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He calls her for the first time in almost a year, knowing she'll pick up just before voicemail, envisioning her staring at the phone in bitter debate. He hears, almost feels, the tight suck of breath between her teeth as she answers, "What do you want?"

"It's been a while. I thought we were due."

"Were we?" She's moving, maybe pushing covers back, swinging her legs off the edge of the bed, the tendons rippling across the tops of her bare feet. He feels a warm surge at the thought of waking her, embodying the rough start of her morning before more than a vague ribbon of light has streaked above the tree line beyond that washed-out old Wyeth painting of a farmhouse she lives in.

"You must've been wondering." He lets air trickle from his nose. "Is he dead?" His impression of her is soft, subtle, a near whisper: "Is the bastard finally out of my life?" Waits. In his own voice, flatly, "You must've prayed to whatever god County girls turn to. Patron Saint of Pabst Blue Ribbon?"

She clears morning phlegm directly into the speaker, making him wince and smile. "Never once."

"I'm flattered."

“My luck’s not that good, is all.” She coughs. “You ought to know. You’ve made a lot of it.”

“No argument from me.” He presses his forehead against the back of his hand as leans into the doorframe where he is. “Is Ryan there beside you?”

Where Shaw is, she’s off the bed, in motion, tugging on an old plaid robe over the big T-shirt that was once Ryan’s; she seized it for sleep so far back in their marriage that the origin no longer registers. Her pulse is up, but the recording app’s saving all this, adding another audio file to her Anders Jansen collection. “Damn, are you behind the times.”

She goes down the hall on autopilot to the coffeemaker, kicking Beau’s stray Nike out of the way. It bounces off the dog’s dish and spills some of yesterday’s kibble; the boys gave her too much again. There’s a rattle-clack as she shifts the glass decanter from the dish rack to the warming plate. “A lot’s changed since we last talked. Ry’s moved on.”

A momentary pause. “You two split up? Really. And here I thought you’d be the couple to prove all the statistics wrong.” He exhales. “I suppose you’re going to blame me for that, too.”

“Nah. Long time coming. No big shock.” She doesn’t know how many scoops of grounds she’s put in, but she starts it perking anyway just for background noise other than her nails ticking the countertop and her heartbeat thrumming in her ears. Through the broad open doorframe to the living room, she notices the crest of Dad’s gray head over the back of the recliner, slumped to the side.

“How’re the boys taking it?”

Her fingers stop. She waits.

There’s a smile in Anders’s voice as he leisurely draws back from the tender spot; he always has to get close enough to warm them

with his breath. “Must take a lot to break up high school sweet-hearts, together some-odd years.”

“Nope. Takes a little bit. Year after year. Stream wearing away the rock, all that.” She’s got to keep a steady hand, work him like a locked wheel. “Where you living these days, bubba?”

“What fun would it be if I told you?”

“Want to hear my guess? You got a new job somewhere, had to relocate. Some kind of big life change like that.”

“I’ve been keeping busy, yes.” There’s a brief absence from the speaker, as if he’s making breakfast preparations, too. “You Connollys were never far from my thoughts, though. In fact . . . I was just pondering your names. You three girls.”

Shaw shuts her eyes for a second, swallowing the first slosh of acid up her throat.

“I mean—there’s no flow at all. Did your parents even begin to comprehend the task at hand? You, Shawnee, firstborn, were given the trailer trash name. That tacky touch of cultural appropriation. And the littlest one may as well have had ‘Madison’ stamped on her ass on her way down a factory conveyor belt. It was the number-two most popular name in the country for baby girls that year. I checked.” Pauses. “But then we circle back to Thea.”

Steel creeps up Shaw’s spine. She forces herself to the act of pulling down mugs from the cupboard. “You want to talk about Thea, okay. Talk.”

“Normally I dislike bastardized spellings—Theodora is the generally accepted version of the name—but in the case of your sister . . . somehow, the inconsistency just fit. Theadora. Old-fashioned. Sweet.”

“And she was neither one. Go figure.”

