

**SIMON
SCARROW**

AND LEE FRANCIS

**PLAYING
WITH
DEATH**

H

HEADLINE

To Mum, Dad, Karl and Alex

0.

Rose Blake follows Shane Koenig's blue pick-up truck along the dirt trail, up the slope towards a two-storey cabin. The brake lamps of Koenig's truck burn red in the dark of the night. The cabin's windows pierce the darkness with an inviting orange hue, and then the harsh glare of a security light sears the cold air as they park on the leaf-strewn gravel in front of the cabin. It is starting to rain, small drops pattering through the bare branches of the forest. Rose leaves her vehicle and follows Koenig up the porch steps. Tall, black trees loom all around the cabin. A name plaque reads 'Solace'. Koenig turns to look at her. He is handsome, in the rugged, dark-haired sense, wearing blue jeans, brown leather boots and a Tommy Hilfiger wool jacket over a red checked shirt.

'My home away from home, huh? Pretty nice, isn't it?'

He unlocks the front door. Rose's pulse quickens as he gestures for her to enter.

'It sure is.'

The built-in kitchen has gleaming beechwood panelling and shelving units, copper pots and pans hang on a wall, no expense spared. The cabin itself is a mix of stone brick work and orange dyed wood. The kitchen is open plan, leading to the living room where there's a fireplace with crumpled paper, kindling and small logs, ready to light. Koenig takes out a gas lighter, and soon there's a crackle and hiss as the flames take and start to warm the room. Rose holds her hands out by the fire, feeling the warmth prickle her skin. Koenig crosses to a Bose wall-mounted sound system and presses play:

*Somethin' about this night . . .
Somethin' is so right.
You and me, babe. We're connected . . .*

An unsettling choice, Rose thinks.

He takes off his jacket and flashes her a smile. 'Make yourself at home. You'll find it's a comfortable place. At least I think so.'

'A bit lonely though.'

'Not with the right company,' he says, touching her cheek. His fingers send a jolt through her body. But not of sexual anticipation. It's fear that Rose feels.

'Nice to meet someone who looks like their profile picture for a change,' he adds, his gaze running down her body.

'In a good way, I hope?' Rose feels her skin chilling under the pink cashmere sweater she is wearing on top of her pencil skirt.

'You bet. Here, let me take your coat.' Koenig slides the long brown garment from her shoulders, letting her arms slip free.

Rose quickly shifts a short distance away from him and sits down on the soft beige sofa. She casts a glance at the cabin walls where framed photos of hunting expeditions hang. Shane Koenig is in every one of them, posed by the body of a deer, or some other game. At the back of the cabin is another door, and several hunting rifles are in a rack to one side. As her eyes look for more clues to his personality, she senses a faint tang of bleach in the air.

The significance of the odour is not lost on Rose. It's what she would expect a man like Koenig to use to cover his tracks. But she tries to keep calm. She knows Owen and the rest of the team are waiting nearby in a black surveillance van. There are others with them, armed and ready to move as soon as the word is given. Rose knows she cannot raise the alarm unless she is directly threatened or Koenig gives himself away. So far he has behaved like any normal man on a date.

His behaviour has been too guarded, she realizes. As if he has been watching her, coolly weighing her up, before he makes his move. She feels an icy tingle at the base of her neck. Maybe

he knows that she is not what she seems. He moves unhurriedly to the kitchen and takes some glasses from a cupboard. Two wine glasses and two tumblers. He glances over his shoulder. His lips lift in a smile, but his eyes are dead. 'Cold night. Fancy a snifter?'

'Sure. What have you got?' Rose lets her hair fall forward in a nod. She wears her hair down to conceal the flesh-coloured two-way earpiece in her right ear.

Koenig turns and stares for a moment. 'You really are quite a looker. Bet there's no end of guys on the site who've asked you out. Why choose me?'

'Your profile was interesting. Not the usual generic crap. And you've got a good job, I guess.'

'You guess . . .'

For a second his expression is as dead as his eyes. Then he smiles again. 'And what job would that be? I don't believe I mentioned any details about what I do for a living.'

Rose feels her pulse quicken in alarm as she makes herself reply in a casual tone. 'Whatever it is, must be good enough to pay for all this. Your home away from home, as you call it.'

'Yes.' His eyes dart from side to side. 'This place is more like my real home. It feels like I just live at the house in the city, where I work during the week. This is where I'm most comfortable. This place is more . . . me. If you see what I mean?'

Rose nods at the hunting photos. 'Sure I do.'

Koenig laughs. 'No. No, I really don't think you know what I mean. We've only just met. Three hours ago, at the bar.'

