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The car sits on four flats in the center of the impound garage bay, the doors and trunk hatch left open to release the stagnant water trapped inside, leaving the concrete darkened with a network of flailing octopus arms which reaches almost as far as the entrance where Shaw now stands, kit in hand, gazing back at the dead headlights spattered with drying bits of grass and reeds. “Damn. It’s got a smell, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s not real pleasant.” Deputy Deacon Osbourn wears an air filter mask around his neck but doesn’t raise it as he leads the way toward the Chevy Sonic. He’s a stocky man, red-haired, with a truly well-cultivated handlebar mustache, and every inch of skin visible beyond the hems of his brown Bennet County Sheriff’s Office uniform is sandblasted with freckles. He must be a new hire; Shaw knows the faces in the Bennet County office well enough to sketch county-fair-style caricatures of each—should she feel like launching a quirky side hustle. “You figure,

you got her, the woman, decaying in there for thirteen months, not to mention mold thriving in the upholstery, bacteria multiplying like crazy—”

“But only to a point, right?” Shaw stops a couple feet back and sets her kit on the floor, peering inside the cab. The fabric of the driver’s seat is darkened nearly to black where the deceased, Nadia Jimenez, who had been missing and presumed dead since August of last year, sat entombed under fifty feet of water while the earth completed its unhurried journey around the sun and began another one, until a day and a half ago, when a dad out with his son in the family center-console boat picked up a large, vague shape on the screen of his fish finder through the gloom of Signet Lake outside of Devane and mistook it for a boat wreck, radioing in a call to the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. “I was told this was kind of a rare case”—Shaw pauses to pull on nitrile gloves—“like a microclimate, almost? A vacuum was created inside the cab when the vehicle went under, and the victim herself was only partially submerged all this time?”

“Right. For some reason the car didn’t fill completely as it sank like they usually do, so the pressure never equalized. I was told she would’ve suffocated in there before she drowned, more’n likely, if she hadn’t been dead going into the water, which, judging by the hole in the back of her skull, she probably was. The water was up to her chest, about here”—he marks the line on himself, mid-sternum, with the edge of his hand—“when the divers looked in at her. Of course, things got pretty sloshed around during the salvage operation. No helping it.”

Shaw kneels and pops her kit open, taking out the jar of

aluminum flake powder that she finds most effective on glass. “I don’t want to be a Negative Nancy, but even under those circumstances, I doubt we’ll be able to pull anything from this. Prints in water can maybe last four, five days on certain surfaces. Even that little soak the cab took getting hauled to the surface would’ve worked like an eraser on whatever might’ve been preserved on the inside glass.” She locates the fiberglass brush she reserves for use with the aluminum powder, avoiding cross contamination of the powder hues by assigning each its own applicator. “Too soon for a verdict on whether the skull fracture was a result of the crash, huh? Back of the head seems a little suspect. But you never know—there could’ve been debris in the cab, a projectile. Maybe she kept her bowling bag in the car.” She glances up to see him gazing back at her, his eyes heavy-lidded, expression bland, and she says, “My, how I do go on,” in her best Scarlett O’Hara, which is none too good, as she twirls her brush in powder, spins off the excess, and crabwalks the last couple feet or so to the inside of the driver’s side window. “Pointless conjecture’s a little hobby of mine. No offense, Osbourn.”

Osbourn grunts noncommittally. “My toes ain’t sore. Anyway, what’s left of Ms. Jimenez is with the ME now. We’ll see. Look, I’ll leave you to it. Detective might stick his head in later.”

“Cool, cool.” She watches him walk back into the office area; the garage is privately owned, secured by the sheriff’s office for storage of seized or abandoned vehicles—or, apparently, when a piece of evidence is an economy car that couldn’t be adequately processed on the banks of a public boat launch on a sunny Saturday in early September.