“Like I said. Inconsistencies. Appealing, in certain people.”

She stops again, bracing her hands against the counter while rocking back on her heels, a deep lioness stretch under the weight of it all, the burden of him, and her voice becomes guttural: “It’d be

so easy for you.” She shakes her head. “You need to feel like you got all the power, fine, you got it. Just name a place. A landmark. Something. I’ll find her. You can go disappear. I don’t give a shit anymore.”

“Does your employer know that you say these things? Hardly becoming to one involved however peripherally in the criminal justice system”—Anders speaks right over her as she tries to cut in—“and anyway we both know what an utter falsehood it is. You could never let me go. It’s not in you. Other people might talk about needing a burial, some sense of closure. But not you. Truthfully, Shaw? I don’t believe you care about honoring Thea. It’s never been about that. It’s about grinding my bones to make your bread. Isn’t it?” Waits. “Answer.”

Her words emerge dry, exhausted, her eyes held shut: “What’d you kill her for, you prick?”

Silence. “You can be so uncouth sometimes.”

He ends the call.

Shaw wakes the old man first, nudging his shoulder—“Dad, it’s morning”—while she gathers the quilt away from his legs and pushes the recliner footrest down into the locked position.

“Hmm? Oh.” His hearing aids lay right where she thought they would, side table to his left, removed while he watched TV with captions on late into the night. “Thought I was dead for a minute there, didn’t ya?”

“Dead men don’t fart, so I’ve been told.”

He laughs, wincing in the process of easing himself up. “Always were a rude girl.”

“Heard that once or twice, too.” Shaw drops the folded quilt over the chair arm. “I’ll get the boys—”

“No, no, I’ll do it.” He starts stiffly toward the stairs, creases criss-

crossing the back of his heavy sweater and cords, worn since yesterday. “What do you pay me for, anyway?”

She snorts. “Microwaved meals and a mattress too hard to sleep on—that passes for a salary these days?”

“Well . . . got to earn my keep.” He takes the stairs with difficulty, even more so than when he first moved in four months ago, grasping the railing like a lifeline between ships. Time’s catching up with him, no denying it; he’d been in his early thirties when Shaw was born. Maybe she ought to get one of those stairway elevator seats they’ve got for old folks. Forget it—keeping the boys off it would be impossible, and convincing Dad to park his ass there would be even worse. Inching along like an invalid with his hands limp in his lap while Beau and Casey thunder up and down, basketballs dribbling down the steps? Stupid. “Was that your work on the phone?” Dad’s voice carries down. “Heard you talking.”

Shaw keeps her eyes on the frost-stippled morning coming into full light outside the front windows. “Yeah.” Can’t face telling him, but there’s no other way; bad news will out, like blood. “No, I’m lying to you. It was him again. Shit.”

Dad stops halfway up but doesn’t turn. “That Anders guy?” Her silence is answer enough. “Thought he was gone.”

“So did I. Poked his little gopher head back up this morning, though. Yippee. Knew this was going to be a banner day.”

The old man’s standing there, grappling, his hand now a claw on the banister. “Call Steve York.”

“It’s at the top of my list, believe me.”

Dad climbs a couple more steps, and then his call bounces off the upstairs landing: “You boys are *late*—hup, one, two, three, four, move your asses or you’ll be walking to school.” He forces a goblin’s grin on his way back down as they hear feet thudding the floor above. “Always did the trick with you girls, too.”

She smiles crookedly, shakes her head, getting cereal boxes out of the pantry as her phone goes off again.

With breath held, she leans over the counter, checking the screen. Jesus, it really is work this time. Shaw answers, netting some bowls from the shelf: “I’ll be out the door in, like, twenty minutes. Can you put whatever it is on ice till then?”

A guttural *chuff* from Lydia Gauthier; it takes Shaw a second to realize the girl is laughing.

“Okay, what? Use your words.”

“It’s just—you saying that. I mean . . . considering.” In the put-out silence, Shaw can almost see Gauthier burrowing down into her emotional shell, all pink-cheeked defensiveness. “They need us on a suspicious death in Houghton. Jewel thought it might be quicker for you to meet me there.” A light bulb flickers. “Want me to text you the address?”