'But we've been talking for weeks online,' says Rose. 'I know you well enough to suggest we go on a date. I turn down most men. Way too many assholes on the site. You're different. There was something about you I picked up on right away.'

'Oh? What was that? What makes me different?'

Rose pauses, as if considering, even though she's rehearsed this many times with Owen and the team. She shrugs. 'You know, none of the crap about being a genuine guy who's the life and soul of the party, but sensitive and caring at the same time. You just

cut through all that and talked straight. I kind of liked that.'

'Good.'

'Of course, it helped that you look hot in your profile picture.'

'You're not the first to say that.'

'No?'

'Not by a long way. You think you're the first person I've ever brought back to this place?'

There's an edge to his voice and Rose shifts uncomfortably on the sofa. She tries to lighten the mood. 'Then maybe the others didn't have as much to offer as I do.'

'You think you're special?'

'That remains to be seen, doesn't it?' Rose lets her hand drop to her thigh and gently eases up the hem of her skirt.

Koenig gazes at the dark curve of her knee and a frown crosses his face. He stands over Rose. He slowly reaches out a hand and runs his fingers through the fringe on the left side of her head. It takes all her self-control not to flinch beneath his touch.

Not yet, Rose.

She has to go by the book. There isn't enough evidence to obtain a search warrant. Rose is their only chance to take Koenig down. If Koenig gives himself away and she calls in the troops then she must Mirandize him, otherwise any confession will be invalidated, along with subsequent 'fruits of the poisonous tree' – if the evidence is tainted, then any further evidence gained is tainted as well. So Koenig stands every chance of walking free. Free to continue killing.

Rose looks past him and can see camera cases and tripods stacked near a desk down a narrow corridor leading to another room. Koenig leans towards her, trying for a kiss. He gives off an aroma of expensive aftershave. She puts her hand up and holds him back.

'A drink first, surely?'

He hesitates before smiling. 'Classy lady. Right you are.'

Koenig straightens up. 'I got a small wine cellar out back. Red?'

'Perfect,' she says, crossing her legs.

'Then warm yourself up by the fire. Won't be long.' Koenig

slips into the back area of the cabin, through a doorway and out of sight.

Rose whispers: 'Owen? You getting all this?'

'Sure. All good. I've got men in the trees around the house. We've got your back. Seen anything yet?' Owen's voice crackles in her ear.

'Some hunting pictures, not much else. I'm going to take a look around.'

'Be careful.' Owen's voice betrays his concern. She knows the risks she is taking, but she volunteered for this. It is her duty to hunt down killers. That is what Uncle Sam pays her to do, and she is good at her job.

She eases herself up and paces into the kitchen area. There are some cupboards with concealed lighting illuminating the granite counter. A small door opens into a pantry. There's an open padlock hanging on the latch . . . Why a padlocked pantry? She pushes the pantry door open. The room is long and narrow, lined with shelves. At the far end is a chest freezer. The items on the shelves are neatly arranged. Fastidiously. Tins to the right, arranged into soups, vegetables and fruit. To the left are small pots of herbs, jars of preserves and tubs of flour, rice and pasta. There is a large ceramic sink by the freezer and a sturdy shelf on which lies a heavily scored wooden block. A cleaver gleams from a hook above. The smell of bleach is stronger than ever.

The end of the pantry is in shadow, and over the middle of the room hangs a naked light bulb on a length of flex. Rose is tempted to turn on the light but it is too risky. She approaches the chest freezer, feeling the sweat on her hands as she reaches for the handle and gives it an upwards tug. There's a slight resistance and then the lid rises freely. Even though there is not much light at this end of the pantry Rose can make out the contents easily enough. There are large tubs of ice cream at one end. The rest of the space is filled with plastic food bags, sealed with tape. Cuts of meat.

But not the kind of meat that anyone should ever store in a freezer, unless they are criminally insane.

There are hands, clenched like claws, visible through frosted plastic. A foot, and then half a torso with a shrivelled-looking breast. And there, in the corner, a brunette's head, eyes staring dully, her mouth hanging open in a silent cry, pressed against the plastic.

'Owen . . . ' Rose tries to speak but her chest feels tight. Her legs feel weak and it's hard to breathe as nausea stirs, even though these are not the first human remains she has ever seen, not by a long shot. *But not like this.* She tries to speak calmly. 'There's body parts here . . . the freezer's filled with them.'

'Rose!' Owen's voice fills her earpiece. 'Get out of there! Now!'

Time seems to slow and enfold her like crude oil. She is acutely aware of every sound, everything in her field of vision and every faint smell as she returns to the living area. It's him. The monster the news media has dubbed 'the Backwoods Butcher'.