The aluminum powder is also suitable for hard rubber and most dark surfaces in general, so, for preliminaries, Shaw continues with it down onto the sill and the door handle to the line of demarcation—namely brownish scum—which indicates where the water level sat before the vacuum was broken. Physically on the job while emotionally taking stock that this had been a woman's resting place up until yesterday, Shaw allows those inevitable images to crowd in: a corpse at the wheel of a car trapped beneath fathoms, the packed white noise of a cab full of a few feet of stale air, lake water, and busy microbes, all working together to gradually dissolve Nadia Jimenez. Meanwhile, on the surface, her family searching, baffled as to why no one could find a trace of their missing twenty-six-year-old daughter. For Shaw, it's better to face down the uglies now than let them congregate until the moment her head hits the pillow, when the house is sleeping and there's nothing to do but look inward.

Shaw had dreaded the possibility of a smear of the deceased's fingerprints on the inner driver's side window glass, evidence of the woman scrabbling to get out, but there aren't more than a couple smudges on the entire pane, another indicator that Nadia was indeed dead at the time the car submerged; Shaw can't imagine anybody sitting still for the slow-motion horror of seeing the water rising and the front end capsizing toward liquid darkness.

Shaw has no choice but to climb onto the seats to reach the windshield—the scum line continues around the interior, bisecting the steering wheel—and she isn't exactly loving the saturated squish of the upholstery beneath her or the smell that wafts off it. The fuming wand is the best tool for the job, really, and she's

not even totally sure what to look for in a situation like this other than anything out of the ordinary, which she likely won't recognize until she gets back to the lab with her print cards and starts scanning them into the biometric software system, then IAFIS. One light bulb appears over her head, though: the projectile issue.

She's running her hand along the crack where the dash meets the windshield when she hears a few scuffling footsteps of the kind made when wearing nylon shoe covers, and looks over to see Pdraig McKenzie outside the vehicle, Scottish ex-pat, Major Crimes detective, white coveralls over his street clothes, hood pushed back, mask dangling around his neck. "Hey." She drops back on her haunches a bit more, gazing at him, his hair doing its usual aerial thing, his careworn face creased in the noncommittal greeting she's counted on to get them through this ongoing awkward phase since she walked out on him during a blizzard, post-date and pre-coitus. Because God knows she probably acts about as naturally as a mime trying to escape from an invisible box every time they bump shoulders at a crime scene, which is often. She's going to have to work on her tough-as-nails ruthless-career-woman act. Breaking hearts, solving crimes, *snap, snap, snap*. "Hey. This is you?" She indicates the car. "Nobody said."

McKenzie nods, his gaze traveling around the Sonic's interior. "It's me, all right."

"Well, congrats, because this is an interesting one. Behold my mini brainstorm." She holds up a ballpoint pen, then a pair of tortoiseshell sunglasses. "Who doesn't have junk roll down the dash, right? Now, these could've been wedged there for years or been thrown forward during the crash or the salvage, but I

found them above the waterline, so I'll bag them—Wait, was there a crash?"

"No sign of a collision, and the gear shift was found in neutral. We'll have our mechanic take a crack at the internals, of course, but Nadia's head wound rules out the explanation of her simply going off the road and submerging in the dark of night." He shrugs. "It's likely that she was either poleaxed, then driven to the lake and placed in the driver's seat before someone escorted the vehicle down the boat launch, or she drove herself to the landing with a passenger, who later struck her and dispatched the vehicle. When the ME weighs in on the angle of the blow, and on the off chance that serology has any luck with blood spatter in here, that should help us build a scenario. But it seems to me that it would've been near impossible to deal that kind of blow while she was sitting in the driver's seat. She was hit left-hand side, compound fracture to the occipital bone."

"Yowch. So, we know our doer is probably a righty. Alert the media. We're a crack team, we are. I'm guessing you've already peeked inside the glove compartment?" She lifts the handle, finds the space empty except for scraps of nearly dissolved paper stuck to the interior, probably once a vehicle registration card and proof of insurance. "Ditto for the storage console and anything in the back seat and trunk? Total loss?"

He nods, leaning down to look around the cab, giving Shaw an unneeded reminder that his eyes are an unexpectedly luxurious shade of dark brown, 90 percent cacao, fine lambskin leather, all the goodies. "Her purse and a couple other items have already been bagged and removed, but once we've had our look, it's straight on to you. Honestly, I think that our biggest

piece of evidence and possibly also our crime scene has been scrubbed clean by time and won't be of much use." He clicks his tongue—*tch*—straightening up. "Never worked a case where a vehicle was submerged for this long."