“Now that’s using the old walnut. See ya.” Shaw rings off, tosses the phone, dumps her armload in the center of the kitchen table. No time for a shower, piss up a rope. No chance to rinse free of the used, prying fingers feeling, the residue left behind by any conversation with Anders. No opportunity to steal five goddamn seconds without an audience to confront the building darkness, the pressure behind her eyes—a black sandstorm, that’s how she thinks of him, billowing, abrasive, rushing in to scour every crack and fissure, clot her lungs. She can’t breathe at the thought of starting up right where they left off: him, fucking her life and mind over. So. She won’t breathe.

Beau rounds the kitchen doorway first, sleeping in boxer shorts and a T-shirt now like he’s grown, tall and rail-thin for his age at fifteen, but he’s still got the bright, eager look she associates with his toddler years. Blue eyes, straw-straight brown hair which lays flat on his brow, every inch his father. “Mom, you eating with us?”

Her heart hurts at anyone being that excited to crunch Frosted Mini Wheats across from her. “Can’t, sweets. Gotta go, go, go.”

Beau gives an over-the-top groan, but he’s already after the food, used to her leaving ways. “Anything cool this time?”

“Death’s never cool, bud. It’s just—an end.” It’s not the first time she’s chided them on this, being insensitive, flippant, typical kids, but it’s the first time within Dad’s earshot, and with Thea on her mind, Shaw’s feeling stiff, humorless.

She checks Dad’s reaction, but he acts like he hasn’t heard, instead washing down his medication. Beau’s gaze is on the middle distance as he shakes out cereal, and Shaw kisses the top of his head as she passes, pressing close to the precious organic electrical processes inside which can stop, just stop, at any time; she can never forget that.

Casey, ten years old, comes into the room: he’s stockier, a head shorter than his brother, and still little enough to wear print jammies without shame, thank God. Walking like he’s half asleep, Casey catches Shaw around the waist for a quick connection without words before she jogs upstairs for a cabbie’s shower, hearing Dad say, “What’d she do to this coffee?” before sloshing it down the sink.

Upstairs, Shaw takes a minute to call Stephen York, getting his voicemail, no surprise there. He’s a state police detective with a caseload that won’t quit, and nothing sets Thea apart from the rest of his dead other than the fact that she’s probably the coldest, passed down by a series of predecessors since 2007. Steve doesn’t use the word *cold*, though. Thea is unsolved. As-yet unknown. A rabbit hole into a free fall for any investigator, anybody who delves too deep.

Shaw speaks: “Steve, this is Shaw Connolly, Thea’s big sister. Long time, no talk. I wanted you to know that I got another call from Anders Jansen this morning.” She takes a breath; it’s awkward, what with her going against Steve’s advice last year after she went through the pain in the ass of changing her number and then Anders found it anyway. That’s when she decided, fuck it, she’s not pursuing charges. Bring on the calls; maybe he’ll make a mistake and give her back her sister. “He’s full of the same old sunshine and lollipops. I’d love a chat, but . . . you may not want to try me until tomorrow. My hands are going to be pretty full.”

Beneath the wind-buffeted crime scene canopy tent, the man lies on his stomach, head turned to face east toward Route 2, which tumbles through Bennet County in the reckless loops of a wounded snake. The deceased—one Bernard Cloyd, 67, according to the license found in his wallet, along with credit cards and thirty-one dollars cash—landed half on the ice of Round Pond, half on the snowy crust, his right arm upraised, bent beside his head as if his last act was to try to catch himself before the world grayed out.

The blow to his head had torn a piece of scalp from the bone like leather from a tattered baseball, and his brimmed ski cap, marked by an evidence technician with a yellow number-three Versa-Cone, lies some seven feet away, thrown when whatever it was came down across the back of his skull with extreme prejudice.