Rose feels his presence all around, sucking the air from her lungs. She slips her hand behind her, under her sweater, to where the automatic is concealed against the small of her back.

'Get out!' Owen voice blares in her ear. 'We're coming!'

The music is still playing softly.

*I'm with you. In your heart
In your body, like fire . . .*

'Here we are, baby . . . ' Koenig calls out as he returns. 'I found us a Rioja . . . Where are you?'

Rose tears her weapon from the Velcro grip and swings it out and round as she lowers into a half crouch and holds the Glock in front of her.

Koenig is standing on the threshold of the back door with a wine bottle in one hand. His smile fades as the muzzle of Rose's automatic aims at his chest. There's no sign of surprise in his expression. No sign of any emotion at all, just the dead eyes and the thin line of his lips as he stares at her. Time seems to slow.

Rose looks over the steady barrel of the automatic as she addresses

Koenig. ‘You have the right to remain silent and refuse to answer questions . . .’

‘What the fuck?’

‘Anything you say may be used against you in a court of law . . .’

‘You lying bitch – just like all the others.’

‘You have the right to consult an attorney before speaking to the police, and—’

‘Whore!’ Koenig screams and hurls the bottle at Rose.

She instinctively raises her hands as the bottle explodes against the kitchen wall by her head. Glass and wine spray over her and she feels a sharp pain as the back of her wrist is hit. A door crashes open and footsteps pound down the steps outside.

Gonna make you mine, baby

Gonna eat you up . . .

There are shouts from outside, and the whine of vehicles approaching at speed cuts across the music. Rose is already moving towards the back door, pointing her gun, steadying her right hand with a double grip, as Owen crashes into the cabin. He’s wearing black gear with FBI stencilled in large white letters across his front and back. Tall and slender, mid-thirties, with neat black hair and goatee beard, his face is taut with concern. Two more men burst through the door and take up position on either side, heads hunched over their assault rifles as they scan from side to side. Owen sees the blood dripping from her hand.

‘Shit . . . Rose, you OK?’

Rose kicks off her heels and points to the back door. ‘Koenig’s out back!’

Her heart is pounding and she feels an electric thrill at the thought of capturing their prey. The cabin is surrounded by Bureau agents and police. Koenig is like a trapped animal. That makes him dangerous and desperate.

‘Rose, easy . . . We’ve got a tight perimeter set up. He’s going nowhere.’

She shakes her head. 'Let's go.'

Rose leads the way. By the back door there is a rack of hunting rifles. One is missing. Owen speaks into his radio mike.

'Be advised, Koenig is armed and to the rear of the cabin.'

Rose, Owen and the two agents step through the door and onto a wooden stoop. The wood is cold and dank beneath the soles of her feet. There's a short flight of steps leading down into the darkness. The hackles on the back of her neck rise. Rose realizes that Koenig knows these woods intimately.

A thought enters her mind. Maybe they are his prey now. Flashlights are winking on amid the trees as orders are shouted and passed along the line of the other agents and the police tactical team that have surrounded the suspect's cabin.

The sharp crash of a handgun comes from the trees close by. Rose and the others lower into a crouch, guns sweeping towards the sound.

'What's going on?' Owen shouts into his mike.

Beams of local PD headlights cut through the darkness as the cars roar up the hillside, the light slicing through the gaps between tree trunks. Rose sees movement to her right as a headlight beam catches Koenig's red checked shirt.

'Over there!' Rose shouts.

Rose and Owen clamber up the slope, running east into the forest. The ground beneath her bare feet is cold and clammy with fallen leaves, but she feels nothing as the adrenalin surges. They see police officers and agents in dark FBI jackets and caps, quickly converging, charging through the trees as they close in on Koenig. Rose guesses that Koenig is heading towards the creek, not far from the interstate. If he can reach it and stop a car, then it will all have been for nothing.

Crunch.

'Everybody, quiet!' she hisses. Owen and his two companions halt. Further off, the other agents and police are still sweeping the trees.

Rose moves to the front, pacing forward along the narrow trail.

Her senses are strained to the limit. Everything she sees, hears, smells and touches has an unbearable intensity. Raindrops from the branches above spatter her hair and shoulders, and she shakes her head to keep the hair and moisture out of her eyes. Suddenly she catches a glimpse of Koenig's face peering out from behind a tree trunk, grinning. Rose tightens her grip on her gun, raising it in front of her.

She takes aim and pulls the trigger.

The woodland in front of her is lit with the yellow glare of the muzzle flash, her bullet snapping into the side of a tree trunk. Koenig shields his face from the splintering wood, losing his balance as the barrel of his rifle swings up. Owen steps in front of Rose as the sharp crack of a rifle fills the air. Koenig shoots downwards, shattering a fallen branch, which bursts into a spray of splinters. The bullet, meant for Rose, smashes through Owen's right kneecap, and the agent cries out and topples onto his side.