"Same. All I can say is that we've got a chance with the glass above the waterline. This vacuum situation may have created an exception. Observe brainstorm part deux. I've been itching to show this to somebody." Shaw reaches over to the visor on the driver's side and opens the magnetic cover on the vanity mirror, indicating a visible partial index coated in powder and ready to be pulled with tape. "Check out that patent. She must've been eating barbecue ribs on her lunch break that day or something. Obviously, chances are, this belongs to Nadia, but if this print survived, I think it's well worth fuming the daylights out of this cab and focusing on the rearview for latents. If our killer did in fact drive this car to the lake that night, maybe he had to adjust the mirror because he was a male of average size and our girl was—what, five two, five three? Itty-bitty thing, right?" Shaw had read everything she could on the case online while wolfing down breakfast before coming here.

"Five two, about one hundred and twenty pounds. I checked the seat, and it's adjusted a bit further back from the wheel than you'd expect for a woman of her height. Nothing definite there."

"Well. I saw something like that in a *Columbo* once, I'm sure of it. Listen, I'm going to bust out my handy-dandy wand and go all Witchiepoo in here, and you may want to make yourself scarce, because huffing deadly cyanoacrylate fumes is a special perk for Latent Prints employees only. Sound kosher?"

"I leave it in your capable hands." It is in no way a sexy

comment—McKenzie isn't a double entendre kind of guy—but Shaw engulfs with heat from her shoe covers up, and all she can think of is the dimness of his apartment last winter, stripping half naked on the couch with him and being almost certainly fully prepared to take it all the way until her phone rang and reminded her that she's hardly a free agent, and not a hookup kind of girl, anyway. Never has been. Phooey.

“Stop by the office after, if you like,” he adds, seemingly oblivious to her internal state of tornado-through-a-trailer-park, already turning away. “I'll buy you a free cup of coffee.”

“Hey, big spender.”

Mask in place, Shaw pops the safety cap off the cyanoacrylate fuming wand, used to reveal latent prints in a contained area too large to be placed in the CyanoSafe back at the lab, drops a couple superglue pellets into the basket, then props the wand on the dash, where she turns on the butane, closes the car doors, and removes herself to a safe distance, letting the fumes fill the cab, gradually fogging the glass white.

When the wand has timed out, Shaw opens the doors and lets it air a bit before sliding back into the driver's seat, saying, “Hello,” softly as she looks up at a scattering of ghostly prints above the dashboard, the friction ridges developed in white, now visible like a pattern of frost.

Shaw and McKenzie end up taking a fifteen together in the parking lot after Shaw has trashed her damp, reeking coveralls

and scrubbed her hands, leaning side by side against her Yukon Denali—the Beast—in what has turned into an intensely clear and vivid fall day, a piercing blue sky backlighting maples already tipped with crimson.

Shaw twangs the edge of the plastic flip top on her disposable coffee cup a few times until it starts to grate on her nerves. “Were you the one who notified next of kin?”

McKenzie nods. “They know that the ME needs to complete her examination and get a look at the dental records before we can say for certain. A visual identification is off the table, as you’d imagine.” The slightest pause to acknowledge the sight of a woman whose corpse has been trapped half in water, half in stale air for a year; Casper’s Law never had this situation in mind when it drove home the rules of decomp. “Nadia was my case originally, you know, when her employer—she worked at a physical therapy clinic—reported her missing after she didn’t show up for her shift and wasn’t answering her phone. Her family had difficulty getting people concerned, and it bounced around the department for a while before I classified it as probable foul play. It’s not illegal for an adult to walk away from their life, after all.”

“And it’s better for people’s worldview to pretend that this shit doesn’t happen. Because if it happened to Nadia, it could happen to you.”