Shaw sees the cap from where she stands, picturing its initial coast across the ice, catching a bit of breeze now and then until it spun to the center of the pond while the rest of the world stood still out here, save the treetops, their transitory swaying reflected in the deceased’s open eyes.

Shaw pops the trunk door of her Yukon Denali, which sits parked behind two sheriff’s department SUVs, and gets into her gear: the

white Tyvek coveralls she zips into and tugs the hood to her hairline, the nylon shoe covers, the filter mask she hangs around her neck by the strap until it's necessary.

Her fingerprinting field kit is secured against the back of the third row with bungee cords, and she frees it before crossing the snow toward whom she knows to be Gauthier, yet another masked, shapeless clean suit, but notably shorter than the boys' club, standing on the periphery of the activity, her raspberry-colored muck boots glowing through the spunbonded coverall material like the legs of an Alaskan King Crab.

"Where've you been so far?" They're the first words out of Shaw's mouth once she's under the tape.

The young woman's kit rests by her feet. "Jewel said to wait for you."

Shaw gives a terse sigh. "No foolin'. Who's team leader? Dunleavy? Didn't he put his two cents in?" Shaw rubbernecks among the white-suited CSIs, recognizes the build of the scene manager—top heavy, long-legged—and gets the distinct impression that the guy's dodging her gaze while crouching over an area of snow with a couple other techs. "Shunted you off on your own, huh." Shaw feels the girl's stare keenly, those dark brown cocker spaniel eyes; Gauthier rarely seems to blink, all part of her earnest-to-a-fault awkwardness. Shaw can't decide if it's a side effect of being a noob or, God help them all, just how Lydia Gauthier is. "So, nothing's been done on our end. We need to get rolling. Have you run into Pdraig McKenzie at all? He'll be lead detective on this, more than likely, unless or until the stadies take over. He's from the sheriff's office." Gauthier's gaze flicks away, then back. "You know who he is? A Scot on the wrong side of the pond? Sticks out like bagpipes in a barbershop quartet?"

Shaw waits a microsecond for an answer, then swivels, heading down the safe path through the clearing that's already been decreed

free of evidence, approaching the flapping tent, another tech on hands and knees nearby, no doubt hunting for any fibers that haven't already been scattered to Oz. "Right, okay. Walk with me, talk with me. There's two of us, so no need to be on each other's heels. Bisect the scene and work our way out toward the tree line and then down to the roadside." She checks the mottled, frozen snow under her boot. *Tsks*. "Tracks guys are going to be shittin' themselves. Look at this mess. Must've had every Arctic Cat and dog walker in the county out here at some point." Shaw glances at Gauthier. "This being—what, your third crime scene?"

"Second." She pauses. "First homicide."

"Unexplained death. Don't call it 'homicide' until the ME has signed off. This is Land of Make-Believe time. Pretend like a very large bird could've swooped down on Mr. Cloyd to steal his hat until we're told otherwise. Got it? Practice. Discretion. Don't even use the word 'suspicious.' You don't want a witness or reporter hearing you shoot your mouth off before we know what went on." Shaw's gaze lands on a woman with a shock-blانched face leaning heavily on a pair of skis driven into the crust just beyond the tape, where she speaks with a uniform. "A scene like this doesn't have much of an onlooker problem, but if you practice, discretion becomes second nature. Helps keep you out of trouble in the long run."

"Okay. Got it." Gauthier stumbles on the crust, then falls into step with Shaw. "And I won't be on your heels. I just . . . need to not mess this up. You know?"

Shaw glances at her, makes a quick appraisal of the girl's tense face, then nods, her attention pulled away by a two-note bird's whistle from within the tent.

McKenzie crouches beside the body, mask on, photographing an object in Cloyd's right hand with his phone. "No murder weapon yet," McKenzie says to Shaw without preamble; they've been working together on and off for two years, and they fall in together as

easily as if it's been twenty. "But here's one for your lot, eventually." He indicates a gray plastic handle still squeezed in the man's left hand.

Shaw hunkers down for a better look. "Dog leash?"