Rose hears the shriek of startled woodland birds as Owen writhes on the forest floor, his teeth gritted in agony, emitting a keening whine. The two agents are crouched down, assault rifles held up and ready to fire as they scan the trees around them. Rose fixes her eyes on the tree Koenig has ducked back behind. She feels the twigs and slimy leaves under her feet and the cold air on her exposed skin as she edges forward, but there's nothing behind the tree. Just the dull gleam of a spent cartridge case lying amid the twigs and leaves on the ground. Koenig has vanished. She looks through the trees but there's no sign of movement. Behind her, Owen's head falls back as his mouth opens and he lets out an animal cry of agony.

As the first of the agents and SWAT team rush past her, following the direction she gives them, Rose knows it is too late. This is Koenig's forest. He will escape. Go on the run, disappear like a ghost. Biding his time before emerging from his new lair to kill again. And again . . .

1.

Seven months later

September

Rose is in the kitchen, peeling the cellophane from the tray of snacks. The scars on her hand have virtually disappeared. It's been a cold day and she is wearing a thin wool sweater over her black pants. She takes a sip from her wine glass as she considers the arrangement on the tray and then moves a few of the sushi wraps so that the layout is neatly symmetrical. Outside, in the dining room, she can hear the voices of her husband, sister and father. Jeff's voice is deep, but loud, as he holds forth with an amusing tale of the latest scandal breaking on the Hill. The others listen in silence and then there is laughter.

Rose smiles. She loves him and she loves the fact that Jeff is popular. It allows her to bask in the satisfaction that he chose her for his wife when she felt he could have done better for himself. She still feels it, which is why she is determined to give him no reason to regret what she sees as his mistake. And why wouldn't other women want Jeff for themselves? He is tall and athletic with a full head of light brown hair, almost blond, with a ready smile and devastating charm. He is intelligent and has a job with prestige, even if the salary is not in the big league. Jeff is taking a sabbatical from San Francisco State University to serve as social media adviser to Democratic senator Chris Keller, who is fighting to keep his seat in the Senate in Washington. If Jeff is on the winning side then he may go all the way with Keller. She is pleased at the thought that the best is yet to come for her

husband. All going well, he might one day work at the White House.

The future of her own career is a source of less optimism.

Thirty-five years old – seven years younger than Jeff – she knows that the time she took off work to have their son, Robbie, and raise him through infancy until school age meant that she lost vital years of experience and seniority that pushed her promotion prospects back. Then there was the Koenig case . . . But there's really no contest when she weighs up her love of her job against her love for her son. Her family comes first.

'Rose, you about done out there?' Jeff calls. 'You've got three in here ready to sign up to Anorexics Anonymous.'

There is more laughter and Rose joins in, picking up the tray and crossing the kitchen before pushing the door open with her shoulder. The room beyond is large, and the walls are panelled, like many of the early twentieth-century properties in the neighbourhood. Their house on Oak Avenue is in a pleasant, leafy suburb with views over San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge on the skyline.

Places have been set either side of the table. Opposite Rose's seat is Jeff, grinning at her as he winks through his neat frameless glasses. Sitting next to him is Rose's sister Scarlet, and next to her is their father, Harry Carson.

Scarlet, thirty-three, is short, with dark dyed copper hair and a voluptuous figure. The younger, more reckless, sister has recently divorced and is enjoying her new-found single status, especially as her oleaginous weasel of an attorney gouged her former husband for every available cent. She still works as a real estate agent though. She is good with people and is skilled at closing deals. She tops her wine glass for the third time that evening, grabs her smartphone and takes a picture of herself posing with the wine glass.

'Gotta get that on the 'gram,' she says, before cropping the picture and applying a filter so her skin looks smoother. She slides the smartphone onto the table. Rose is concerned about her obsession with social media and has, on more than one

occasion, asked her to limit her screen time in the presence of family.

Their father, seventy-two, a retired master sergeant from the marine corps, has salt and pepper hair. He sits quietly and Rose wonders if he is thinking about her mother, who disappeared without trace many years ago. It's an open wound in the family, but one too painful to discuss. Harry is listening politely to Jeff, whose politics he does not share but has learned to tolerate for his daughter's sake. There's something about Harry's expression that concerns Rose. A listlessness. He's starting to forget things and is confused from time to time, and she hopes that he is not starting the slide into senility.

'At last!' Jeff pretends to gasp. 'You had me worried there, girl. Thought you were gorging on the dainties and leaving the rest of us to starve.'