McKenzie turns his cup in his hand, brow set in some of those deep lines that indicate a frequent response he has to the world: a grimace, a rueful acceptance. “It can be hard proving a different explanation when you don’t have a body or a sign of a struggle. Her apartment was immaculate, and her car and

purse were gone. Of course, her clothes, laptop, and migraine meds were left behind, and her phone and debit card were never used again, which didn't bode well. It was obvious to me that this was completely out of character, for her to take off without a word. She was either dead or being held somewhere against her will."

"How're they taking all this? Her family?" Shaw searches his demeanor for any sign of hedging or softening the truth because of the obvious triggers this situation holds for her: a missing daughter, a family telling anyone who would listen that she never would've left on her own while the months and seasons kept on passing and still no word. "I mean, I'm not expecting anybody to be turning handsprings, but—did they seem to be holding together, got each other's backs?"

"It went about as you'd think. They want answers and we're still a long ways off. They came right out and told me that they want the state police to take over the case, maybe even looking for FBI involvement. But the parents are solid. Their son and his family are flying up from Florida to be with them." He returns her look, scrutinizing. "They're contending with the matter of facing your loved one's death as fact, not conjecture, which I know I don't need to tell you about."

"Yeah. In my experience, when you finally know, and that last bit of hope is stomped out—grief's a wall and you hit it, no brakes. But it beats the hell out of playing what-if for decades. There's no stopping point with that kind of grief, no healing. It goes on as long as you do. It'll be sitting on the edge of your deathbed." She sips the coffee too soon and scorches the roof of her mouth, one of those peeling burns that makes it tough to

eat for a couple days—too bad, because she’s being wined and dined at a new brewery in Dover-Foxcroft tonight and has every intention of digging into something cheese-laden and butter-soaked with a drink big enough to accommodate an Olympic artistic swimming team. “Well. I know this is getting into some sketchy areas of personal involvement, but if they need somebody to talk to who’s been through it, feel free to give them my number. I’m no therapist, but my time comes cheap, so.”

He closes his coffee with some care and sets it on the hood. “That’s good of you, but I hope you won’t be tearing open wounds out of a sense of duty. You haven’t had much recuperation time after everything that’s happened to you.” It’s the first time that he’s averted his gaze from her. She can’t blame him; the last seven months of Shaw’s life have a sickening glare, and she knows she’s being talked about whenever she arrives at a scene or walks away from a conversation. Learning your sister was buried almost within view of your shared childhood bedroom window for more than a decade sounds like the final scene of a nightmare before the shadows dissolve, or maybe an appalling, half-glimpsed headline that, with effort, you can almost convince yourself had to be fake news.

“What’s enough time. I’ve had sixteen years without my sister. If I can’t use what happened to us to help somebody out occasionally, what the hell’s the point of surviving it.” She can feel Thea so sharply then, the sliver of her sister that will forever live inside her, almost as physical as the movement of a fetus—*You talking about me? I’m not deaf, you know*—and without further hesitation Shaw gets into her wallet and hands him one of her cards, watching as he places it in his pocket. “Okay. I came, I

saw, I burned the crap out of my mouth. All in all, I'd call it a solid day's work." She lifts her cup. "Thanks for this."

"All I did was pour." McKenzie smiles, and Shaw thinks it again—s traight American teeth courtesy of a couple years in braces? Meh. Scottish teeth placed by nature with a little creativity and character? *Caramba*.

Shaw finds her feet behaving reluctantly and tries to step it up as she gestures over toward McKenzie's vintage 1986 Bronco. "She's still looking pretty."

"Mmm. She's also been in and out of the shop three times in five months. Replaced the starter and another fuel pump. Might be time to trade her in, start driving a Mini Cooper."

"Don't you fucking—I will disown you, do you hear me?" They're laughing, and then the moment turns ever so slightly; she'd have to be anesthetized from the waist down and the neck up not to sense it or catch the regretful twist his smile acquires at vanishing point, a man glimpsing the memory of something that once escaped his fingers like a minnow darting through the shallows. But he says nothing, and she doesn't have words, either, so she gives a forced, spastic kissed-fingers wave that she hopes looks platonic, the kind of thing she's always throwing around at the office, before speeding off down the street in the Beast with her shoulders hunched up around her ears.