly wounds, weeping blood. And something else. Something familiar.

I paged through the file, but there weren't any pictures of her wounds. Made sense; the case was closed, and evidence was no longer needed.

But I did have images of Diane. Videotape #12, *Slipping the Knife to the Wife*.

"You're off the case, Jack," I said aloud.

I didn't listen to myself.

I found tape #12 and took it into the bedroom. I hit PLAY and then FAST FORWARD, cycling through Diane being tied up, up to the scene where he sliced off her clothes.

I paused the tape.

The image jittered, two lines of snow framing the edges of the screen, but I could clearly see what I'd been looking for; a heart-shaped tattoo, the size of a dime, on Diane's hip bone just below the bikini line.

I stared for a moment, then went back to the kitchen and dug out the copy of the tape of the latest murder---the original was still at the lab.

I swapped cassettes and again viewed the slow approach to the Kork house, the walk into the basement, and the zoom in on the naked victim.

I couldn't see any tattoos because the woman was sitting, and the crease in her lap obscured her bikini line.

I let the tape play in slow motion, watching her struggle and die frame by frame, and five minutes into her pain she arched her back and her pelvis came briefly into view.

PAUSE.

The heart tattoo was the same.

I felt my breath catch, and hashed out the possibilities. Either the killer had put a fake tattoo there to make it look like Diane Kork, or else the victim was indeed Diane Kork.

I had Diane's phone number in my jacket pocket, from when I'd called Information earlier. When I dialed it, I got her answering machine for the second time.

"Shit."

Two options. I could call the station, have them send a car over to check out Diane's place. Or I could go myself, even though Bains had ordered me off the case.

Diane lived on Hamilton, and I was more than a mile closer to her than anyone at the 26th District.

I slid into some Levi's, shrugged on a sweater, strapped on my .38, and was out the door before I gave it any more thought.