Scarlet shakes her head. 'Hope the main course isn't delayed the same way. Man, I'm hungry.'

'You always are,' says Harry, slipping her a fatherly wink.

Rose sets the tray down in the middle of the table and takes her seat. Her guests don't wait to be asked and begin to eat. Scarlet reaches for a second snack as she glances at Rose.

'So, Ro', how's business? Catch any more bad guys lately?'

Rose shrugs. 'You know how it is. Ninety per cent paperwork, ten per cent TV reality show where we get to chase guys down dark alleys with guns and flashlights.'

'Really?' Scarlet arches a plucked eyebrow. 'So how about Mulder and Scully? They solved *The X-Files* case yet?'

'Old joke, Scar. Don't go there.'

'So tell me, seriously. What's new at the Bureau?'

Rose is reluctant to say anything. Koenig slipped through their fingers and there has been no sign of him since. The grisly human remains recovered from the cabin and the video files on his laptop prove beyond doubt that Koenig is the Backwoods Butcher. And now he's out there, Rose reflects bitterly, waiting for the right time to resume his serial killer career.

The online and press fallout had been vitriolic – the FBI Twitter feed is still a target for internet trolls lamenting the Bureau’s failure, and hers. But luckily her superior, Special Agent Flora Baptiste, stepped in. After a fairly ineffective psychological debrief, Baptiste had eased Rose’s workload for the last few months. From time to time Rose still mentors undercover agents in training, and with additional therapy on the quiet, she has just about made it work. She glances at Jeff, imploring him not to say anything about it. He smiles before reaching for the wine bottle and topping up the glasses. Scarlet leans forward.

‘Oh, come on, Rose. What’s the *latest*?’

She’s referring to the failed case that nearly cost Rose her life, that burned her out, that some of her colleagues had even quit the Bureau over. Shane Koenig. The serial killer who had been preying on women and a handful of men across the West Coast, videoing their deaths. One of the vlogging news sites, ‘The Gab’, had named him the Backwoods Butcher, which got picked up by the TV networks, leading to a surge in audience figures.

For the last six months Koenig seemed to have been wiped from the face of the earth. All manner of surveillance had been running, including facial recognition, licence plates, GPS tracking, IP searches, but the task force has drawn a blank, despite intense pressure from the media and relatives of the victims. They’d even asked one of the technology giants to hack a cellphone recovered from the cabin, but the corporation denied their request and increased their encryption instead. The FBI’s Cyber team had tried to crack it, but they were unsuccessful.

There had been a chance to take him down. But Rose had blown it. She had taken her shot at Koenig and missed. She briefly closes her eyes, trying to shut out the rest of the thorny memory.

Sometimes, the monster wins.

Harry shifts in his seat. ‘Scarlet, please, maybe your sister doesn’t want to talk about all this’.

‘Oh, come on, Dad. Rose is a pro. She can handle it.’

Rose rolls her eyes at Scarlet. ‘If you must know, we found out

what he was doing with the body parts. They were trophies. He'd store them in secret locations, burying them and then auctioning them online to the highest bidder. When the money was paid he'd release the geotag coordinates.'

Scarlet's eyes opened wide. 'That's gross . . .'

'We didn't release the details, but the media still got to hear about it somehow and . . . Well, I'm sure you've seen the stories. How Koenig used to keep the mutilated genitalia and other body parts. In jars, with printouts of their profile pictures on the outside. We found and confiscated what was left, but most of the buyers were clever and masked their IPs. As for the rest of the remains of his victims, he ate them. That enough detail for you?'

Scarlet lowers her half-eaten finger of seaweed and rice. 'Oh God . . .'

'Nice, Rose. Thanks for the overshare,' says Jeff.

'She asked.'

Rose feels a ripple of anxiety, which she quells by picking up the wine bottle. A figure emerges from the den at the other end of the living room. The light sensor detects his presence and a lamp fades into life, bathing the boy in its warm glow.

Harry raises his glass. 'Robbie! How's my boy?'

The youth walks across the room and stands at the end of the table. He is fourteen, and tall for his age. He has Jeff's good looks except for his acne and the glasses. But there's something missing in his expression. He returns the smiles of the adults around the table and then nods to Harry. 'I'm fine, Grandpa . . . How are you?'

'Just swell. How's school?'

Robbie looks to his mother. Rose feels a sudden surge of concern for her son and quickly steps in. 'He's doing well. Top of the class in math and science. We're very proud of him.'

Rose turns to her husband. He surreptitiously sends a text, sliding his smartphone away, something he has been doing more and more frequently of late.

'Surely that can wait?' Rose asks with a tight smile. 'You're at

home now. Your time belongs to the family.'