"With his hand trapped under his body like that, nobody saw it right away." McKenzie rests on his heels. "Looks like he got hit, fell forward, and Fifi must've eventually worked herself loose. The tape retracted back under the body."

"Where's the collar?" She catches his mild look. "Just saying, if the dog wriggled itself free, the collar would still be attached to the bolt snap." Shaw leans in. "And the leash is a good inch wide."

"Okay. Meaning?"

"Well—that's for a big dog. More Fido than Fifi. These suckers can handle up to 150 pounds." At his raised brows: "German shepherd at home."

"Got to get you one of those Dog Mom bumper stickers. All right, noted. I sent a couple uniforms out to search the woods, anyway, and Animal Control is on its way."

"Guess they'll find out if Fido was chipped. Best way to identify him, her. I think it's inhumane myself, but then, so's chopping their balls off, and we don't mind that, do we." *Contradictions*—Anders's blunt, dry fingers forcing the word between her lips, holding her jaw shut till she swallows—and Shaw straightens abruptly, jerking her head back toward Gauthier.

"This is Gauthier, new addition to Latent Prints. Gauthier, McKenzie. He works Major Crimes in Bennet County. If you've got a question, you can always go to him, just in case I'm swept away in a flash flood or something."

"Saddle me with that, will you?" McKenzie sends a half smirk Gauthier's way, that smile like it hurts, the distinctive fan of creases at his eyes that sets him apart from every other eyes-and-forehead at a scene, at least for Shaw. Gauthier shifts her feet, saying nothing,

her gaze drawn inexorably to the back of Cloyd's head, that window of bloody skull, the fluttering of the scalp flap. At least the girl hasn't puked; no sign of even coming close. "Welcome." McKenzie looks back to his work. "It's not always like this. Sometimes it's worse."

"Buh-dum-dum. Here all week, folks," Shaw says. "If he didn't say it with that badass brogue, it'd be downright obnoxious, wouldn't it? Okay. We're off."

"Hey"—McKenzie stops her—"see you at Tommy Daly's send-off?"

"Oh, ugh, that's today? Sorry, not ugh. Yeah, sure thing. Patel's, I'm guessing?" She doesn't wait for McKenzie's nod, instead giving a come-hither gesture to Gauthier, who paces away with her as Shaw surveys the rest of the scene.

Frozen pond. Small, dilapidated wooden bench on the far side for ice skaters to sit and fiddle with their laces, probably painted once but now peeled to gray. "Desolate, isn't it? Okay, so we do the bench, but unfinished wood that's been weathered in the elements like this is a toughie, rarely holds a print. Then there's this shack—what is this?"

Shaw leads the way to the lean-to standing some fifteen feet back from the pond's edge, built from plywood, the door hanging slightly ajar. "We want pictures of this—our own pics for Latent, never mind what the other techs have done. And get the position of the door." Gauthier goes for her phone as Shaw kneels and opens her kit, getting out her go-to brush with big soft fiberglass bristles and a jar of basic black powder. She unscrews the lid. "Again, porous wood, so who knows what we'll get, but obviously we want to dust all around this funny little latch they've jiggered here and this whole area along the edge where a person might touch when coming or going. Seriously, who built this and why? Shelter for the kids, I guess? What's the point?"

“Maybe it’s an ice fishing shack.” Gauthier stops mid-tap on her screen when Shaw looks back. “You can get plans free online. My stepdad made one.”

“What in God’s name could anybody expect to catch in a puddle that size?”

“Maybe that’s why they dumped it here.”

Shaw smiles impulsively and pats the snow. “Pull up some tundra.” She waits until Gauthier is squatting beside her before she spins the tip of the brush against the inside of the powder jar lid, getting a light coating. “Make me happy and tell me the number-one rule of thumb when you work in prints, pun intended.”

Gauthier hesitates, no doubt rapidly scanning a mental inventory of textbook terms, class lectures at UMass Lowell, where she got her barely dry forensics degree. “Label everything. Initial. Always get your partner to sign off.”