'If only it was that simple. But you know how it is. We don't work nine to five. The campaign runs 24/7, and we have to run with it.'

'Huh . . .' Rose glances at her watch. 'Anyway, who are you texting at this hour?'

'Oh . . . my assistant. Pandora's printing some notes for tomorrow.'

'She's the one I met at the last fundraiser? Dark hair. Young.'

Jeff nods. 'That's her.'

Jeff's eyes meet hers with a hint of challenge and she decides not to pursue the matter right now.

Harry chuckles. 'Boy, how things have changed. Time was when your home was your own and no one could bother you once you closed the front door. Now they can get you anytime, anywhere. You're all gonna be screwed up in the head if the world carries on this way, I tell you.'

'Hear, hear,' Rose says, smiling.

Scarlet checks her smartphone.

'Oooh, my pic's got sixteen likes.' She scrolls down. 'He looks cute. See?' She holds up her smartphone to reveal a cheesy shot of a slick-haired guy in a business suit, tanned and expensively dentured. She reads the profile. 'Oh no, he likes jazz. Sorry, babe.' She flicks the profile away.

'Harsh,' Jeff says. 'I mean, Rose likes country music, but I still married her. No one's perfect.'

'Well with this I can find Mr Perfect.'

There's a single electronic tone from Rose's smartphone and she reaches into her jacket pocket and takes it out. She reads the message on the screen and stands up.

'Excuse me for a moment.'

'Trouble?' Jeff frowns. 'At this time of night?'

'Criminals don't work nine to five,' Rose replies. 'Or haven't you heard about that?'

There's laughter as Rose retreats to the kitchen and hits the

quick-dial button. A deep female voice coughs before speaking.

‘Baptiste.’

‘I got the message,’ says Rose. ‘What’s up?’

‘Hey, sugar, there’s something I want you to take a look at. There’s been a fire in Palo Alto. Possible arson. One person dead. Happened a few hours back. Local PD are handling it. Or were, until we got the call.’

‘Who from? I mean, since when did the Bureau deal with this kind of thing? Arson? Suspected arson? What’s that got to do with us?’

‘Normally? Nothing. But this ain’t exactly normal.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’ll see for yourself when you get there. I’m on the scene now and I’ll send you the address soon as I hang up. Get there as soon as you can.’

‘Now? Tonight?’

‘Yes, tonight,’ Baptiste replies testily.

‘But I’ve got my family here. At dinner. Can’t it wait until morning?’

‘No chance. This has come down from the top.’ Baptiste lowers her voice slightly. ‘Seems that someone at the Defense Department has requested our assistance.’

‘Defense?’ Rose feels a twinge of anxiety. ‘But this isn’t their jurisdiction, any more than it’s ours.’

‘Technically, no,’ Baptiste admits. ‘But someone at the Pentagon has asked for our help, so we’re to head up the case with our experience, our labs. Seems there’s a computer angle to it – that’s where Defense comes into it. In any case, Palo Alto PD hasn’t got the budget for this kind of investigation.’

Rose sighs. It is true local police forces are undermanned and struggling to deal with the rising tide of crime. Civil offences and minor crimes are all but overlooked, and many forces have ceased to even investigate them. The amount of technology-related crime has soared in recent years, everything from bitter ex-partners posting intimate pictures online to fraud on a massive scale, but

departmental budgets including the Bureau's have not increased to cope.

Baptiste continues. 'What I have been told is that the vic has recently been accused of stealing defence contractor secrets, which *is* our jurisdiction. Defense want a tight lid on it. I don't know any more than that. We've just been given the word and told to deal with it, like now. And now I'm telling you. So you better skip from soup to nuts in five and get in your car. They want our best agents on the case and you're still my best agent.'

Rose sighs. She owes Baptiste.

'All right.'

'That's my girl. You can get to the scene in forty-five minutes. Make it forty.' Her faintly husky smoker's voice softens: 'Sorry to get you at home . . . but I really need you to take a look at this, while it's hot, so to speak. This isn't your usual murder scene.'

'Murder? I thought you said it was arson?'

'Feels like murder to me. It *could* be just a damn fire, but the DoD wants to be sure. At any rate, this one's unusual, and then some. Christ . . . It's a fucking mess. I've never seen anything quite like this before. Our forensics guys are already on the road.' There's a brief pause. 'Hope you haven't eaten anything tonight.'

The line goes dead. Rose bites back on her frustration and anger before she thumbs the off button and thrusts the smartphone back in her pocket. She takes a deep breath and leaves the kitchen.

Maybe a new case is what she needs, so she can let Koenig go.

'Guys, I gotta run.'

'Right now?' Jeff asks, his soft voice hardening.

'Sorry, honey. It happens. You'll have to take over. The salmon is in the oven. Sauce in the microwave. Make sure Robbie gets to bed before ten thirty and no games after ten.'

He nods.

Rose hurriedly kisses her son, her sister and Harry. Jeff cranes his neck to kiss her on the lips but Rose deflects his kiss onto her left cheek. His texting to Pandora has been very regular lately. It's hard to avoid being suspicious.

‘See you later, guys.’

‘Be careful,’ Jeff calls after her.

There’s a locked desk in the hall. Rose slips her key in, opens a shallow drawer and picks up her badge and the Glock 22 .40 cal in its holster. She pockets the badge and tucks the holster clip over her belt. Her palm presses against the cold metal grip of the gun so it hangs neatly over her right hip.

As soon as she steps outside she is no longer a mother and wife. She’s Bureau through and through. It’s a trick she has made herself learn. You can’t mix two different worlds at once, not without fucking them up. That’s one thing Rose holds on to. By the time she reverses her Changan out into the street, the dinner party is a distant memory. She feels a familiar quickening of her heartbeat as she drives towards the crime scene and the gravelly voice of Baptiste echoes inside her head.

It’s the unsettled tone that troubles Rose. Baptiste had served fifteen years before Rose joined her team. There was nothing that she had not seen in that time, and nothing unsettled her.

Well, *almost* nothing.

Rose remembers the aftermath at the cabin, when Koenig had escaped. She had noticed Baptiste sitting alone on a felled log, facing away, in a moment of private reflection. She seemed to be crying. Rose drew back, knowing she’d witnessed a rare, intimate moment for her boss, but Baptiste had looked up and seen her. She’d wiped her face and fixed it into a frown as she stood up. They’d never spoken about it then, or since.

As Rose drives towards Palo Alto, she wonders: what could possibly have unsettled Baptiste tonight?

2.

It is sheeting rain as Rose's navy Changan rolls to a stop on the street in an affluent-looking neighbourhood in Palo Alto. She knows little about the area, except that it's the kind of place she could never afford to live in. There are several parked police patrol cars, blue and red lights strobing Sand Creek Road.

'You have reached your destination,' the personalised SatNav chimes from the dashboard. 'Have a good evening, Rose.'

A few other cars are parked up on the curb as well as a fire engine and a forensics van. Two firefighters are rolling their hoses back into the truck. Police officers in glistening capes and covered caps provide a loose cordon to protect the scene and keep the civilians out. The lights are on in most of the houses down the street and in every window of the apartment building at the heart of the crime scene, illuminating the gleaming slivers of rain. Already there are several streaming news bloggers on site, holding their cellphones at arm's length as they make their reports to the news hubs, vying for the breaking news fee. Rose is thankful that the networks have not sent any teams to the scene yet. But they will, and soon enough. And they'll be hard to avoid.

Water runs in torrents down the road into the drains as Rose opens her driver door. She pushes her umbrella up, heading quickly towards the trunk of her car. Inside she has a selection of equipment neatly zipped up in plastic packs. She grabs her flashlight, the one with the precise beam, and some clear polythene bags. These are standard items at a crime scene, but over the years Rose has learned to always take her own supplies.

She passes the shared pool and barbecue area, softly lit by

concealed lamps, avoiding puddles as she goes. Behind the taped-off area, the neighbours gawk from under their umbrellas as Rose approaches the property's front gate. Looking up she sees the blackened first-storey window of what must be the victim's apartment. She stoops under a cordon of the yellow crime scene tapes.

Rose observes the various security features; the doors have to be buzzed opened from the inside, and there is also CCTV. If this is indeed a murder, the perpetrator would either have known the victim or somehow bypassed these safeguards.

At the sight of Rose, a young uniformed officer from Palo Alto PD steps up to her. 'Identification ma'am?'

Rose takes out her badge shield and clips it onto her breast pocket. The policeman reads the FBI security hologram at the bottom of the shield: Senior Special Agent Rose Blake, Violent Crime, San Francisco Division. The officer nods and steps aside, tapping in her name and time of arrival on his tablet.

'Who is the police officer in charge here?' asks Rose.

'Detective Fontaine – he's inside.' The policeman jerks his thumb behind him.

Rose climbs the glistening steps to the front door, shakes her umbrella and folds it quickly as she enters. The hall of the victim's apartment is bright white, although the firefighters have tramped dirt into the cream carpet and scuffed the walls. There's a modern side table and several generic abstract paintings hanging on the walls, the kind that say more about the depth of a person's wallet than the breadth of their taste. Several uniformed police officers and firefighters are clustered at the foot of the staircase. Rose turns her attention to the tall man with unruly hair in a black jacket who seems to be the one in authority.