“Well, yes. Those things. But that’s not what I wanted.” Shaw gives the brush a finishing spin, then continues the twirling motion all over the latch and the surface around it. “Less is more. Use it like Marie Antoinette’s powder puff and you’ll bury half the lighter prints you’ll never even know were there, ones clinging on by aminos, not sebaceous.”

Shaw peers close to the wood, searching for friction ridges, the swirls and whorls and arches that form the topography of the human fingerprint. “Yeah, the shack is crap, doesn’t hold a print. This clouding here? Doesn’t even qualify as a smudge.” Shaw opens the door wider, peers around before stepping into the shadowy space barely big enough to accommodate the two of them. Gauthier follows.

There’s another bench, this one built into the back wall, as well as a scattering of dead leaves and trash on the ground and a single window in the far wall with smeared, grime-caked glass. “Add a composting toilet and a stack of *Reader’s Digests* and you’d

have yourself one hell of a room with a view.” Shaw crouches, peering under the bench. “Is your stepdad’s ice shack set up like this?”

“I don’t know.” Gauthier’s still not looking at Shaw when she tries to connect again; eye contact is becoming a kind of game. “I wouldn’t set foot in it.”

Shaw waits for more but gets nothing. “Fair enough.” She sees what she was looking for, gives a “*Ha*,” as she straightens. “We’re in business. Structure’s unfinished, but the bench is polyurethane treated. Plus, I see empties, glass, aluminum. Something to bring back to the lab with the leash, anyway. This is going to be a thin one. Better hope the uniforms turn up the weapon out in the woods or we’ll all be flying by the seat of our collective pants, if that makes any sense.”

Gauthier goes out and retrieves her kit, then opens it on the floor beneath the window, ready to start on the casing, sash, and glazing. “Won’t we probably just be lifting a bunch of unknowns from whoever came in here to drink that Mountain Dew two years ago?”

“Doesn’t matter. We work in likelihoods when we can. Other times, we canvass. Leave motivations to the psychologists. If there’s a chance that there’s one print that could set off bells in AFIT, our job is to make damn sure we don’t miss it.” Shaw gets out her mini Maglite, shining it on the dusty but reflective coating on the wood, where it sets off telltale patterns, human oils deposited by fingers. Shaw goes for the clear lifting tape, letting loose the first two bars of “Whistle While You Work.”

They dust: the entire bench, doorframe, bag the empties and two cigarette butts and a crumpled candy wrapper for a closer look at the lab.

They photograph and lift: partials and fulls captured in black powder on carefully smoothed strips of tape, the tape then applied to index cards, exact location of discovery written in Shaw's cramped dashing hand and Gauthier's soft, rounded letters, snapped away inside plastic file boxes for the ride in totes to the evidence-receiving area.

Packing it in three hours later, Shaw leads the way down the slope, kit in hand, then tugs her mask down to call to McKenzie, "Any word on the dog?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing yet."

"Huh. Well, maybe it's homeward bound and will turn up in Mr. Cloyd's front yard later, looking for Snausages." Her phone pings, text received; she checks it as she walks, wondering if it could be Stephen York touching base today after all.

Jewel, the boss: *See me when you have time thx.*

i.e., Unless this case is the Unabomber meets the Lindbergh baby, make time.

Shaw sends back a thumbs-up and tucks the phone away, working her jaw as she reaches the roadside. She glances over at a powder blue VW Beetle hatchback parked two spots behind her Beast, the smaller vehicle visible now that one of the deputy's SUVs is gone. "Yours?" Shaw watches Gauthier's nod, then says, "I shouldn't have said that earlier." Gauthier stops. "When I said, 'make me happy.' Not your job or your worry. So don't take that shit from me, all right?"

"Okay. I won't." The girl takes a slow sidestep, sensing they're not done.

"Just curious—what did Jewel say to you about me this morning?"

Gauthier continues walking, pushing her coverall hood back, smoothing a hand over her hair, which is dark brown and woven

into a halo braid. “She said you’d look after me.” She goes to her car without a backward glance.

Shaw watches a moment, shakes her head, then stares off hard at the tree line and the middle distance.