'Detective Fontaine?'

'Yeah. And you?'

'Special Agent Blake – FBI, Violent Crime,' Rose replies, sensing that this is not a man who is concerned about getting on first-name terms.

Fontaine peers down at her. ‘Violent crime?’ He laughs. ‘Lady, this is a done deal. Ten gets you one this is a simple house fire. One casualty. Case solved. That’s what I already told your boss. You guys are here for nothing.’ He eyes the badge once again. Rose stifles a sigh of frustration.

‘Victim’s name?’

‘Gary Coulter. When the fire team got here, he was already dead. Took ’em ten minutes to get the blaze out. Guttled the study. Shame. An apartment in this area has got to be worth a piece of change.’

Rose nods, but makes no move towards the staircase. Relationships between federal agents and local law enforcers are crucial, but sometimes tinged with resentment. The FBI usually only get involved with the most significant cases, and faced with uncooperative local officers it can be challenging not to appear arrogant, especially with the kind of cops who don’t think the Bureau has ‘earned’ the case. Fontaine is one of those. But Rose needs as much as she can glean from him.

‘So, what have you got?’

‘Not much. Coulter lived alone. The neighbour, Mrs Tofell, said she smelled burning and heard loud screaming. The lights cut out in the whole building, and when she stepped outside she could see flames and smoke in the study window. Called 911, fire team arrived first and we arrived shortly after. We’ve taken her statement.’

‘Anything else on the vic?’

‘We found Coulter’s wallet on the kitchen counter. Bank cards, workplace IDs. Worked freelance for some fancy computer hardware company, by the look of it.’

The DoD hires many private contractors, supplying everything from additional military personnel to expertise on new technologies. Rose has had to deal with the Pentagon before and knows how unhelpful they can be when it comes to providing information necessary to an investigation. Even now, a few presidents on from the attack on the Twin Towers, with Islamic fundamentalist attacks on America an ongoing threat, some officials are still fighting turf

wars over funding and influence at the White House. Information is the currency of power, and vendetta, although in politics these days it seems there's no longer any requirement to distinguish between true and false information. She pushes aside such thoughts. They are an unhelpful distraction at a crime scene, but these have been troubling times. Even if Coulter had suction at the DoD, he was still a dead human being, and it is his death that Rose is here to investigate.

'What time was the fire?'

Fontaine flicks through some notes. 'Just after seven. Like I said, done deal. It's all here.' Despite being an asshole, Fontaine and his squad had done everything by the book.

'Was the apartment door locked?'

'Yeah, fire service guys had to break it down. Forensics are now taking pictures and dusting. Guess I'll be handing over to you from here on.'

He pauses and stares at her. 'Rose Blake . . . You're one of the leads on the Koenig case, right?'

'Was.'

'Strange he's just stopped. Maybe you guys scared him off for good.'

'You ever hear of a serial killer going into retirement?'

Fontaine smiles briefly. 'Nope. But he'll slip up again. Those crazy bastards always do.' He turns and strides off down the hallway.

Rose has only climbed a few steps before the smell hits her: roasted meat and the sharp tang of burned rubber. By the time she reaches the galleried landing the smell is a penetrating stench and she pinches her nostrils. There are several framed photos mounted on Coulter's landing wall. Posed in some holiday pictures is a round-faced man with cropped blond hair and a neatly trimmed beard that does nothing to hide his fleshy jowls. There's a small corridor leading off the landing, and outside a door at the end, two forensics guys in plastic overalls are packing evidence bags into cases. One looks up as Rose approaches and glances at her badge before he announces to his colleague, 'More fed reinforcements.'

He stands up to give Rose space to reach the doorway and hands her a pair of rubber gloves. She pulls them on and stretches her fingers to make sure they fit well. He gives her a disposable set of transparent overalls, shoe covers and a hairnet. Rose knows that when a crime scene has been subjected to fire, like this one, there is a risk that crucial evidence will be compromised. The most common contamination results come from police, first responders and witnesses.

The forensic holds out a small tub of Noxzema, a minted gel. 'You might want some. Smells like a torched abattoir in there.' Rose smears a small amount under each nostril.

'Ready?' asks the forensic.

'As I'll ever be.'

He lifts the yellow tape for Rose to duck under as she clears her mind and feels the familiar surge of adrenalin, and the eerie sensation of entering a stranger's home. A stranger she now has to get to know everything about. Anything and everything should be considered as evidence. Most homicides – *if* this is a homicide – are solved within seventy-two hours. As Rose takes her first step across the threshold, she knows the clock has already started.

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